

Gözde Orhan¹

[Istanbul]



**Remembering a Massacre:
How Has the Rise of Oral History
as a Methodology Impacted
Dersim Studies?²**

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Introduction

On 10 November 2009, the seventy-first anniversary of the death of the founder of modern Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, Onur Öymen, a parliamentary deputy and the vice chairman of the Republican People's Party (CHP), delivered a speech in parliament criticizing the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government's Kurdish initiative, which sought to extend the rights of Kurds in Turkey and end the armed conflict between the Kurdish movement and the Turkish state. Öymen argued that Atatürk's method of combating terrorism in the 1930s was completely unlike the AKP's current approach and cited the case of Dersim: "Did not mothers cry during the Dersim uprising? Did Atatürk negotiate with the actors of the Dersim rebellion?" For the first time, the Dersim massacre, an "open secret known to everyone,"³ was revealed to the public and openly discussed.

¹ <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1381-4025>.

² This paper is a part of the author's dissertation at Boğaziçi University.

³ *An Open Secret Known to Everyone (Herkesin Bildiği Sır)* is the title of Şükrü Aslan's book on Dersim. Ş. Aslan (eds.), *Herkesin Bildiği Sır*, Istanbul 2010.

In the discussions that emerged after Onur Öymen's unfortunate statement, the Dersim question has not only become a means through which the AKP government caught the main opposition party, the CHP, "in the act," but also the subject of critical research thanks to a new political atmosphere. Did military operations occur at the end of a rebellion or not? Did the Dersim people resist the modern state? Did the state approach the rebels with extreme prejudice? What was the role and impact of *aşirets* (tribes), the most prominent social formations in the province, in the events? Was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk aware of the massacre? In the political conditions of the 2000s, when the AKP regime led by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan attracted Islamists, conservatives, and liberals and established its superiority over the Kemalist bloc, these questions started to be answered independent of the official historiography of the pre-AKP era.

This paper scrutinizes the development of the Dersim literature, the only province in Turkey whose population is predominantly Alevi-Kurd and speaks Zazaca (variously called Zaza, Kirmanjki, Kirmancki, Kirmancca, and Dimli). It aims to demonstrate how the Kurdish policy of the AKP regime, the government's relations with the European Union, and the rivalry between the government and the main opposition party have affected the revival of Dersim studies. It also highlights the function of oral history as a methodology in such a context that written official history has completely excluded the victims of massacre. It focuses on artistic, literary, and academic works based on oral sources produced from the end of the 1990s and especially in the 2000s and questions the intellectual and political dynamics lying behind this revival.

This research first provides short information about the official Turkish historiography on the 1937–1938 events and then refers to the significance of pro-Kurdish historiography, which appraises Dersim as a part of Kurdistan and situates the massacre within Kurdish history. Finally, it focuses on the revival of the literature on 1938 in tandem with the transformation of the political climate of Turkey. It argues that the rise of the literature on the Dersim massacre was made possible not only thanks to the new political atmosphere shaped by the conflict between Kemalists, the liberal-Islamic bloc, and the Kurdish movement, but also thanks to the development of oral history as a methodology based on the reconstruction of the past with individual and collective human experiences. It claims that the rise of interdisciplinary studies and works produced in recent decades are an outcome of both social and political struggles and conflicts between various actors and a pattern that in that strengthens the legitimacy of the inhabitants of Dersim.

Towards a Non-Official Historiography of the Dersim Massacre

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk proclaimed the Turkish Republic in 1923 after the war of independence supported by both Turks and Kurds living within the new borders; however, the Kurdish people were not mentioned in the peace treaty of Lausanne and were disappointed when promises of autonomy made by nationalist leaders were forgotten.⁴ Moreover, the caliphate, the religious authority of Sunni Turks and Kurds, was abolished in 1924 and a religious regime was replaced by a radical program of secularization and modernization. The suppression of the caliphate and Sharia law weakened the Islamic bond between Kurds and Turks.⁵ In this way, Sheikhs and religious elements that had already existed in the late nineteenth century became more apparent in Kurdish politics.⁶

During the single party period (1923–1945), many Kurdish rebellions took place and were violently suppressed by the state. Some of them were of both a religious and nationalist nature; however, because the Kurds living in Turkey belong to different sects (Sunni or Alevi), collaboration between Alevi and Sunni Kurds to establish an independent state or to mobilize for nationalist demands was limited. Alevi Kurds preferred the “irreligious” regime of the Turkish state over the struggle for a new nation state under the control of the Sunni Kurds.

One of the provinces where rebellions against the Turkish government occurred was Dersim. The region was ruled by a large number of tribes (*aşirets*)⁷ organized on the basis of loyalty to a chief. The social, religious, and political affiliations of tribal chiefs mixed in Dersim. The province was inaccessible due to not only mountainous geographical conditions and poor transportation, but also because of the regime of powerful tribal formations and inter-tribal coalitions. In the 1930s, the central government was

⁴ E.J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, New York 1998, p. 170.

⁵ W. Jwaideh, *Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development*, New York 2006, p. 210.

⁶ A. Vali, *Genealogies of the Kurds: Constructions of Nation and National Identity in Kurdish Historical Writing*, in A. Vali (eds.), *Essays on the Origins of Kurdish Nationalism*, California 2003, p. 95.

⁷ For detailed information see: M.V. Bruinessen, ‘*Aslımı İnkâr Eden Haramzadedir!*’: *The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis*, in K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, A. Otter-Beaujean (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, Leiden 1997.

still unable to control the province, which was under the influence of tribal relations and laws, although the modern Turkish state was established in the early 1920s. When the government made an effort to modernize the province through the construction of new roads and bridges, some tribes resisted under the leadership of Seyid Rıza. As a result of a Turkish military campaign against the rebellion (1937–1938), thousands of people were killed and displaced. According to Martin van Bruinessen, who conducted many years of field research in Kurdish cities and has published a number of publications on the Kurds,⁸ the Turkish army had been waiting for a pretext to suppress the tribes; therefore, it took action, even though participation in the resistance was limited.⁹

There is considerable debate on the reasons for the military interventions and resistance of *aşirets*. The historiography of the events of 1937–1938, which marks the entrance of the modern state into the province, has become a matter of debate and has provided a basis for the construction and maintenance of different identities in Dersim. There are dozens of narratives that try to explain the causes and consequences in significantly different ways, and each one supports or debunks competing political stances in the province.

A Turkish nationalist current dominated the research area until the aforementioned reinvention of Dersim. This dominant approach is comprised of narratives, observations, and reports that gave the government information about the city and sought to prove the Turkishness of the population or provide an official explanation of the 1937–1938 events. For example, the books and articles of Naşit Hakkı (Uluğ), Ömer Kemal Açar, and Besim Darkot written in the late 1930s and early 1940s introduce the inhabitants and geography of Dersim and justify the project of modernization there.¹⁰ Studies

⁸ M. v. Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan*, London 1992; *idem*, *Kurdish Ethno-Nationalism Versus Nation-Building States: Collected Articles*, Istanbul 2000.

⁹ *Idem*, *Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937–1938) and the Chemical War Against Iraqi Kurds (1988)*, in G.J. Andreopoulos (eds.), *Conceptual and Historical Dimensions of Genocide*, Pennsylvania 1994, pp. 141–170.

¹⁰ N.H. Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, Ankara 1931; *idem*, *Tunceli Medeniyete Açılıyor*, Istanbul 1939; Ö.K. Açar, *Tunceli-Dersim Coğrafyası*, Istanbul 1940; B. Darkot, *Tunceli Üzerine Coğrafi Görüşler*, Istanbul 1943.

investigating state intervention as a legitimate and necessary defense against insurgency are still being conducted today. They generally claim that *aşiret* leaders oppressed the Dersim people and that the military operations were carried out to put an end to this tyranny. Their main argument is that the *aşirets* mounted insurgency movements, which can be considered Kurdish rebellions, and that these were supported by foreign countries such as Britain, Russia, France, and the United States as well as the Armenian community, the “historic enemy” of the Republic.¹¹ Beginning in the 1990s, some works independent of official history have been published.¹²

Against the main current, a general view of the 1937–1938 events embraced by a significant part of the Kurdish movement claims that the 1938 Dersim massacre was a Kurdish rather than Alevi massacre. This viewpoint focuses on the “Kurdishness” of the Dersim massacre, referring to official reports defining Dersim people as “Kurds,” and views the operation as an extensive colonization plan. *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim* (Dersim in the History of Kurdistan), a famous book by Nuri Dersimi that was first published in Syria in 1952, has led the drive for an alternative historiography that has considered the province to be a part of Kurdistan.¹³ This approach highlights the similarities between Dersim and other Kurdish cities and includes it in Kurdish geography and history. Other pro-Kurdish narratives usually refer to Nuri Dersimi, who positions the province in the heart of the Kurdish nationalist movement, emphasizes the role of Seyid Rıza in the construction of Kurdish nationalism, and defines “Kurdish Alevism” as different from that of the Turks. Moreover, it considers Zazaca as a dialect instead of a language.

¹¹ See for example: H. Öztürk, *Tarihimizde Tunceli ve Ermeni Mezalimi*, Ankara 1984; S. Akgül, *Yakın Tarihimizde Dersim İsyanları ve Gerçekler*, İstanbul 1992; B. Öz, *Dersim Olayı*, İstanbul 2004; R. Zelyut, *Dersim İsyanları ve Seyit Rıza Gerçeği*, Ankara 2010; N. Günel, *Dersim İsyanı*, İstanbul 2010; R. Demir, *Feodalizmin Devlete İsyanı ve Dersim Olayları*, Ankara 2011.

¹² V. Timuroğlu, *Dersim Tarihi*, Ankara 1991; A. Kaya, *Başlangıcından Günümüze Dersim Tarihi*, İstanbul 1999; H. Yıldırım, *Ena Lenge: Une Femme Témoinne sur les Massacres au Kurdistan-Dersim, 1937–1938*, Paris 2001; M. Bayrak, *Dersim-Koçgiri: Te'dib, Tenkil, Taqtil, Tehcir, Temsil, Temdin, Tasfiye*, Ankara 2010; C. Solgun, *Dersim... Dersim... Yüzleşmezsek Hiçbir Şey Geçmiş Olmuyor*, İstanbul 2010; N. Uğurlu, *Kürt Milliyetçiliği: Dersim 1937 Seyit Rıza İsyanı*, İstanbul 2011; M. Akyürekli, *Dersim Kürt Tedibi 1937–1938*, İstanbul 2011; M. Çem, *Dersim'de Alevilik*, İstanbul 1995; *idem*, *Dersim Merkezli Kürt Aleviliği: Etnisite, Dini İnanç, Kültür ve Direniş*, İstanbul 2011.

¹³ M.N. Dersimi, *Günümüz Türkçesiyle Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim*, İstanbul 1994.

İsmail Beşikçi's important book *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* (*The Tunceli Law [1935] and the Dersim Genocide*), written in 1977 and published in 1990, constructs the main historical arguments of this pro-Kurdish literature and is the first work that clearly criticizes Turkey's official ideology.¹⁴ Beşikçi evaluates the Dersim operations as the continuation of state interventions in Kurdistan and openly uses the term "genocide" to refer to the killing. This narrative introduces the Dersim people as powerful actors who resisted instead of as passive victims of state violence.

Martin van Bruinessen also scrutinizes Dersim as part of the historical process of modern Kurdish awareness while emphasizing ethnocultural diversity among the inhabitants of the Kurdish lands. He examines not only the 1930s – the decade when the pacification program of the government in the province was applied to assimilate the non-Turkish population – but also the 1980s and 1990s, when both leftist and pro-Kurdish movements flourished in the city.¹⁵

It would not be wrong to introduce the birth of the Kurdish movement in Dersim in order to reveal the establishment of the Kurdish identity in the city, which contributes to the development of an alternative historiography of the Dersim massacre after Nuri Dersimi. Single-party rule ended in Turkey in 1945; however, the country has since experienced two coup d'états (on 27 May 1960 and 12 September 1980, respectively) and a military memorandum (12 March 1971). Social, economic, and political developments led to

¹⁴ İ. Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi*, İstanbul 1990.

¹⁵ M. v. Bruinessen, *Kurdish Society, Nationalism and Ethnicity, Refugee Problems*, in P.G. Kreyenbroek, S. Sperl (eds.), *The Kurds: a Contemporary Overview*, London 1992; *idem*, *Nationalisme Kurde et Ethnicités Intra-Kurdes*, "Peuples Méditerranéens," no. 68/69, 1994, pp. 185–215; *idem*, 'Aslını İnkâr Eden Haramzadedir!': *The Debate on the Ethnic Identity of the Kurdish Alevis*, in K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele and, A. Otter-Beaujean (eds.), *Syncretistic Religious Communities in the Near East*, Leiden 1997; *idem*, *Constructions of Ethnic Identity in the Late Ottoman Empire and Republican Turkey: the Kurds and their Others*, paper presented at the workshop *Social Identities in the Late Ottoman Empire*, New York, Middle Eastern Studies, 8 March 1997; *idem*, *Race, Culture, Nation and Identity Politics in Turkey: Some Comments*, paper presented at the Mica Ertegin Annual Turkish Studies Workshop on *Continuity and Change: Shifting State Ideologies from Late Ottoman to Early Republican Turkey, 1890–1930*, Princeton University, 24–26 April 1997; *idem*, *Kurds, States and Tribes*, in F.A. Jabar, H. Dawod (eds.), *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, London 2002.

a state of emergency declared by the government under the conditions of natural disasters, dangerous epidemics, severe economic crisis, and widespread violence that seriously disrupted public order, requiring extraordinary management procedures in cities where the Kurdish population lives. The geographic frontiers of the area under the control of emergency rule have changed over the decades. The state of emergency was first declared on 1 March 1984. Starting then, the scope and the extension of the time of implementation were reconfigured every four months at the request of the council of ministers. Before the state of emergency, the Turkish government had imposed martial law in thirteen provinces in 1978, which entailed the suspension of ordinary law and the imposition of direct military control in response to attempts at rebellion or war. The number of cities included in the scope of martial law increased until the military coup of 1980.¹⁶ After the coup d'état, when the entire country was incorporated into the martial law system,¹⁷ military rule was gradually withdrawn. Cities categorized in the 1982 Constitution as places where the government had "doubts about the emergence of acts of violence intended for the abolishment of the democratic system or of fundamental rights and freedoms"¹⁸ were redefined by the state of emergency law and added to the state of emergency region. From 1987 to 2002, six governors ruled the Kurdish region as "super-governors."¹⁹ They were authorized by law to evacuate, reallocate, or disappropriate villages, hamlets, and other residential areas.²⁰

The government declared a state of siege in Dersim in April 1979; it lasted for eight years. A new era started with the declaration of the state of emergency in 1987. In sum, Dersim was ruled under extraordinary provisions for twenty-three years, three months, and four days.²¹ During this period, like all the inhabitants of the Kurdish region, Dersim people were subjected to countless human rights abuses. The justification for the extension of the state

¹⁶ Z. Üskül, *Olağanüstü Hal Üzerine Yazılar*, İstanbul 2003, p. 11.

¹⁷ H. Özdemir, *Rejim ve Asker*, İstanbul 1989, p. 303.

¹⁸ *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Anayasası (Constitution of the Republic of Turkey)*, <http://www.tbmm.gov.tr> (accessed: 13.06.2019).

¹⁹ Y. Türker, *Kısa 'Süper Vali'ler Tarihi*, "Radikal," 22 August 2011.

²⁰ Olağanüstü Hal Bölge Valiliği İhdası Hakkında Kanun Hükmünde Kararname (Decree Law on the Establishment of the Governorship of the State of Emergency), <http://www.mevzuat.gov.tr/MevzuatMetin/4.5.285.pdf> (accessed: 10.06.2019).

²¹ Z. Üskül, *op. cit.*, p. 162.

of emergency after the 1980 coup was based on the war between the PKK and the state; since 1984, the PKK has been involved in an armed conflict with the Turkish Republic in eastern Turkey.

In the 1990s, the political influence of the PKK in the city strengthened the intellectual and cultural spheres of the Kurdish movement as well. The Kurdish nationalist tendency seeking common denominators among inhabitants living in the Kurdish region has sought to reconstruct a past based on a common fate. The 1938 massacre was the last stage of state violence against the Kurdish people and was not independent of the Koçgiri (1921) or Şeyh Sait (1925) Rebellions, which according to this historiography occurred in the neighboring provinces. However, written sources were limited, and the book of Nuri Dersimi shows some spatial and temporal inconsistencies. A new method was needed to reveal the importance and scope of the Dersim massacre. The transformation of the political atmosphere of Turkey overlapped with new methodological research, including objective and subjective evidence used in collaboration with each other to reconstruct the past.

Dersim is inhabited by citizens who define themselves as Kurds, Zazas, Alevi, etc. A considerable population of Dersim-born expatriates lives abroad; many of them frequently visit their homeland. The cultural environment and political power of the above-mentioned groups influence the memory of the massacre and oral transition of knowledge about it. It is clear that the rise of a non-official historiography of the Dersim massacre is strictly related to the power and expansion of the Kurdish movement and other culturalist initiatives seeking to place the province in a distinct context. The struggle between different identity groups in Dersim contributes to the development of a new historiography.

Pro-Kurdish Dersim literature developed in the 1990s, parallel to the rise of the Kurdish movement. The province is described as part of Kurdistan, whose national identity is reconstructed primarily through a single language with different dialects and a collective memory shaped by the Dersim massacre. The Vate Working Group (Vate Çalışma Grubu), which first met in Stockholm in 1996, is the crucial initiative that represented this current in the 1990s. It sought to standardize the Zaza language and demonstrate the similarities between Zazaca and Kurmanci, the most widely spoken Kurdish dialect in Turkey. Since 1997, the group has been publishing a periodical titled "Vate". The Vate Publishing House was founded in 2003 and has since published many studies supporting the Kurdishness of

Dersim. A member of the group, Munzur Çem, has conducted important research on Dersim Alevism and its language.²²

On the other hand, Dersim-born intellectuals who migrated to Europe after the coup d'état of 1980 started to give thought to Dersim's language, religion, and traditions. They framed a perspective based on the assumption that Dersim is neither Turkish nor Kurdish. It could be said that the emergence of Zazaist literature on Dersim is directly correlated with the rise of publications regarding the province as part of the Kurdish region. In other words, it stems from a dialectical relationship to the development of Kurdish nationalism. The Zazaists focused on the Dersim language as a characteristic cultural norm. They have published many periodicals such as *Ayre, Piya, Raştiye, Desmala Sure, Ware, Tija Sodiri, Pir, and Kormuşkan* and have made efforts to prove that Zazaca is a distinct language. Books written in the 1990s by Ebubekir Pamukçu, Sait Çiya, Seyfi Cengiz, and Mustafa Düzgün represent this Zazaist tendency.²³ With the expansion of internet usage, diaspora intellectuals have tended to publish on websites.

One can highlight the relationality existing between the rise of new political actors independent of the hegemonic powers of the state of emergency regime on the one hand and, on the other, the appearance of new methodological approaches enabling the lives of ordinary people to be incorporated for the first time. In the subsequent sections, this paper first scrutinizes the effect of the normalization of the regime on the removal of the military tutelage system and that of government attempts at solving the Kurdish question (from 2002 to 2015) on the revival of the Dersim literature. In this way, a new liberal wave has proven to be a critical historiography as well as a pro-Kurdish one. Second, I discuss the role of oral history as an opportunity to see ruination from the viewpoint of non-state actors. Thanks to the conflict between new and old hegemonies, collecting, presenting, and analyzing the oral history narratives of Dersim people can be achieved by using an ethnographic approach.

²² M. Çem, *Dersim'de Alevilik*, İstanbul 1995; *idem*, *Türkçe Açıklamalı Kırmancca (Zazaca) Gramer*, Diyarbakır 2003; *idem*, *Dersim Merkezli Kürt Aleviliği*.

²³ E. Pamukçu, *Dersim Zaza Ayaklanmasının Tarihsel Kökenleri*, İstanbul 1992; M. Düzgün, *Tayêlawikê Dêrsımı: Şiwari: Agitlar/Dersim Türküleri*, Kista 1992; *idem*, C. Munzur, H. Tornecengi, *Dersim De Diwayi, Qese Pi-Kalikan, Erf u Mecazi, Çibenokî, Xeletnayeni/Dersim'de Dualar, Atasözleri, Mecazlar, Bilmeceler, Şaşrtmacalar*, Stockholm 1992; S. Cengiz, *op. cit.*, Marne 1995; S. Çiya, *Dersim Yazıları*, İstanbul 1998.

In sum, beginning in the 1990s, the events of 1937–1938 have started to be critically investigated. On the one hand, some historical documents exhibiting the severity of the massacre have been discovered and published; on the other, new research based on oral histories interwoven with archival and photographic surveys and biographical memoirs has been released. In this way, the events have been rewritten and radically reconsidered from the standpoint of witnesses.

A New Literature Based on Oral Sources

In the 2000s, the legal arrangements of single-party rule and the coercive measures of the state of emergency were replaced by the AKP government's new strategies that pretended to break from the old. The AKP was a conservative, Sunni-Islamic, neo-Ottomanist, and market-oriented party. According to the AKP, it had the same enemy as the Dersim people: the Kemalist regime and the CHP, which embodies all values related to modernism and secularism. The formation of the first AKP government (March 2003) coincided with the lifting of the state of emergency (July 2002) in Dersim, which had been in force since 1987, after the declaration of cease-fire by the PKK in 1999. With the lifting of the state of emergency, the relative presence of the army in the province has diminished, while more civil society-based governance practices have become prominent.

With the AKP's coming to power, the Dersim question has ceased to be an official problem. However, it is clear that there have been considerable attempts at producing cultural, academic, and intellectual works even in the late 1990s thanks to mostly Dersim-born people living in the diaspora. Like Turkish immigrants, Dersim people coming to Europe as migrant laborers have started to construct a homeland identity by emphasizing their distinctness from other groups: "While reinventing their cultural identity in the host society conditions, they have also discovered their parents' traumatic expulsion from their hometown to the Western regions of Turkey years ago, in 1938, which made them feel contextually like a victim diaspora."²⁴

Under the current pro-Islamic government defining itself as the opposite of the secularist Kemalist regime, the collective memory of Dersim has begun to attract more attention from the public. Social scientists and artists

²⁴ M. Akçınar, *Re-Invention of Identity: The Case of Dersim Community Association in Berlin*, Unpublished MA Thesis, Middle East Technical University 2010, p. 16.

eager to explore the aspects of this lesser-known case have also paid close attention to the province.²⁵ The dynamics of ethnic identification and the boundaries [re]produced through social interaction have been scrutinized in certain sources.²⁶ The especially valuable works of Erdal Gezik and Gürdal Aksoy inspire one to think about the ways in which the ethnic identities of the Dersim people are defined and negotiated. Moreover, two crucial books edited by Şükrü Aslan have fostered an interdisciplinary approach to the field.²⁷ These studies gathered the articles of both Dersim-born intellectuals and other academics and have therefore encouraged new outside researchers. On the other hand, the state of emergency regime and the severe restrictions imposed on everyday life in the 1990s have been discussed in certain academic and non-academic research.²⁸

Apart from critical projects generally based on written sources, certain studies on Dersim that use sources other than traditional document-based and archival research have attracted attention: its reliance on memory rather than texts²⁹ is the common denominator of these historical and cultural productions introduced below. This means all histories that aim to

²⁵ For a detailed analysis, see: Ü. Sözen, *Neo-Dersim Kültür Alanı: Siyaset ve Piyasa Ekseninde Hafızanın ve Kültürün Nesneleşmesi*, in Ş.G. Tuna, G. Orhan (eds.), *Dört Dağa Sığmayan Kent: Dersim Üzerine Ekonomi-Politik Yazılar*, İstanbul 2013, pp. 249–305; P. Dinç, *Novels and Short Stories as Products of Nationalist Competition: the Case of Dersim 1937–1938 in Turkish Politics and Literature*, “Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity,” vol. 46, no. 1, 2017, pp. 144–157.

²⁶ E. Gezik, *Dinsel, Etnik ve Politik Sorunlar Bağlamında Alevi Kürtler*, Ankara 2004; D. Munzuroğlu, *Toplumsal Yapı ve İnanç Bağlamında Dersim Aleviliği*, Ankara 2004; A.K. Gültekin, *Tunceli’de Kutsal Mekân Kültü*, Ankara 2004; G. Aksoy, *Dersim Alevi Kürt Mitolojisi: Raa Hag’da Dinsel Figürler*, İstanbul 2006; G. Aksoy, *Anadolu Aleviliği’nden Dersim’e: Alevi Tarihine Coğrafi Bir Giriş*, Ankara 2009; A.K. Gültekin, *Tunceli’de Sünni Olmak: Ulusal ve Yerel Kimlik Öğelerinin Tunceli-Pertek’te Etnolojik Tetkiki*, İstanbul 2010; G. Aksoy, *Dersim: Alevilik, Ermenilik, Kürtlük*, Ankara 2012; D. Deniz, *Yol/Rê: Dersim İnanç Sembolizmi: Antropolojik Bir Yaklaşım*, İstanbul 2012.

²⁷ Ş. Aslan (eds.), *Herkesin...;* Z. Hepkon, S. Aydın, Ş. Aslan (eds.), *Dersim’i Parantezden Çıkarmak: Dersim Sempozyumu’nun Ardından*, İstanbul 2013. See also: Ş. Aslan, *Pülümür*, Ankara 2016.

²⁸ See, for example: C. Başlangıç, *Korku Tapınağı: Güçlükönak-Silopi-Lice-Tunceli*, İstanbul 2001; J. Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War*, Leiden 2007.

²⁹ J. Fentress, C. Wickham, *Social Memory*, Oxford 1992, p. 1.

give voice to what would otherwise remain voiceless³⁰ and root in memory “from which meaning can be extracted and preserved.”³¹ Considering that oral history is not only a practice of recording the speech of people which helps to obtain information about the past but also a process that leads to theoretical innovation,³² this paper includes all models of oral history usage. Lynn Abrams posits three models of oral history usage. The first is the tradition of collecting interviews and producing transcripts “for the sole purpose of recovering voices and placing them in the historical record.”³³ The second “evidential” model is the application of oral history to support one argument or arguing against another with the help of data extracted from interviews. The third “theoretical” model is the usage of materials for “a particular analytical model” and enables interdisciplinary approaches as far as the interest of scholars from other disciplines is concerned.³⁴ For this research, all works under the categories formulated by Abrams are investigated as oral sources.

The value of an oral source depends on how much it triggers a dynamic process of production of meanings. As far as Dersim research projects based on oral history and memory studies produced during these decades are concerned, one can classify them under a few categories; a considerable amount of research has been dedicated to language in this period. Oral history studies aiming to discover the language/dialect of the Dersim people (Zazaca or Kirmancki) based on interviews with local people have contributed to the development of both language and history. Religion has been another area of research. In Turkey, where Sunni Islam has a hegemonic position, the province’s heterodox religious identity has increasingly attracted the intense attention of social scientists. Ethnographies aiming to reveal acts of worship of Kurdish Alevis living in the province have been published in both Turkey and Europe. Moreover, research projects on Dersim music, morning rituals, poems, folklore, and clothing have been constructed through stories transmitted orally from one generation to another and transformed in tandem with experiences within the lifetime of the narrator.

³⁰ P. Connerton, *Social Memory*, in *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge 1989, p. 18.

³¹ D.A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History – A Practical Guide*, New York 1995, p. 19.

³² L. Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, New York 2010, p. 1.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

Because Dersim people witnessed many waves of emigration from the 1930s to the end of the 1990s, studies based on interviews with the Dersim community living abroad have been conducted to understand issues of discrimination, collective identity, diasporic identity, assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization. Although Dersim seems to be a relatively homogeneous community, sub-groups such as Armenians or Sunni Turks living in the province have been introduced through case studies. Interviews with elderly Dersim people not only provide crucial information about linguistic, religious, and ethnic features and patterns of the province, but they also help to discover its cultural and natural heritage. For example, thanks to oral records, endemic plants and medicinal herbs were mapped and this data has been handed down to the next generations.

As mentioned previously, a critical literature started to take shape in the 1990s, though an obvious boom in the number of productions occurred in the early 2000s. First, examples of the new Dersim literature consist of musical projects. Dersim's ethnic music, based on lamenting the victims, was reinvented in this period. The most famous musicians who unearth and perform Dersim songs are Metin-Kemal Kahraman, Mikail Aslan, and Ahmet Aslan. Metin-Kemal Kahraman's 1997 album *Yaşlılar Dersim Türküleri Söylüyor* ("The Elders of Dersim Sing Traditional Songs"), which is a collection of poetry and songs from Dersim, has become very famous in both the province and among the diaspora. Leyla Neyzi, an oral historian and professor of anthropology, argues that Metin and Kemal Kahraman have built a bridge between the past and present of Dersim through music.³⁵ The sound of Dersim reinvented thanks to the rise of oral history has been scrutinized by not only local musicians, but also by European researchers from countries with large Dersim-born populations. One of them, German ethnomusicologist Martin Greve, highlights the impact of Alevi traditions, beliefs, and aesthetics of the path of God in the construction of Dersim's music.³⁶ Because the Dersim massacre was seen as an Alevi massacre, religious and elegiac elements intermingle in these works of art. Ülker Sözen describes this new artistic

³⁵ L. Neyzi, *'Ben Kimim?' Türkiye'de Sözlü Tarih, Kimlik ve Öznellik*, İstanbul 2013.

³⁶ M. Greve, *Tu Temburi Ez Perde Me – Religious Music in and from Dersim/Tunceli*, Lecture Series in the Autumn & Winter 2017/2018: Aesthetic Dimensions of Alevi Cultural Heritage, İstanbul, 10 January 2018.

and cultural environment as a public sphere shaped by market dynamics, power relations, symbols, and representations of Dersim.³⁷

Although the number of studies that focus on various aspects of the province has increased significantly, it would not be wrong to argue that the massacre was the key concern for the majority of researchers.³⁸ Their social behaviors, forms of worship, the formation and transformation of their identities, political stances, and ideological approaches have been investigated by considering the impact of the massacre on them and the inter-generational transmission of the trauma. In their article on the Armenian Genocide, D.E. Miller and L.T. Miller argue that the responses of survivors to the massacre has changed over the course of time.³⁹ The aim of oral history is not only to record what is said, but also to comprehend how and why it is said. In other words, one can interpret the change of the feelings and ways of remembering of survivors, not just information but also signification, interpretation, and meaning.⁴⁰ The last surviving witnesses of the Dersim massacre were about to die; therefore the most crucial and urgent thing to be done was to reach the testimony of those who had been there. In this way, their invaluable narratives have been recorded by independent researchers or as part of oral history projects supported by the European Union and by several NGOs.

The oral history projects perfectly captured the *zeitgeist* of 2000s studies of Dersim. On the one hand, in order to convey the stories of the survivors

³⁷ Ü. Sözen, *Neo-Dersim Kültür Alanı...*, pp. 249–305.

³⁸ C. Taş, *Dağların Kayıp Anahtarı: Dersim 1938 Anlatıları*, İstanbul 2010; M. Çem, *Tanıkların Diliyle Dersim '38*, İstanbul 1999; İ. Algör, *Ma Sekerdo Kardaş? Netmişiz Kardaş?: 'Dersim 38' Tanıklıkları*, İstanbul 2010; H. Demir, *Dersim'den Tunceli'ye: 38 Katliamı Tanıklıkları*, İstanbul 2011; B. Bilmez, G. Kayacan, Ş. Aslan, *Toplumsal Bellek, Kuşaklararası Aktarım ve Algı: Dersim '38'i Hatırlamak*, İstanbul 2011; Y.B. Beyi, *Süngü ve Yara: Dersim '38 Katliamı ve Sürgün Tanıklıkları*, Ankara 2012; M. Özcan, *Tanıkların Dilinden Pêri Vadisi*, İstanbul 2012; Y. Doğan, *Savruulanlar: Dersim 1937–1938 Hatta 1939*, İstanbul 2012; E. Yağan, *Dersim Defterleri: Beyaz Dağ'da Bir Gün*, İstanbul 2013; M. Çem, *Qurzeli Usiv'in 70 Yılı*, İstanbul 2014; M. Yıldız, *Dersim'in Etno-Kültürel Kimliği ve 1937–1938 Tertelesi*, İstanbul 2014; B.F. Günday, *'Adın Perihan Olsun': Diyar Ağa'nın Torunu Ane Hatun'un Hikayesi*, İstanbul 2016.

³⁹ D.E. Miller, L.T. Miller, *An Oral History Perspective on Responses to the Armenian Genocide*, in R.G. Hovannisian (eds.), *The Armenian Genocide in Perspective*, New Jersey 1986, p. 201.

⁴⁰ L. Abrams, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

and their children to future generations, researchers had to conduct interviews almost immediately before the last witnesses pass away, because the orphans of Dersim are by now more than eighty years old. Oral history is the most effective method as far as the ages of interviewees are concerned. Moreover, as mentioned above, the elders of Dersim speak only their own language and have an oral culture instead of a written one; therefore, recording the narratives is the primary purpose of writing history from below.

The first institutionalized project, titled *Dersim 1937–38 Oral History Project*, was initiated in 2009 by the Confederation of Dersim Communities in Europe (FDG), although since the 1990s there have been many attempts at collecting oral data on the massacre. It was designed as a collective project with broad social participation and academic research in which oral history was determined to be the principal methodology.⁴¹ This project is run by an academic committee led by Yaşar Kaya. Three different workshops were held to train the interviewers who work within the scope of the project. It should be noted that the interview techniques of the USC Shoah Foundation, which is known for its oral history studies on the Holocaust, are exclusively utilized. More than 350 witnesses from eight different countries have been interviewed up to the present. Two of the witnesses were soldiers from the army units who perpetrated the massacre.⁴² Not only the witnesses of the 1937–1938 events but also the second generation Dersim people have been included within the scope of this research.

Another crucial oral history project is *Dersim '38 in Memories: An Intergenerational Oral History Project*, conducted by the History Foundation between July 2010 and June 2011 and funded by Global Dialogue Foundation and the Embassy of Finland. Within the scope of this project, 146 people (125 of whom were born in Dersim or were the children of Dersim-born people) were interviewed in twenty cities in Turkey and abroad, such as Basel, Berlin, Toronto, and Vienna.⁴³ The results and the main findings of the project have been published by Bülent Bilmez, Gülay Kayacan, and Şükrü Aslan.⁴⁴

⁴¹ <http://www.dersim-tertele.com/index.php/tr/hakk-m-zda/dersim-1937-38-soezlue-tarih-projesi> (accessed: 10.06.2019).

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ B. Bilmez, G. Kayacan, Ş. Aslan, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*.

These oral history projects are strictly related to the rise of civil society in Dersim. In tandem with the process of fulfilling the conditions for accession to the European Union, the AKP has created some “democratic openings” for disadvantaged groups and minorities and supported research projects encouraged by the European Union or European NGOs throughout the country. The NGOs aiming to strengthen the role of civil society, intercultural dialogue, cultural diversity, and to maintain the identity of original traditions have tended to support oral history projects in the Kurdish region of Turkey. That is to say, oral history projects on the Dersim massacre have attracted the attention of not only Dersim-born intellectuals but also European NGOs interested in improving relations between different cultural, ethnic, and religious groups.

Although the rise of oral history and memory research has had a strong influence on the construction of a new Dersim historiography and has contributed to the revival of Dersim language and culture, some critics have charged that these works take advantage of the elderly people of Dersim and their narratives for personal gain, detaching their memories from the political context and making them an element of agitation.⁴⁵ The image of traditional and wise Dersim people was constructed through the elders in the majority of cultural products and some believe that researchers or artists eager to tell the stories of Dersim people distort the truth.⁴⁶ These critics carry the traces of political conflicts in the city, between liberal and revolutionary approaches. Although the popularization of Dersim culture and history has been welcomed by liberal and culturalist groups, some Dersim people seem to feel disturbed by this fast and unfamiliar process and perceive it as a kind of consumption and fetishism.

Albeit the unprecedented flourishing of historical studies and artistic productions concerning Dersim has contributed to the development of the collective memory of the city, the great interest in the past and in a culture characterized by elegiac values, themes, and expressions seems to overshadow its present.⁴⁷ Dersim is generally described as trapped in the

⁴⁵ Ü. Sözen, *Sembollerde Cemaati Aramak ve Kimliği Yeniden Kurmak: Dersim’de Hafıza, Yerellik ve Siyaset*, “Praksis,” vol. 42, 2016, pp. 568–569.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁷ Some interesting articles on the socioeconomic dynamics of the city include: A.E. Doğan, Ş.G. Tuna, *Tunceli/Dersim’de Tembelliğin Kültürleştirilmesi: Emek Süreçlerinin Özgünlükleri Çerçevesinde Bir Bakış*, in “İktisat Dergisi,” no. 515/516, 2011, pp. 81–93; Ş.G. Tuna, B. Güneş, *Munzur’dan Şirket Yaratmak: Munzur A.Ş. Üzerinden Dersim’de*

past; frozen, permanent, and monolithic. However, the present of the city framed by the new AKP hegemony also deserves serious consideration.

Documentaries on the 1937–1938 events have an important place in the new Dersim literature. Storytelling, autobiographies, diaries, photographs, memoirs, and other forms of personal testimony of the massacre as well as the deportation process have been presented in them.⁴⁸ In addition to documentaries, some films such as Kazım Öz's *Zer* (2017) have focused on the 1937–1938 events and transgenerational trauma. Moreover, literary works by famous novelists have been published. Some of them can be classified as fiction but a considerable number of them consist of original narratives of the witnesses of the massacre.⁴⁹ It can be highlighted that the legitimacy of these copyrighted works derives from the power of primary data collection and firsthand experience.

In the preface of the book *Dağların Kayıp Anahtarı* (The Lost Key of the Mountains), the author is described as a member of the homeland association who started to record the testimonies of the 1938 Dersim massacre in native language (Zazaca or Kırmancki) beginning in the middle of the 1990s, when the province was dehumanized due to the military operations of the Turkish army against the Kurdish movement.⁵⁰ He also wrote articles in Kırmancki, a language threatened with extinction, in the Dersim journal, the media organ of the homeland association. In the preface of another book, *Tanıkların Diliyle Dersim '38*, Munzur Çem also emphasizes that the records were kept in Kırmancki.⁵¹

Sermaye Birikiminin Dinamikleri, "Praksis," vol. 28, 2012, pp. 99–119. See also: Ş.G. Tuna, G. Orhan (eds.), *Dört Dağa Sığmayan Kent: Dersim Üzerine Ekonomi-Politik Yazılar*, İstanbul 2013.

⁴⁸ Ç. Demirel, *Dersim '38*, 2006; Ö. Fındık, *Qelemma Sure*, 2009; N. Gündoğan, *İki Tutam Saç: Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları*, 2010; Ö. Fındık, *Kara Vagon*, 2011; N. Gündoğan, *Hay Way Zaman*, 2013; N. Gündoğan, *Vank'in Çocukları*, 2017.

⁴⁹ Popular examples are as follows: M. Oruçoğlu, *Dersim*, İstanbul 1997; C. Yıldız, *Dersim Dile Geldi: 1938'in Çocukları Konuştu*, İstanbul 2008; S. Kaygusuz, *Yüzünde Bir Yer*, İstanbul 2009; H. Karataş, *Gece Kelebeği/Perperik-a Söe*, İstanbul 2010; H. Fırat, *Tunceli Otuzsekiz ve Mirze: Konuşma Destanı*, İstanbul 2010; H. Karataş, *On İki Dağın Sırrı, Bir Göz Ağlarken*, İstanbul 2012; M. Mungan (eds.), *Bir Dersim Hikâyesi*, İstanbul 2012; H. Işık, *Arevik: Dersim Tertelesinde Bir Ermeni Kızı*, Ankara 2013; H. Karataş, *Ejma'nın Rüyası*, İstanbul 2017; C. Taş, *op. cit.*; E. Yağan, *op. cit.*

⁵⁰ C. Taş, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁵¹ M. Çem, *Tanıkların...*, p. 13.

Because elderly Dersim people usually speak Kırmancki, their mother tongue, in their daily lives, in many research projects face-to-face interviews were generally conducted in Kırmancki. Thus, it is possible to claim that the rise of oral history as a methodology has contributed to the survival of Kırmancki. According to intellectuals living in the diaspora, Kırmancki is being replaced by Turkish or Kurmanji, the most widely spoken dialect of Kurdish, and is no longer studied by new generations. In other words, academic and artistic works based on historical narratives have not only provided detailed verbal sources on the massacre, but they have also helped to preserve and revive their endangered language.⁵²

Conclusion

The intellectual and cultural turn in Dersim is a part of a multidimensional awakening of the 1990s and 2000s. The democratic opening created by the AKP government; the rescinding of the state of emergency regime in eastern Turkey; the rise of a legal Kurdish movement; and the increasing importance of local governments has coincided with Dersim's reinvention and facilitated the evolution of new approaches for a fair reconstruction of the past. Because Dersim people are considered to be the most conspicuous sufferers of the policies of the early Republican regime, old rivals of the CHP (the Islamist-conservative-liberal alliance and the Kurdish movement) have encouraged this intellectual and cultural turn. In such a political atmosphere, the history of Dersim is rewritten by exceeding the limits of Kemalist historiography. As far as the disadvantaged and underprivileged position of the Dersim

⁵² In these years, symposiums and panels about the massacre have been organized in the province by both government institutions and local groups. An international symposium where the Dersim massacre was scrutinized was organized by Tunceli (Munzur) University in 2010. Three years later, the university hosted another in which the peace-seeking process was the most discussed issue. In 2013 and 2016, a symposium series on healing traditions of Dersim was held. These events, supported by Dersim's many NGOs, focused on the relationship between Dersim's nature and its belief systems. In 2014, an Economy Conference in Tunceli (Dersim) was organized by the chamber of commerce and industry of Tunceli. Moreover, the Dersim Municipality held many conferences during the Munzur Culture and Nature Festivals. In almost all of these events, the causes and consequences of the Dersim massacre were discussed.

people is concerned, oral history is becoming prominent as an alternative to official written discourses or writings.

As trends in the social sciences have shifted from social analysis to cultural studies and identity politics, Dersim has become the subject of anthropological and ethnographic research projects. In terms of the resiliency of the linguistic, religious, and cultural differences among the population as well as its ethnopolitical construction, studies on Dersim have appeared in recent decades. Oral history has generated a new process in which ordinary people build their own narratives via interviewers. This is not only a challenge to traditional history, allowing the underprivileged Dersim people (instead of the Turkish state) to participate in writing history and thus in shaping public opinion, but also a contribution to the protection of an endangered language. The rise of oral history as a methodology has inevitably strengthened political objectives within historical writing and improved the legitimacy of the victims of the Dersim massacre.

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Gözde Orhan

*Remembering
a Massacre: How Has
the Rise of Oral History
as a Methodology
Impacted Dersim
Studies?*

Dersim, an eastern province of Turkey whose name was changed to Tunceli by a 1935 law and whose borders were redefined for spatial control in the early Republican period, witnessed a bloody massacre executed by the Turkish army in 1937–1938. The massacre has become a “secret” over the course of time, and even critical Turkish literature has refrained from discussing the role of the Turkish state in it until recently. This paper aims to scrutinize the rise of oral history as a methodology used to study the Dersim massacre. Turkish nationalist literature comprised of reports that gave the government information about the city and sought to make an official explanation of the 1937–1938 events dominated the field until the reinvention of Dersim by social scientists and artists. Nevertheless, critical literature has also developed in tandem with the rise of the Kurdish movement and the Dersim diaspora. In this paper, based on a review of the literature, author argues that starting in the 1990s a new current using primarily oral sources has appeared. Author scrutinizes this trend with the transformation of the political climate of Turkey, and seeks to reveal the power of politics as well as its influence on historiography regarding the case of Dersim.

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