

The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937-38)

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An Almost Forgotten Massacre: Dersim, 1937-38

In 1990 a book was published in Turkey that by its very title accused Turkey's one-party regime of the 1930s of having committed genocide in the Kurdish district of Dersim.¹ The book was immediately banned and did not generate the debate its author, the sociologist Ismail Beşikçi, had hoped for. Beşikçi was the first, and for a long time the only, Turkish intellectual to publicly criticize Turkey's official ideology and policies regarding the Kurds, beginning with his 1969 study of the socioeconomic conditions of eastern Turkey through a whole series of increasingly polemical works. He paid a heavy price for his moral and intellectual courage; all his books were banned, and he spent more than ten years in prison for writing them. Although my conclusions may be slightly different from his, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to his committed scholarship, and dedicate this chapter to him.

The massacres with which Beşikçi's book deals occurred in the course of Turkey's pacification of the rebellious Kurdish district of Dersim (presently called Tunceli) in 1937 and 1938. The events represent one of the blackest pages in the history of Republican Turkey, gracefully passed over in silence or deliberately misrepresented by most historians, foreign as well as Turkish.² As the campaign against Dersim went on, the authorities made sure that little information about it reached the outside world. Diplomatic observers in Ankara were aware that large military operations were taking place, but had little idea of what was actually going on. After the events, however, the British consul at Trebizond, the diplomatic post closest to Dersim, spoke of brutal and indiscriminate violence and made an explicit comparison with the Armenian massacres of 1915. "Thousands of Kurds," he wrote, "including women and children, were slain; others, mostly children, were thrown into the Euphrates; while thousands of others in less hostile areas, who had first been deprived of their cattle and other

¹ Ismail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* [The 1935 law concerning Tunceli and the genocide of Dersim] (Istanbul: Belge yayınları, 1990).

² There is not a single word about the events in the two standard texts, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), and Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and of Modern Turkey*, vol. 2, *The Rise of Modern Turkey 1808-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Turkish authors referring to the Dersim campaign prefer to gloss over the massacres. Thus, the retired general Muhsin Batur mentions in his memoirs that he took part, as a young lieutenant, in the 1938 Dersim campaign but refuses to speak out: "I beg my readers to be excused, I shall not write this page of my life" (Muhsin Batur, *Anılar ve görüşler: üç dönemin perde arkası* [Memoirs and views: behind the scene in three periods] (Istanbul: Milliyet, 1985), quoted in Musa Anter, *Anılarım* [My memoirs] (Istanbul: Doz, 1990), 44.

belongings, were deported to vilayets (provinces) in Central Anatolia. It is now stated that the Kurdish question no longer exists in Turkey."³

I shall first, using the few available sources, attempt to give an impression of the situation in Dersim prior to the pacification campaign and sketch the events of 1937 and 1938. Then I shall attempt to show that what we are dealing with was not merely the brutal suppression of an internal rebellion but part of a wider policy directed against the Kurds as such.

Dersim is an inaccessible district of high, snowcapped mountains, narrow valleys, and deep ravines in central Eastern Turkey. It was inhabited by a large number of small tribes, eking out a marginal existence by animal husbandry, horticulture, and gathering forest products. Their total numbers were, by the mid-1930s, estimated at 65,000 to 70,000.⁴ Dersim was a culturally distinct part of Kurdistan, partly due to ecological-geographical factors, partly to a combination of linguistic and religious peculiarities. Some of the tribes spoke Kurdish proper, but most spoke another, related language known as Zaza. All adhered to the heterodox Alevi sect, which separated them socially from the Sunni Kurds living to the east and south (among whom there were both Zaza and Kurdish speakers). Although there are Alevis in many other parts of Turkey, those of Dersim constitute a distinct group, with different beliefs and practices.⁵

Dersim was, by the mid-1930s, the last part of Turkey that had not been effectively brought under central government control. The tribes of Dersim had never been subdued by any previous government; the only law they recognized was traditional tribal law. Tribal chieftains and religious leaders wielded great authority over the commoners, whom they often exploited economically. They were not opposed to government as such, as long as it did not interfere too much in their affairs. Many chieftains, in fact, strengthened their position by establishing close relations with the military and police officers appointed to the region. There was a tradition of refusing to pay taxes — but then there was little that could be taxed, as the district was desperately poor. Young men evaded military service when they could, but by 1935 a considerable proportion of them did in fact serve in the Turkish army.

There were perpetual conflicts between the tribes, often taking the form of protracted feuds. Many of the tribesmen carried arms, and raids against neighboring

³ Report from the Consul in Trabzon, 27 September 1938 (Public Record Office, London, FO 371 files, document E5961/69/44).

⁴ This figure was given in December 1935 by then minister of the interior Şükrü Kaya (quoted in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu (1935)*, 10). It referred to the province of Tunceli. The historical district of Dersim was in fact larger than Tunceli, and included parts of neighboring Sivas, Erzincan, and Elazığ provinces. This may explain why another contemporary author gives the much higher population figure of 150,000, apparently referring to larger Dersim (Naşit Uluğ, *Tunceli medeniyete açılıyor* [Tunceli is opened up for civilization] (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Matbaası, 1939, 144). The military campaigns were mainly restricted to the province of Tunceli, and therefore I prefer the former figures.

⁵ Interestingly (and perhaps of some political significance), many of the Dersim Kurds are partly of Armenian descent — Dersim used to have a large Armenian population. Even well before the Armenian massacres, many local Armenians voluntarily assimilated, becoming Alevi Kurds (L. Molyneux-Seel, "A Journey in Dersim," *The Geographical Journal* 44, no. 1 [1914]: 49-68). This has left traces both in the local Zaza dialects and in popular belief.

tribes were not uncommon. The local military officials were often drawn into the tribal conflicts too, as some chieftains accused their enemies of conspiring against the state. At the same time there was Kurdish nationalist agitation among the tribes, carried out by the educated sons of leading families.⁶ In 1936 Dersim was placed under military government, with the express aim of pacifying and "civilizing" it. The tribes' response to the modernization brought by the state, consisting of roads, bridges, and police posts, was ambiguous. Some chieftains sought accommodation with the military authorities, others resented this interference in their former independence. By early 1937, the authorities believed, or had been led to believe, that a major rebellion was at hand, a show of resistance against the pacification program, instigated by nationalists. The person said to be the chief conspirator was a religious leader, Seyyit Riza. Five tribes (out of around one hundred) were said to be involved in the conspiracy.

The military campaign against Dersim was mounted in response to a relatively minor incident, and it would seem that the army had been waiting for a direct reason to punish the tribes. One day in March 1937, a strategic wooden bridge was burned down and telephone lines cut. Seyyit Riza and the tribes associated with him were suspected. The army may have believed this to be the beginning of the expected rebellion. One Turkish source mentions that there was around the same time another minor incident elsewhere in Kurdistan and suggests coordination by Kurdish nationalists.⁷ The official history of the military campaign, however, considers the incident as of a local nature only.⁸ It is hard, in retrospect, to separate intertribal violence from deliberate rebellion against the state. One pro-Turkish source in fact suggests that the suspicions against Seyyit Riza were based on denunciations by his local enemies.⁹ In any case, the army had its warrant for intervention. The first troops, sent in to arrest the suspects, were stopped by armed tribesmen. The confrontations soon escalated. When the tribes kept refusing to surrender their leaders, a large campaign was mounted. Military operations to subdue the region lasted throughout the summer of 1937. In September, Seyyit Riza and his closest associates surrendered, but the next spring the operations were resumed with even greater force. They must have been of unprecedented violence and brutality.

The few existing accounts of the events are necessarily partisan. One important book was written by a local man, the veterinarian and nationalist activist Nuri Dersimi, who was involved in the early stages of the rebellion, and who lost many relatives in the military reprisals. The book he published fourteen years later in Syrian exile is

⁶ According to a detailed military study of the events, Dersim-born Armenians, who had survived the Armenian massacres and lived in Syria, returned to the area together with Kurdish nationalists and successfully incited the tribes to rebellion. Reşat Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar (1924-1938)* [Rebellions in the Republic of Turkey, 1924-1938] (Ankara: T. C. Genelkurmay Başkanlığı Harp Tarihi Dairesi, 1972), 377.

⁷ Mahmut Goloğlu, *Tek-partili Cumhuriyet, 1931-1938* [The one-party republic, 1931-1938] (Ankara, 1974), 243.

⁸ Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 379.

⁹ Hıdır Öztürk, *Tarihimizde Tunceli ve Ermeni mezalimi* [The place of Tunceli in our history and the atrocities by the Armenians] (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1984), 31-36.

obviously colored by his nationalist views and may contain certain cosmetic corrections, but seems on the whole reliable.¹⁰ The best I can do is to quote verbatim some passages.

When the Turkish troops began hunting down the rebellious tribes, the men gave battle, while the women and children hid in deep caves. "Thousands of these women and children perished," Dersimi writes, "because the army bricked up the entrances of the caves. These caves are marked with numbers on the military maps of the area. At the entrances of other caves, the military lit fires to cause those inside to suffocate. Those who tried to escape from the caves were finished off with bayonets. A large proportion of the women and girls of the Kureyshan and Bakhtiyar [two rebel tribes] threw themselves from high cliffs into the Munzur and Parchik ravines, in order not to fall into the Turks' hands."¹¹

The Kirgan, a tribe that had opted for submission to the Turkish army and broken with the rebels, was not treated with greater clemency: "Because the Kirgan trusted the Turks they remained in their villages, while the rebel Bakhtiyar withdrew. As a result, they were destroyed. Their chieftains were tortured and then shot dead. All who tried to escape or sought refuge with the army were rounded up. The men were shot on the spot, the women and children were locked into haysheds, that were set fire to."¹²

When winter approached and the army could not continue its operations, it offered a cease-fire and a peaceful settlement with the rebels, while promising to leave the other tribes in peace and to give compensation for the damage done.¹³ These promises served to lure the chief rebel leader, Seyyit Riza, into the town of Erzincan (whose governor he knew and trusted). He was arrested, together with his retinue of some fifty men. They were summarily tried and eleven of them, including Seyyit Riza, were immediately executed.¹⁴

In the spring of 1938 military operations resumed on an even larger scale. The Karabal, Ferhad and Pilvank tribes, which surrendered, were annihilated. Women and children of these tribes were locked into haysheds and burnt alive. Men and women of

¹⁰ M. Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim* [Dersim in the history of Kurdistan] (Aleppo, 1952). Dersimi left the area when it had become clear that the new military governor of Dersim considered him to be the major instigator of the rebellion. This was before the military operations proper had begun. Dersimi was therefore not an eyewitness of the massacres; on the whole his account seems factually correct, although his figures may be somewhat exaggerated. Possible distortions in the book concern Dersimi's own role, and his desire to depict the Dersim population as more nationalist than it actually was. The Dersim rebellion shows more the signs of traditional tribal resistance to government interference than anything so modern as the wish for a separate state.

¹¹ Translated from Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 285-86. Among the girls who thus committed suicide was the author's daughter Fato (*ibid.*, 319).

¹² Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 286-87.

¹³ According to Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 288, the army also pretended to acquiesce in the rebels' demands, but he does not explain what these demands were.

¹⁴ The trial and executions were carried out with great haste because all had to be settled before President Atatürk, who was already on his way, visited the region. The officials in charge did not wish to embarrass the president by having the local people petition him for mercy. The events are narrated, with apparent feelings of shame, by the man who was ordered to organize the summary trial and executions, the later foreign minister Ihsan Sabri Çağlayangil, in his memoirs, *Anılarım* (Istanbul: Yılmaz, 1990), 45-55.

the Pilvank and Aşağı Abbas tribes, that had always remained loyal to the government, were lined up in the In and Inciga valleys and shot. The women and girls in Irgan village were rounded up, sprinkled with kerosine and set alight. Khech, the chief village of the Sheykh Mehmedan tribe, which had already surrendered, was attacked at night and all inhabitants were killed by machine gun and artillery fire. The inhabitants of Hozat town and the Karaca tribe, men, women and children, were brought near the military camp outside Hozat and killed by machine gun. (...) Thousands of women and girls threw themselves into the Munzur river. (...) The entire area was covered by a thick mist caused by the artillery fire and air bombardments with poisonous gas. (...) Even young men from Dersim who were doing their military service in the Turkish army were taken from their regiments and shot.¹⁵

Another Dersim-born Kurdish nationalist, Sait Kırmızıtoprak, published in 1970 under the pseudonym of Dr. Şivan a history of the Kurdish movement, in which he devotes a few pages to the Dersim massacres.¹⁶ Though clearly indebted to Dersimi's book, he adds some information from oral sources. On the 1938 campaign he writes (in free translation):

In the spring of 1938, the government offered amnesty to all who would surrender their arms. The Karabal, Ferhad, Pilvank, Sheykh Mehmedan and Karaca tribes, who responded to this call, were entirely annihilated. In a later stage, they also killed most of the Kureyshan tribe of Mazgirt district, the Yusufan and the Bakhtiyar tribes, not sparing women, old men and children. They were killed en masse, in many cases by the bayonet. Towards the end of summer, the Hormekan, Kureyshan and Alan of Nazimiye district, and part of the Bamasuran of Mazgirt were also annihilated, by poison gas bombs as well as by bayonets. Their corpses were doused with kerosine and set alight.¹⁷

Improbable though it may seem, these accounts are to a large extent confirmed by the documents published in the official military history of the campaign.¹⁸ Only the claim that the army used poison gas in the 1938 offensive, made by both Dersimi and Şivan, cannot be substantiated. At several instances the reports mention the arrest of women and children, but elsewhere we read of indiscriminate killing of humans and animals.

¹⁵ Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 318-20. Dersimi mentions especially his own brother, who then had a clerical job at Diyarbakir air base, and who was taken away to be shot, together with two friends.

¹⁶ Dr. Şivan, *Kürt millet hareketleri ve Irak'ta Kürdistan ihtilali* [Kurdish national movements and the revolution of Kurdistan in Iraq] (Stockholm, 1975; previously published clandestinely in Turkey in 1970).

¹⁷ Şivan, *Kürt millet hareketleri*, 98.

¹⁸ Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 365-480. This important source gives a detailed, day-by-day account of the military operations, prepared by the War History Department attached to the Turkish General Staff. The book is not publicly available; it was printed in a very limited edition, and most of these few copies were moreover requested back and destroyed within a short time after publication. Friends who prefer to remain anonymous provided me with photocopies of the section on Dersim. Some of the key passages are also quoted verbatim in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*.

With professional pride, reports list how many "bandits" and dependents were "annihilated," and how many villages and fields were burned. Groups who were hiding in caves were entirely wiped out. The body count in these reports (in some engagements a seemingly exact number like 76, in others "the entire band of Haydaran tribesmen and part of the Demenan") adds up to something between three and seven thousand, while tens of villages are reported destroyed. In seventeen days of the 1938 offensive alone, 7,954 persons were reported killed or caught alive;¹⁹ the latter were definitely a minority. According to these official reports, then, almost 10 percent of the entire population of Tunceli was killed. The Kurds claim that their losses were even higher.

Genocide or Ethnocide?

The killing in Dersim was undoubtedly massive, indiscriminate, and excessively brutal, but was it genocide? Was the killing done "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part" the Kurds (or only the people of Dersim) "as such"? Or was it only the suppression of an armed rebellion, with considerable overkill? I shall try to show that it was neither. There was never a policy of physically destroying the Kurds or part of them as such. There was, however, in the Dersim campaign, a deliberate intent to destroy rebels and potential rebels, and this was part of a general policy directed toward the Kurds as such. But this policy is more appropriately termed ethnocide, the destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity.

Intent to destroy may be inferred from the wording of the Secret Decision of the Council of Ministers on the Punitive Expedition to Dersim of 4 May 1937.²⁰ The decision envisages a final solution to the perpetual rebellions in Dersim. "This time," it reads, "the people in the rebellious districts will be rounded up and deported." But then it orders the army to "render those who have used arms or are still using them once and for all harmless on the spot, to completely, destroy their villages and to remove their families." Given the fact that almost every man in Dersim was known to carry arms, this reads like a brief to kill all men in the area.

It is not immediately obvious from official sources that the Dersim campaign was directed against the Kurds as such. There are no explicit references to Kurds, because the Kurds by that time had already been defined out of existence. The military reports call all people of Dersim indiscriminately "bandits" (*haydut*). Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya, however, had found it necessary to inform the National Assembly that the people of Dersim were "authentic Turks," thereby implicitly mentioning the unmentionable ethnic dimension of the Dersim question.²¹ The problem was, of course, that most people in Dersim were not yet aware of their Turkishness. Many did

¹⁹ Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 478.

²⁰ Published in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 67.

²¹ When presenting a special law for Dersim in 1935, two years before the campaigns, the minister (quoted in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 10) declared that the people there were "a group originally belonging to the Turkish race" (*aslen Türk unsuruna mensup bir kitledir*). Destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity was paradoxically legitimated by the denial of its existence (see below).

not know any Turkish at all, and the authorities had to communicate with them through interpreters;²² airplanes dropped leaflets "in the local language."²³

Dersimi and Şivan, both local men, are at pains to show that the Dersim rebellion was in fact a Kurdish nationalist rebellion, and that this was the reason for the brutality of the campaign. But they appear to project too much of their own sentiments on the rebels, who acted out of narrower interests and loyalties than lofty national ideals. The rebellion seems to have been primarily a response to government interference in the tribes' affairs, resistance to what the government saw as its "civilizing mission."

The regime presented this mission — begun well before the rebellion — as a determined struggle against backwardness and the oppression of the people by feudal lords, tribal chieftains, and reactionary religious leaders. One observer close to government circles enthused, soon after the Dersim campaign, on its civilizing effects:

the tribal chieftains, the mischievous religious leaders and their accomplices have been caught and deported to the west. The successful military operations have once and for all uprooted any possibility for a future bandit movement in Tunceli. Dersim is from now on liberated and saved. There remains no place in Dersim now where the army has not set foot, where the officers and commanders have not applied their intelligence and energies. Once again the army has, in performing this great task, earned the eternal gratitude of the Turkish nation.²⁴

In practice, however, the thrust of the government effort, including the operations in Dersim, was not so much directed against "feudalism" and backwardness as against Kurdish ethnic identity. The brutal Dersim campaign was but the culmination of a series of measures taken in order to forcibly assimilate the Kurds, as I shall presently show.

The Kurdish Policies of Republican Turkey

The Republic of Turkey, proclaimed in 1923, owes its existence to the War of Independence fought by Mustafa Kemal and his associates against the various other nations claiming parts of the former Ottoman territories in the wake of the First World War—notably Greeks, Armenians, French, and Italians. A "National Pact" defined the extent of territory for which the independence movement fought as the former Ottoman lands inhabited by non-Arab Muslims — in other words, by Turks and Kurds, for these were the major non-Arab Muslim groups in the Empire. Kurds took part in this struggle along with the Turks, and the movement's leaders in fact often

²² Çağlayangil, *Anularım*, 47.

²³ Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 390.

²⁴ Uluğ, *Tunceli*, 159 (slightly abbreviated). Naşit Hakkı Uluğ was a deputy for the province of Kütahya in the Grand National Assembly and had earlier written a journalistic account on "feudal" relations in Dersim and the need for their abolishment. He shows no interest in the human cost of the "civilizing" process, and mentions not a single killing.

spoke of a Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood, and of the new state as being made up of Turks and Kurds. In January 1923, Mustafa Kemal still suggested there might be local autonomy for Kurdish-inhabited areas,²⁵ but his policies soon changed drastically. The very fact that the new republic was called "Turkey" (a borrowing from European languages) already indicated that some citizens were going to be more equal than others.²⁶

The new republican elite, careful to preserve their hard-won victory, were obsessed with threats to territorial integrity and with imperialist ploys to sow division. In this regard, the Kurds were perceived to be a serious risk. There was a Kurdish independence movement, albeit a weak one, which had initially received some encouragement from the British. The call for Muslim unity, sounded during the War of Independence, had been more effective among the Kurds than Kurdish nationalist agitation, but when Turkey set on a course of secularization the very basis of this unity disappeared. The Kemalists attempted to replace Islam as the unifying factor by a Turkey-based nationalism. In so doing, they provoked the Kurdish nationalist response that they feared.

Some policies caused grievances among much wider circles than those of committed Kurdish nationalists alone. In the World War, numerous Kurds had fled to the west when Russian armies occupied eastern Anatolia. As early as 1919, the government decided to disperse them over the western provinces, in groups not larger than three hundred each, so that they would not constitute more than 5 percent of the population in any one locality. Some Kurds who wished to return to Kurdistan were prevented from doing so.²⁷ In the new Turkey, all modern education was henceforth to be in Turkish; moreover, traditional Islamic schools (*medrese*) were closed down in 1924. These two radical changes effectively denied the Kurds access to education. Other secularizing measures (abolition of the caliphate, the office of *shaikh al-islam*, and the religious courts; all in 1924) caused much resentment in traditional Muslim circles. Kurdish nationalist intellectuals and army officers then joined forces with

²⁵ When the Istanbul weekly *İkibin'e Doğru* ("Towards 2000") published in its 6 November 1988 issue the minutes of a press meeting where Mustafa Kemal had spoken of autonomy, it created a sensation in Turkey. The magazine was immediately banned for "separatist propaganda," but a court decision later lifted the ban.

²⁶ At the time of the common struggle for national independence, the territory to be defended was not called "Turkey" but "Anatolia and Rumeli" (the traditional names for the Asian and European parts of the present country).

²⁷ British intelligence report on the situation in eastern Turkey after the war, Foreign Office files, series FO 371, 1919, item 44A/112202/3050 (Public Record Office, London). FO 371, 1919: 44A/112202/3050 (Public Record Office, London); A. Yamulki, *Kürdistan ve Kürd ihtilalleri* (Kurdistan and the Kurdish rebellions) (Baghdad, 1946), 70-71. The latter author mentions the case of a tribal chieftain who wished to collect his tribespeople and return with them to Kurdistan, and was prevented from doing so. Such cases were later mentioned among the major grievances leading to the first large Kurdish rebellion; see Martin van Bruinessen, "Vom Osmanismus zum Separatismus: religiöse und ethnische Hintergründe der Rebellion des Scheich Said," in *Islam und Politik in der Türkei*, ed. Jochen Blaschke and Martin van Bruinessen (Berlin: Express Edition, 1985), 109-65, at 143-44.

disaffected religious leaders, resulting in the first great Kurdish rebellion, led by Shaikh Said in 1925.²⁸

The rebellion was put down with a great show of military force. The leaders were caught and hanged, and severe reprisals were taken in those districts which had participated in the uprising. According to a Kurdish nationalist source, the military operations resulted in the pillaging of more than two hundred villages, the destruction of well over eight thousand houses, and fifteen thousand deaths.²⁹ Shaikh Said's rebellion did not pose a serious military threat to Turkey, but it constitutes a watershed in the history of the republic. It accelerated the trend toward authoritarian government and ushered in policies which deliberately aimed at destroying Kurdish ethnicity. Immediately after the outbreak of the rebellion, the relatively liberal prime minister Fethi Okyar was deposed and replaced with the grim İsmet İnönü. By way of defining his position on the Kurds, İnönü publicly stated, "We are openly nationalist. Nationalism is the only cause that keeps us together. Besides the Turkish majority, none of the other [ethnic] elements shall have any impact. We shall, at any price, turkicize those who live in our country, and destroy those who rise up against the Turks and Turkdom."³⁰

Several other local rebellions followed, the largest of which took place in 1928-30 in the area around Mount Ararat. This was the most purely nationalist of all rebellions, organized and coordinated by a Kurdish political party in exile. In all these rebellions, however, tribes played the major part, acting under their own aghas (chieftains) and sometimes coordinated by shaikhs, religious leaders of wide-ranging authority. (Hence the emphasis, in Turkish public discourse, on the need to abolish "feudalism," tribalism, and religious reaction.) The government, perceiving this, responded by executing some shaikhs and aghas and separating the others from their tribes by deporting them to other parts of the country. Some entire tribes (notably those that had taken part in the Ararat rebellion) were deported and dispersed over western Turkey.

The first deportations were simply reprisals against rebellious tribes. In later years, deportations became part of the concerted effort to assimilate the Kurds. The turkification program announced by İnönü was embarked upon with characteristic vigor. The Kurdish language, Kurdish dress, Kurdish folklore, even the very word "Kurd" were banned. Scholars provided "proof" that the "tribes of the East" were of pure Turkish stock, and that their language was Turkish, though somewhat corrupted due to their close proximity to Iran. Henceforth they were to be called "Mountain Turks." It goes without saying that there was no place for dissenting views in academic or public life. Another historical theory developed under government sponsorship in those days held that all great civilizations — Chinese, Indian, Muslim, even ancient Egyptian and Etruscan — were of Turkish origin. Turkification, even

²⁸ Van Bruinessen, "Vom Osmanismus zum Separatismus"; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1920-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

²⁹ Bletch Chirguh, *La question kurde* (Le Caire, 1930), 52.

³⁰ Address to the Türk Ocakları in Ankara, 21 April 1925. Quoted in Güney Aslan, *Üniformalı kasaplar* (Butchers in uniform) (Istanbul: Pencere Yayınları, 1990), 14, after the popular history magazine *Yakın Tarihimiz*.

when by force, was therefore by definition a civilizing process. The embarrassing question why it was necessary to turkify people who were said to be Turks already was never addressed.

Massive population resettlement was one measure by which the authorities hoped to strengthen the territorial integrity of the country and speed up the process of assimilation. Kurds were to be deported to western Turkey and widely dispersed, while Turks were to be settled in their place. The most important policy document, the Law on Resettlement of 1934, shows quite explicitly that turkification was the primary objective of resettlement. The law defined three categories of (re)settlement zones:

— one consisting of those districts "whose evacuation is desirable for health, economic, cultural, political and security reasons and where settlement has been forbidden,"

— the second of districts "designated for transfer and resettlement of the population whose assimilation to Turkish culture is desired,"

— and the third of "places where an increase of the population of Turkish culture is desired."³¹

In other words, certain Kurdish districts (to be designated later) were to be depopulated completely, while in the other Kurdish districts the Kurdish element was to be diluted by the resettlement there of Turks (and possibly deportations of local Kurds). The deportees were to be resettled in Turkish districts, where they could be assimilated.

The intent of breaking up Kurdish society so as to assimilate it more rapidly is also evident from several other passages in the law. Article 11, for instance, precludes attempts by non-Turkish people to preserve their cultures by sticking together in ethnically homogeneous villages or trade guilds. "Those whose mother tongue is not Turkish will not be allowed to establish as a group new villages or wards, workers' or artisans' associations, nor will such persons be allowed to reserve an existing village, ward, enterprise or workshop for members of the same race."³² This is clearly more than just legal discrimination; the Law on Resettlement provides the legal framework for a policy of ethnocide.

It is against the background of this law that the pacification of Dersim has to be considered. Dersim was one of the first regions where it was to be applied. A year

³¹ The assignment of specific areas to these three categories (of which I have reversed the order for the sake of clarity) was to be made by the Ministry of the Interior, in accordance with the spirit of this law. The law itself, its political context and implications are extensively discussed in Ismail Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin "mecburi iskan"ı* (The "forced resettlement" of the Kurds) (Ankara: Komal, 1977); the quoted passages from article 2 are at 133. There is a French summary of the law in Rambout, *Les Kurdes*, 32-33. The partial translation in Ute Baran, "Deportations: Tunceli Kanunlari," in *Documentation of the International Conference on Human Rights in Kurdistan* (Bremen, 1989), 110-16, is unfortunately marred by serious errors. No serious study of the implementation of the law seems to have been made; a geographer who visited Kurdistan in the late 1930s, however, observed numerous recent Turkish settlements in the area (J. Frödin, "Neuere kulturgeografische Wandlungen in der östlichen Türkei," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* 79, no.1-2 [1944]:1-20). Many of those settlers, feeling less than welcome, have migrated back to western Turkey since then.

³² Beşikçi, *Kürtlerin "mecburi iskan"ı*, 142.

after the Law on Resettlement, in December 1935, the Grand National Assembly passed a special law on Dersim. The district was constituted into a separate province and placed under a military governor, who was given extraordinary powers to arrest and deport individuals and families. The Minister of the Interior of the day, Şükrü Kaya, explained the need for this law with references to its backwardness and the unruliness of the tribes. The district was in a state of lawlessness, caused by ignorance and poverty. The tribes settled all legal affairs, civil as well as criminal, according to their own primitive tribal law, with complete disregard of the state. The minister termed the situation a disease, and added that eleven earlier military campaigns, under the *ancien régime*, had failed to cure it. A radical treatment was needed, he said, and the law was part of a reform program (with "civilized methods," he insisted) that would make these people also share in the blessings of the republic.³³

The minister's metaphor of disease and treatment appears to be borrowed from a report on Dersim that was prepared ten years earlier for the same ministry. This document was reproduced in the official history of the military campaign, as a guideline for military policy. The author, Hamdi Bey, called Dersim "an abscess [that] the Republican government. . . would have to operate upon in order to prevent worse pain." He was more explicit than Şükrü Kaya about the nature of Dersim's malady: it was the growing Kurdish ethnic awareness.³⁴

The treatment began with the construction of roads and bridges, and of police posts and government mansions in every large village. The unrest resulting from this imposition of government control provided the direct reason for the pacification campaign of 1937-38, which at the same time served to carry out the first large-scale deportations under the 1934 law.³⁵ After the Dersim rebellion had been suppressed, other Kurdish regions being "civilized" from above knew better than to resist.

The Kemalist enterprise was a grandiose attempt to create a new world. Mustafa Kemal and his associates had created a vigorous new state out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Sick Man of Europe. By banning the Arabic script they destroyed all memory of the past and were free to rewrite history as they felt it should have been. The Kemalists set out to create a modern, progressive, unitary nation out of what was once a patchwork of distinct ethnic communities. Whatever appeared to undermine national unity, be it ethnic or class divisions, was at once denied and

³³ Kaya's speech before the Grand National Assembly, 25 December 1935 (quoted in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 10, after the parliamentary minutes).

³⁴ Report on the situation in Dersim by Hamdi Bey, inspector of the civil service, dated 2 February 1926, reprinted in Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 375-76. This study speaks of a long-term policy of the General Staff based on the ideas in the report, suggesting that the military campaign was not simply a response to an unforeseen incident in 1937. In 1926, when Hamdi Bey wrote his report, it was still possible to mention Kurds and Kurdish political sentiment; in the 1930s, they could only be referred to in oblique terms like "tribal," "uncivilized" (i.e., lacking in modern Turkish civilization) or "originally Turkish."

³⁵ The only figure on deportations from Dersim in the 1930s that I have seen is given by the retired general Esengin, according to whom, 3,470 persons, belonging to many different tribes, were deported to western Turkey. See Kenan Esengin, *Kürtçülük sorunu* (The problem of Kurdish nationalism) (Istanbul: Su Yayınları, 1976), 145. The actual number may well have been higher.

brutally suppressed. In the Kemalists' eyes, this was a process of liberation, an assertion of human dignity and equality.

"The people of Ankara, Diyarbakir, Trabzon and Macedonia," Mustafa Kemal proclaimed, "are all children of the same race, jewels cut out of the same precious stone." Reality often turned out to be less equalitarian. Even today, a person whose identity card shows that he was born in Tunceli will be treated with suspicion and antipathy by officials and will not easily find employment, even if he is quite turkicized.³⁶ Another famous saying of Mustafa Kemal, inscribed on official buildings and statues throughout the country, is subtly ambiguous: "how fortunate is he who calls himself a Turk!" — implying little good for those who don't. Justice Minister Mahmut Esat was less subtle but robustly straightforward when he proclaimed in 1930, "The Turks are the only lords of this country, its only owners. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock have in this country only one right, that of being servants, of being slaves. Let friend and foe, and even the mountains know this truth!"³⁷

The ambivalence, or internal contradiction, inherent in the Kemalist position on the Kurds has persisted for over half a century. The Kemalist concept of Turkishness is not based on a biological definition of race. Everyone in Turkey (apart from, perhaps, the Christian minorities) is a Turk, and many are the Kurds who have made brilliant political careers once they adopted Turkish identity. Both President Turgut Özal and opposition leader Erdal İnönü are of (partially) Kurdish descent. But there is also a sense of Turkish racial superiority that occasionally comes to the surface. Mutually contradictory though these attitudes are, they have reinforced one another in the suppression of Kurdish ethnicity.

The democratization of Turkey, which began after World War II, brought a resurgence of Kurdish ethnic awareness, along with an upsurge of left- and right-wing radicalism. Military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 sought to restore Kemalist purity, and resulted in renewed efforts at forced assimilation of the Kurds. Tunceli, the old Dersim, has come in for more than its share of repression. No longer a "den of ignorance and primitive tribalism," it has for the past few decades been considered a hotbed of communism, besides remaining ineradicably Kurdish. A few years ago, new plans were made to evacuate large parts of Tunceli and to resettle the inhabitants in the west, ostensibly for the sake of reforestation.³⁸ The majority of the people of Dersim now live in the diaspora, either in western Turkey or abroad. Not much is left of Dersim's distinctive culture.

³⁶ Cf. Peter Bumke, "Kızılbaş-Kurden in Dersim (Tunceli, Türkei): Marginalität und Häresie," *Anthropos* 74 (1979): 530-48.

³⁷ Daily *Milliyet*, 19 September 1930.

³⁸ In January 1987, the inhabitants of 233 villages in Tunceli (out of a total of 434) were notified by the district forestry department that they had to evacuate their villages and were to be resettled in western or southwestern Turkey. See the special report in the Istanbul weekly *İkibin'e Doğru*, 15-21 February 1987. Widespread protest occasioned by this report has apparently delayed the implementation of the evacuations.