

Anticipatory historical geographies of violence: Imagining, mapping, and integrating Dersim into the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish state, 1866–1939

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ABSTRACT

Any understanding of the transformation from indirect imperial to centralized nation-state rule must consider the complex interplay between knowledge production, sovereignty, and power, as well as the historical geographies that shape them. As such, this article focuses on Middle Eastern modern-state formation through the case of Dersim, a region in contemporary Turkey's Eastern Anatolia, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It delves deeply into Dersim's intricate dynamics to examine the changing relationship between state and territory through the perspective of government authorities, Western travelers, and local inhabitants. The article argues that the Turkish state's violent transformation of nonstate Dersim in 1937–38 marked a peak in the process of creating a flattened, homogeneous territory where sovereignty would be implemented effectively and, ideally, equally. This process began in Dersim, and the larger region around it, with the implementation of the Ottoman Tanzimat Reforms in the early nineteenth century, gained momentum with the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War, and reached its culmination with genocidal operations in Dersim in the late 1930s. The state elites' instrumentalization of modern cartography, among other technological advancements, for military purposes allowed them to envision, define, and reshape Dersim as an integral part of their imagined national homeland.

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Much has been written about the decolonization of territories as empires end, but less has been written about how regions fare when empires transition into nation-states, especially in marginalized places. This article focuses on the changes in state-territory relationship in one such place: Dersim. As Stuart Eeden argues in *The Birth of Territory*, territory is constructed and redefined through political, social, and economic processes.¹ Undoubtedly, modern-state development has been linked to the creation and assertion of territorial boundaries, which entails legal and administrative frameworks to govern land ownership, as well as military and police forces to enforce authority.² This relationship is also evident in

the state's use of territory as a resource, as with natural resource exploitation, infrastructure development, and land-use taxes and regulations.³ At the same time, the state's territorial control is often contested by other actors, like local communities, ethnic groups, and transnational organizations, who may have their own claims to sovereignty or territorial rights.⁴ These actors' influence can be seen in persistent conflicts around territorial sovereignty in frontier zones and borderlands worldwide, especially in postcolonial regions across Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. They remain dynamic arenas where struggles for dominance and authority shape the geopolitical landscape.

Therefore, any understanding of the relationship between the modern state and territory must consider complex interactions between territoriality, sovereignty, and power, as well as their historical geographies. This can be seen within the Middle Eastern modern-state context through the case of Dersim, a region in

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¹ S. Eeden, *The Birth of Territory*, Chicago, 2013, 7.

² E. D. Weitz, From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions, *American Historical Review* 113 (2008) 1313–43.

³ C. Tilly, War Making and State Making as Organized Crime, in: P. B. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer and T. Skocpol (Eds), *Bringing the State Back*, Cambridge, 1985, 169–91.

⁴ J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven, 1998.

contemporary Turkey's Eastern Anatolia, over the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, corresponding to the transition from indirect Ottoman imperial to centralized Turkish nation-state rule. In this period, various ethnic and religious groups—including Arabs, Armenians, Kurds, Albanians, Pontus, and Alevis—emerged as colonial questions for the Ottoman state elites, even while European state elites viewed the Ottoman Empire itself as a question, under the banner of the Eastern Question or the Sick Man of Europe metaphor.

Looking at places like Dersim during this period enable us to better understand current issues in the region today. Such places were problematic to the Ottomans because they challenged the empire's internal colonization process.⁵ Late imperial Ottoman and republican Turkish elites sought to create a centralized nation-state imagined as a Sunni Turkish community; its homeland, Anatolia. Anything that could challenge the triangle congruity between the cultural unit (the nation), the political unit (the state), and the territorial unit (homeland) was deemed a problem to be resolved.⁶ Turkish state elites employed technologies like genocide, ethnic cleansing, assimilation, and mass-population exchange programs to secure this congruity.⁷ Subjected to such policies, non-Muslims, such as the Armenians and the Pontus in Anatolia, were largely annihilated around World War I, which left the Kurds and Alevis as the only demographically significant communities challenging the dominance of Sunnism and Turkishness. Both communities faced systematic racialization and coerced homogenization policies, but those who identified as both Alevi and Kurd, known as the Kizilbash, the ethno-religious community centered around Dersim, were particularly concerned that they might suffer the same fate as their Armenian neighbors.

Dersim has a reputation of ungovernability; a domain of diverse identities and uncontrollable spaces, it brought together several limits on nation-state formation in terms of race, religion, ethnicity, and territory. Its inaccessible topography and nondominant ethnicities and religious traditions—Kurds, Alevis, and Armenians—turned the region into a battlefield for state making and state evasion. State elites believed that asserting control over Dersim and transforming its internal dynamics would liberate its inhabitants from its rugged natural environment, deviant religious traditions, and backward tribal structure. The Kizilbash, for their part, believed that state control of Dersim would result in their complete annihilation.

⁵ U. Makdisi, Ottoman Orientalism, *American Historical Review* 107 (2002) 768–96; and S. Deringil, 'They Live in a State of Nomadism and Savagery': The Late Ottoman Empire and the Post-Colonial Debate, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003) 311–42.

⁶ Here, I expand Ernest Gellner's theory of nationalism, as "primarily a political principle that holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent." E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, London, 1983, 1.

⁷ U. Ü. Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950*, Oxford, 2011; R. G. Suny, *They Can Live in the Desert but Nowhere Else: A History of the Armenian Genocide*, Princeton, 2015; A. İğsız, *Humanism in Ruins: Entangled Legacies of the Greek-Turkish Population Exchange*, Stanford, 2018; and M. Yüksel, *Forced Migration and the Politics of Internal Displacement in the Making of Modern Turkey: The Case of Dersim, 1937–1947*, unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University, 2008.

⁸ While scholars estimate the numbers of those killed and deported to be much higher, official state archives show that 13,806 people were killed, 14,411 additional people were resettled in thirty-two western provinces of Turkey. Cumhuriyet Arşivi [Republican Archives] (CA). 030.10–111.751.30. An undisclosed number of girls were enslaved and handed over to Turkish authorities participating in the operations. See also N. Gündoðan et al., *Dersim'in Kayıp Kızları* [The Lost Daughters of Dersim], Istanbul, 2012. For more about the Dersimi girls, see Z. Türkylmaz, Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman's Burden in Dersim: Educating the "Mountain Flowers" of Dersim, *Journal of Women's History* 28 (2016) 162–86.

These conflicting narratives culminated in the 1937–38 genocidal operations in Dersim, which fundamentally transformed the region's relationship with the state. According to available archival sources, as a result of Turkish army operations in Dersim from 1936 to 1939, one out of every two people in Dersim was either killed, deported, imprisoned, taken away from their parents, or sold into slavery.⁸ Scholars have used terms such as ethnocide, genocide, massacres, *tertele*, and Dersim 38 to describe these operations.⁹ The state's actions, which encompassed killings, inflicting harm, and forcibly transferring children, 'with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group,' overlap with the United Nations' definition of genocide.¹⁰ It is, therefore, my contention that the region experienced a genocidal transformation aimed at creating a homogeneous society, in which the Dersimis' religious and ethnic identities were unwelcome anomalies.

These operations continued the late-Ottoman centralization process started by the early nineteenth-century Tanzimat Reforms (1839–76). The Tanzimat emerged as a response to the fear of European domination and relied on a militaristic framework. While it officially lasted until 1876, when the Ottoman Empire became the first non-Western country to adopt a constitutional government, the militaristic approach to state formation and centralization continued to intensify, gaining momentum after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. That war posed a more significant existential threat to the Ottoman Empire than its previous war-related losses to the Russians; the empire lost practically all its Balkan territories and parts of eastern Anatolia.¹¹ During this period, Abdulhamid II, enthroned in 1876, abolished the constitution and reclaimed his powers as Sultan. Following the war, more Kurds came under Russian control, enhancing Russia's influence and interest in Kurdish affairs (Fig. 1).

The war was a pivotal moment in Dersim's history, prompting the Ottoman administration to escalate its colonization efforts in the region. This was driven by the region's growing proximity to the eastern frontier with the Russian Empire and prevailing distrust between the Sunni-dominated Ottoman administration and the Kizilbash residents of Dersim, a fact that did not go unnoticed by the Russians. In the late nineteenth century, a Russian officer anticipated potential support from Kizilbash Kurds if Russia were to capture Erzurum and advance westward.¹² Such predictions were supplemented with cartographic knowledge (Fig. 1), where the location of the Kizilbash, the dark green area in the upper left, accurately corresponds to Dersim. This detailed geographic and demographic representation highlights the interconnections between knowledge production, cartography, and the exercise of

⁹ İsmail Beşikçi referred to the Dersim massacres as a *genocide* in one of the earliest studies on the subject. Martin Van Bruinessen later used the term *ethnocide*. Recently, Dilşa Deniz and Hans-Lukas Kieser have characterized the events as a genocide. Local Dersimis commonly refer to it as *tertele* or Dersim 38. See İ. Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* [Tunceli Law and the Genocide of Dersim], İstanbul, 1990; M. v. Bruinessen, Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937–38) and the Chemical War against the Iraqi Kurds (1988), in: George J. Andreopoulos (Ed.), *Conceptual and Historical Dimensions of Genocide*, Philadelphia, 1994, 141–70; D. Deniz, Re-assessing the Genocide of Kurdish Alevis in Dersim, 1937–38, *Genocide Studies and Prevention* 14 (2020) 20–43; H.-L. Kieser, *When Democracy Died: The Middle East's Enduring Peace of Lausanne*, Cambridge: 2023, 259–63; and G. Kayacan, B. Bilmez, Ş. Aslan, *Belleklerdeki Dersim '38* [Dersim 38 in Memories], İstanbul, 2011.

¹⁰ UN General Assembly, Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 78, *United Nations* (1948), 277.

¹¹ See M. H. Yavuz, and P. Sluglett, *War and Diplomacy: The Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878 and the Treaty of Berlin*, Salt Lake City, 2011.

¹² See P. I. Averyanov, *Osmanlı İran Rus Savaşlarında Kurtler (19. Yüzyıl)* [Kurds in Russia's Wars with Persia and Turkey during the XIX Century], translated to Turkish by İ. Kale, İstanbul, 2010, 238–239. (Originally published by the Russian imperial army in Tiflis in 1900).

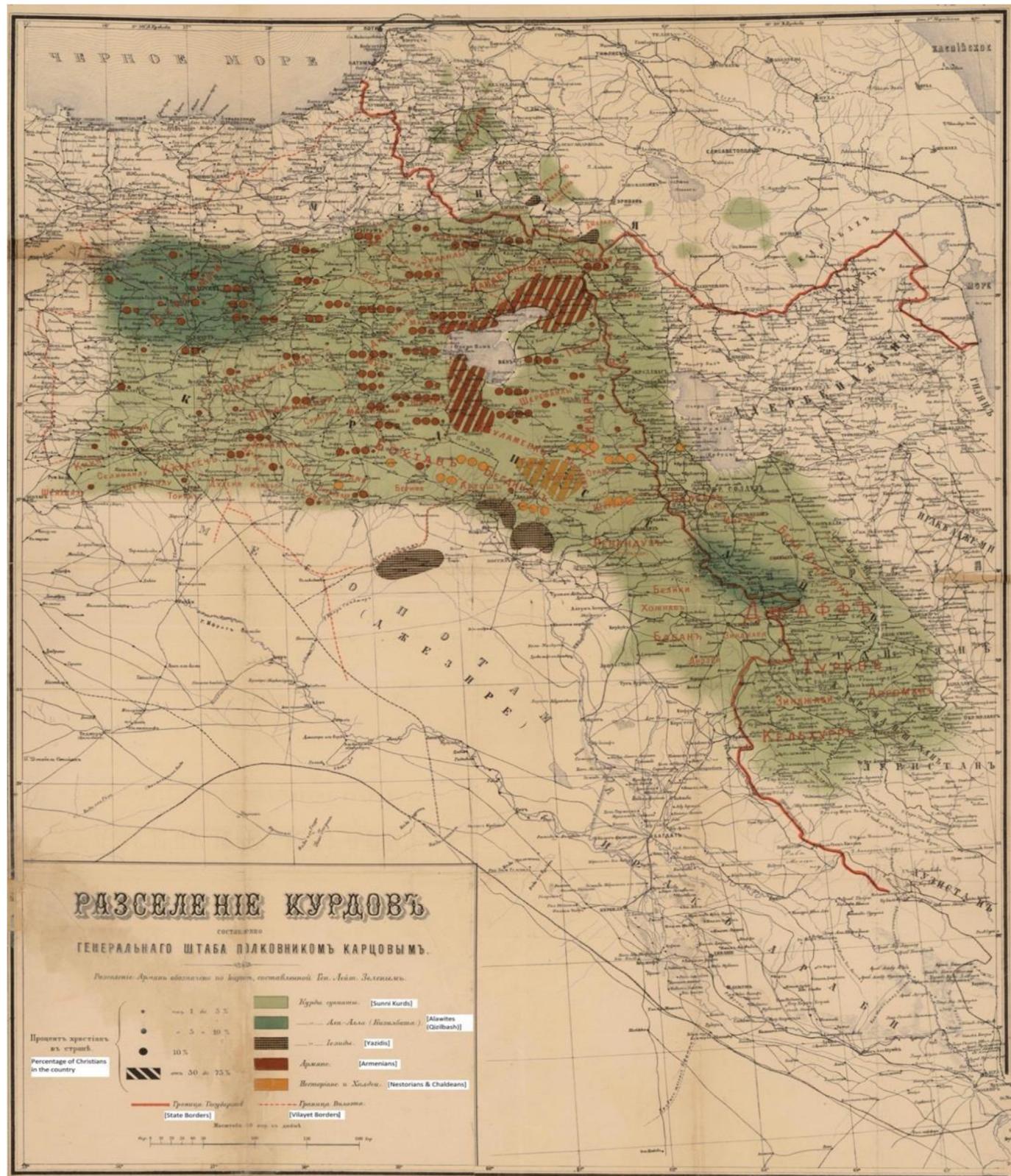


Fig. 1. 'The Distribution of the Kurds' is a Russian military map from 1896. See the appendix in Col. V. A. Kartsov, *Zametki o Kurdakh* [Notes on Kurds], 1896.

power, particularly in relation to Russian intentions to conquer and colonize these areas.

In parallel to the Russian expansion into Eastern Anatolia, Ottoman colonization of Dersim evolved over the empire's final

decades, peaking with Turkey's violent transformation of the region in the late 1930s. What actually happened in Dersim in the 1930s has been a subject of ongoing debate in Turkey, and elsewhere, especially since 2009, when Onur Öymen, a senior member

of the main opposition Republican People's Party, criticized the government's 'Kurdish Opening' policy, and suggested Dersim as an exemplar of how to deal with the Kurds.¹³ Public debate and existing scholarship has primarily focused on the seeming need to create a homogeneous society. This was undoubtedly one of the state elites' objectives. However, they had another equally important, but less understood, objective: to create a homogeneous territory where state sovereignty is applied equally. Indeed, coeval transformations explored in recent works on the Middle East demonstrate that the changing dynamics between the state, society, and territory in the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman territories were part of a global phenomenon of establishing direct rule characterized by a homogeneous population with full sovereignty over every inch of the territory, itself imagined as a national space, the homeland.¹⁴

State elites employed official reports, ethnographic studies, and mapping to render Dersim both legible and manageable. This led to the development of infrastructure, like roads, bridges, railways, and military stations, and the acquisition of aerial bombardment capabilities and poison gas to assert full control. The Turkish government constructed 100 bridges, 300 km of roads, 9 military barracks, 4 military dorms, and 9 police stations from 1935 to 1938.¹⁵ While several sources indicate that the government purchased poison gas from Nazi Germany, it is worth noting that many engineers from Nazi Germany were involved in the construction processes.¹⁶ In the late 1930s, state authorities seized arms from Dersimis and arrested those who surrendered willingly, leading to more extensive military state actions, including massacres, relocation, and enslavement, aimed at bringing every corner of the nonstate space into the national space, transforming Dersim in the process. Between 1936 and 1939, government forces seized 6117 weapons and received 1096 surrenders, including prominent tribal leader Seyid Riza, who was executed in 1937 on charges of leading an alleged rebellion in Dersim.¹⁷

In this article, I delve deeply into the complex dynamics in Dersim to examine the changing relationship between state and territory through the perspective of state elites, Western travelers and officials, and local inhabitants throughout the late Ottoman Empire and early modern Turkey. I demonstrate that the territorialization of modern state sovereignty is a much-deeper process than is conventionally understood, as it is largely limited to border demarcation with other states. I first explore the question 'What is Dersim?' posed in a secret document written by top Turkish army figures and circulated among the country's leaders, including its founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. This question underscores the close relationship between the Ottoman and Turkish state elites' imagination of, and actual developments in, Dersim. Next, I investigate how state authorities and Western travelers envisioned Dersim as a nonstate space, during these periods. This analysis aims

to shed light on the dynamics between knowledge production and state violence.

The dominant state-elite narrative characterized Dersim as a place of anarchy and banditry: 'the Dersim system' (*Dersim sistemi*). To counterbalance this, I provide a detailed account of Dersim's complex internal dynamics, shaped by the Alevi belief system, Kurdish tribal structure, and natural environment.¹⁸ The Alevi Kurds of Dersim had a sophisticated governing mechanism that functioned outside state control and resisted state penetration thanks to its fluidity and invisibility. In the final section, therefore, I explore the dynamic interplay between knowledge, power, and territory through an analysis of late imperial Ottoman and republican Turkish state advancements in cartography and their role in reshaping Dersim as part of a national space.

What Is Dersim?

'What Is Dersim?' (*Dersim nedir?*), asks the book *Dersim*, published by the Turkish army in the early 1930s. One hundred copies were published under extreme secrecy and distributed to top administration figures to guide their Dersim policies.¹⁹ Since they were undoubtedly aware that Dersim referred to a region in Turkey's predominantly Kurdish eastern area, what were these authors asking exactly? The term carries political connotations attributed to Alevi Kurds and the regions' inaccessible terrain, as well as insurgency, banditry, and uprisings.²⁰ For Alevis and the Kurds, however, Dersim symbolizes a picturesque natural environment, sacredness, freedom, and resistance before the Turkish state crushed it.²¹

Dersim's boundaries are not clearly defined. Historical records suggest that Dersim, both as a real and imagined space, did not have fixed borders or well-defined bureaucratic structures and instead fluctuated according to perspective. Dersim was divided into East and West, or Inner and Outer, regions. Inner Dersim, also known as 'Real' Dersim, referred to the heartland. The East/West division was based on tribal affiliations separated by the Munzur River, while the Inner/Outer distinction indicated the extent of state control.²² The term *Dersim*, referring to a particular area, first appeared in the Ottoman archives in a document dated 20 June 1629.²³ In 1848, the Ottoman administration established a new administrative unit, or sancak, called Dersim, with its capital in Hozat, under the vilayet (province) of Erzurum. Dersim was elevated to a vilayet in 1881, but this lasted only until 1886, when it

¹⁸ I use nonstate space as developed by James Scott in his works on upland Southeast Asia. J. C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*, New Haven, 2009.

¹⁹ The book appears to have been written in 1934. In a 1986 interview, İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil revealed that the chief of Gendarmerie Kazım Orbay authored the book. Mesut, *Dersim ve Madimak Söyleşileri* [Dersim and Madimak Talks], Istanbul, 2016, 79.

²⁰ See B. Özök, *Osmalı Devrinde Dersim İsyanları* [Dersim Rebellions in the Ottoman Era], Ankara, 1937; S. Akgün, *Dersim İsyanları ve Seyit Rıza* [Dersim Rebellions and Seyit Rıza], Ankara, 2001. Some sources even refer to Dersim as "the land of rebels", see L. Marchand, G. Perrier and D. Blythe, *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost: On the Trail of the Genocide*, Montreal, 2015, 59–68.

²¹ A. K. Gültekin, Dersim as a Sacred Land - Contemporary Kurdish Alevi Ethno-Politics and Environmental Struggle, in S. E. Hunt (Ed.), *Ecological Solidarity and the Kurdish Freedom Movement Thought*, Maryland, 2021, 225–243.

²² See A. Yeritsyan, *Dersim Seyahatname* [Travelogue], translated into Turkish by P. Tomasyan (originally published in Armenian in 1900), Istanbul, 2012; JGK, *Dersim, Jandarma Genel Komutanlığının Raporu* [Report of the Gendarmerie General Command], (Originally published in 1934), Istanbul, 1984; L. Molyneux-Seel, A Journey in Dersim, *Geographical Journal* 44 (1914) 49–68; C. Gündoğdu and V. Genç, *Dersim'de Osmanlı Siyaseti, 1880–1913* [Ottoman Politics in Dersim], Istanbul, 2013.

²³ Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Ottoman Archives of the Prime Minister's Office) (BOA). A.DVNS.MHM. 84–44, 20 June 1629.

¹³ Türkiye Büyük Millet Meclisi [Turkish Grand National Assembly] (TBMM) Archives, B:15, O:3, 502 [10 November 2009].

¹⁴ See J. Wyrtzen, *Worldmaking in the Long Great War: How Local and Colonial Struggles Shaped the Modern Middle East*, New York, 2022; C. Gratien, *The Unsettled Plain: An Environmental History of the Late Ottoman Frontier*, Stanford, 2022; Z. Pehlivan, El Niño and the Nomads: Global Climate, Local Environment, and the Crisis of Pastoralism in Late Ottoman Kurdistan, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63 (2020) 316–56; N. E. Barakat, *Bedouin Bureaucrats: Mobility and Property in the Ottoman Empire*, Stanford, 2023; S. Dolbee, *Locusts of Power: Borders, Empire, and Environment in the Modern Middle East*, London, 2023.

¹⁵ CA. 030.01–40.238.6.

¹⁶ For the designs and pictures of the Pertek bridge built by German engineer Emil Mörsch in 1937, see Köprüyet, *Pertek Köprüsü*, <https://kopriyet.blogspot.com/search?q=dersim>, last accessed 18 July 2023. For details about the purchase of poison gas, see Deniz, *Re-assessing the Genocide*.

¹⁷ CA. 030.10–111.744.1.

was downgraded to a sancak, this time under the jurisdiction of Mamûretülaziz (today's Elazığ).²⁴

Dersim appeared as an administrative unit under the vilayets of Erzurum, Kurdistan, Mamûretülaziz, Diyarbakır, and Erzincan (Erzingan). These provinces were themselves subjected to constant changes. While Erzurum expanded and contracted based on administrative arrangements, the Ottomans created a short-lived Kurdistan vilayet from 1846 to 1867, its capital in Diyarbakır.²⁵ What government officials, foreigners, and locals commonly understood as Dersim proper was more or less equivalent to today's Tunceli, including its seven districts of Ovacık, Pülümlür, Pertek, Hozat, Mazgirt, Çemişgezek, and Nazimiye, while greater Dersim expanded into the neighboring provinces of Erzincan, Erzurum, Bingöl, Muş, Sivas, Elazığ, and Malatya, historically inhabited by the Kızılbash.²⁶ The seven districts and the larger region beyond were considered the sociopolitical and spiritual realm of Dersim. In 1935, the Turkish government enacted the Tunceli Law, which changed Dersim's official name to Tunceli and laid the legal groundwork for the later violent transformation.²⁷

Official reports and traveler accounts about Dersim shared a common theme: lack of state control (*devlet otoritesinden mahrum*). This, the state elites believed, was largely a consequence of Dersim's topography and flora, which functioned as a natural barrier against state penetration, provided a shield for its inhabitants, and allowed for survival in isolation. Indeed, the Kızılbash Kurdish inhabitants' social and political mechanism, based on religious traditions and tribal structure, was strongly embedded in Dersim's flora and landscape. Some authorities warned that this 'Dersim system' could expand far beyond the boundaries of Dersim region if the government did not take necessary measures to dismantle it.²⁸

Late imperial Ottoman and republican Turkish state elites often described Dersim as an anomaly, a boil or a disease, needing to be removed from the otherwise-healthy body of their imagined nation, homeland, and state. Hasan Hilmi, a Hamidian-era governor of Mamûretülaziz (Elazığ), likened Dersim to an old boil (*çiban*) in the lungs and the heart of Anatolia's body.²⁹ In 1908, a member of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), also known as Young Turks, called Dersim a massive disease that had taken the form of necrosis requiring medical intervention.³⁰ He traced its origins back to 1847, when the Tanzimat reformers first established Dersim as an administrative unit. Since then, despite consecutive Ottoman military campaigns, the problem had only gotten bigger and more serious. Similarly, during the republican era, Civil Inspector Hamdi Bey described Dersim as a boil, whose removal was necessary for the homeland's salvation.³¹

The similarity in these accounts produced in three seemingly distinct political periods—Hamidian (1876–1908), Young Turk (1908–1923), Republican (1923–1938)—is remarkable. But why did the state elites speak of Dersim this way? For them, any region lacking in state control inherently threatened the state's well-

being, maintenance, and preservation (*devletin bekâsı*). In this, Dersim was a regional example of a new relationship between power and territory. Previously, local autonomy from direct state control had been the norm and territorial sovereignty was understood as zones of influence demarcated by frontiers. Now, state elites wanted not only to delineate borders with other states and eliminate intermediaries between the state center and the periphery but also to flatten the land on which sovereignty would be practiced. They wanted to achieve not just a homogeneous society, 'a sociological organism moving calendrically through *homogeneous, empty time*' as Benedict Anderson describes the nation,³² but also a *homogeneous, empty space*, freed from local attachments, on which to implement state authority effectively and, ideally, equally. While Anderson employs this terminology to elucidate nationalism's origins, he minimizes the role of state-territory relations. The modern state and its control over territory, in fact, assumes a pivotal role in the development and proliferation of nationalism.³³

As Prime Minister İsmet İnönü would put it during 1937's military operations, Turkish soldiers strolled through the inaccessible alleys of Dersim 'as if they were the streets of Ankara,' the capital, where state authority was believed to be most effectively and directly implemented.³⁴ Underpinning such statements was the desire to make Dersim and Ankara part of the same homogeneous space, the national territory. This modern ideology was not only to create an imagined community, as per Anderson, but also an imagined territory that would include places such as Dersim, where state elites complained no soldier had ever been seen, despite centuries-long Ottoman and Turkish sovereignty in the region.

'Like a state within state'

One of the earliest descriptions of Dersim, accompanying a topographical map of the region as seen in Figure 2, came from John G. Taylor, the British Consul General for Kurdistan, circa 1866. Taylor was astonished by the shortcuts through Dersim's mountains, 'a country hitherto quite unknown to Europeans'.³⁵ This Western fascination was shared by Ottoman and Turkish elites, who believed the region had eluded state authorities for centuries. On his first journey, Taylor was accompanied for protection by a *seyid*, a spiritual leader, who led him to Mazgirt, which he deemed the 'gate to real Dersim.' This secluded place was accessible only with the help of the Kızılbash, 'an independent race' that had never been subjugated and remained unknown to outsiders, including the Ottomans. Taylor notes how the Munzur Mountains in the north 'rose higher and higher, culminating in the snow-capped heights of the Deyrîm' and seemingly blocked all further progress into the region. Taylor was surprised to discover that 'there existed a remarkably easy route that had never been traversed by civilized beings and which had hitherto been concealed from foreigners due to the Kurds' jealousy, as they did not wish it to be known that an easy route existed through their formidable mountains.'³⁶

Armenian traveler Antranik Yeritsyan, who visited in 1888, called Dersim '*a completely foreign land that many people had talked about, but few had seen*'.³⁷ After hearing stories about 'Inner

²⁴ İ. Yılmazçelik, *Osmalı Devleti Döneminde Dersim Sancağı* [Dersim Sanjak in the Ottoman Period], İstanbul, 2017.

²⁵ See H. Özoglu, *Kurdish Notables and the Ottoman State: Evolving Identities, Competing Loyalties, and Shifting Boundaries*, Albany, 2004, 60–63.

²⁶ Over time, some town names changed. Pülümlür was named Kuzuçan until the early twentieth century, and Nazimiye used to be called Kızılkilise (Red Church), named after an Armenian church. For further details, see Yılmazçelik, *Osmalı Devleti Döneminde*.

²⁷ Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*.

²⁸ JGK, *Dersim*, 192.

²⁹ Governor Es-Seyyid Hasan Hilmi's report. BOA.Y.PRK.AZJ. 17–80, 26 August 1890.

³⁰ Mutessarif Ibrahim Muhlis's report, September 16, 1908. BOA.DH.MUİ. 2–5 – 33 [16 September 1908].

³¹ JGK, *Dersim*, 167–170.

³² Emphasis added. B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, 2016 (first published in 1983), 26.

³³ See J. Breuilly, *Nationalism and the State*, Chicago, 1982.

³⁴ TBMM Archives, i:77, C:2, 344, 18 September 1937.

³⁵ J. G. Taylor, Journal of a Tour in Armenia, Kurdistan and Upper Mesopotamia, with Notes of Researches in the Deyrîm Dagh, in 1866, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 38 (1868) 302.

³⁶ Taylor, *Journal of a Tour*, 303.

³⁷ Emphasis added. Yeritsyan spent several years in Dersim in the 1890s. Yeritsyan, *Dersim Seyahatname*, 9.



Fig. 2. Map to depict British consul John G. Taylor's travel routes across Dersim in 1866. J. G. Taylor, *Journal of a Tour in Armenia, Kurdistan and Upper Mesopotamia, with Notes of Researches in the Deyrsim Dagh, in 1866*, *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 38 (1868) 281–361, appendix.

Dersim'—Taylor's 'real Dersim'—from local Kurds and Armenians, Yeritsyan traveled to Kutu Gorge, with Seyid Khalo.³⁸ Comparing traveling through the 'fearful mountains, bottomless gorges, and dense forests of Dersim' to traveling across the Sahara, he cautioned that even a compass that would function in the desert would be ineffective in Dersim. Yeritsyan traced Dersim's political history in relation to Ottoman Empire to the early nineteenth-century Russo-Turkish wars, prior to which Dersim had been completely autonomous. Locals reportedly told him that whenever the Ottomans went to war with Russia, they first tested their strength on Dersim, and when they were defeated, they took revenge on the Dersimis. Yeritsyan claimed that the Kurds in Inner Dersim had always been independent of the Ottomans due largely to 'the characteristics of the inhabitants of Dersim, as well as the unconquerable nature of the region, which by itself fights the foreigner and the enemy.' Even though it might sound strange, Yeritsyan added, Dersim appeared like 'a state within state'.³⁹

In 1900, Russian General Averyanov observed that Ottoman generals had successfully divided the Dersim Kurds into two hostile factions, potentially leading to the complete subjugation of Dersim.⁴⁰ In 1905, the British vice-consul in Diyarbakir noted that the

Ottoman government was gradually gaining control over the previously 'independent district' but there was still much work to be done.⁴¹ In 1911, the British Vice-Consul in Van wrote that although Dersim has formed an integral portion of the Ottoman Empire for six centuries, until recently 'it remained as much forbidden to the Turks as Mecca is at present to Christians'.⁴²

An Ottoman perspective was provided in 1880 by Ferik Fazlı Paşa, the Commander of the Ottoman Reform Division responsible for bringing places like Dersim under state control. The area's military barracks, he complained, had no significant authority over the interior, and despite several military operations to 'reform' Dersim, the government 'has not yet been able to annihilate this menace'.⁴³ Later Ottoman accounts continued this figuration. In 1890, Ottoman governor Hasan Hilmi pointed out that 'Inner Dersim' was completely beyond the reach of the government, whereas the 'Outer

³⁸ According to Yeritsyan, Seyid Khalo joined him in exchange for special headwear.

³⁹ Yeritsyan, *Dersim Seyahatname*, 113.

⁴⁰ Averyanov, *Osmanlı İran Rus*, 329.

⁴¹ Foreign Office (FO) 195/2196. 'The Actual Condition of the Dersim,' Annex B in Acting Vice-Consul in Diyarbekir, H. E. Wilkie Young's dispatch No. 7 of March 5, 1905.

⁴² Report on Dersim, in: A. L. Burdett (Ed) *Records of the Kurds—Territory, Revolt, and Nationalism, 1831–1979*, vol. 4, 1900–1914, Cambridge, 2015, 513.

⁴³ The lieutenant general Ferik Fazlı Pasha's report. BOA. İ.MMS. 68–3183 [23 November 1880].

Dersim' had some level of government authority.⁴⁴ In 1908, official Hayri Bey said that Dersim had 'remained unconquered for the past five hundred years,' indicating that despite centuries of Ottoman rule, Dersim had been left outside a formal state mechanism.⁴⁵

Also in 1908, the CUP orchestrated a military coup, overthrowing Abdulhamid II and reinstating the Hamidian-era constitutional regime. The Young Turks pledged to transform the empire's governing structure and ideology, while they also continued the policy of centralization and modernization set in motion by the Tanzimat. Initially, they garnered support from non-Muslim, non-Sunni, and non-Turkish communities, including the Kizilbash Kurds of Dersim, who marched to Mamiüretülaziz, commemorating the 'revolution' and embracing the promise of change.⁴⁶ Yet, the new authorities persisted in perceiving Dersim as a region needing control. In the face of European and Russian offensives on various fronts, the Young Turks ramped up their efforts to pacify Dersim.

This increasing sense of urgency can be seen in 1908 and 1909. In the spring of 1908, government forces seized a grain-laden caravan purchased by the Dersim Kurds and imposed a ban on all imports into the region.⁴⁷ Dersimi tribal leaders issued a warning, demanding the return of the food supplies and animals, as well as the release of prisoners. In response, the government mobilized troops, local militias, and multiple Hamidian Cavalry Regiments, reportedly amounting to about thirty thousand fighters, all directed at Dersim.⁴⁸

The Dersimis attacked a battalion, killing several soldiers. They seized weapons and ammunition and captured twenty-five soldiers, releasing them unclothed. The Dersimis also destroyed the telegraph lines, bringing the government's efforts to a standstill by May 25. The government then replaced the commander of operations, Zeki Pasha, and dispatched reinforcements.⁴⁹ Gradually placing the region under siege, government forces burned down villages and destroyed crops, forcing some tribes to surrender.⁵⁰ Eventually, Dersimis sought peace, as imperial troops controlled the routes into the region, making it nearly impossible for the Kurds to receive external supplies.⁵¹

To establish a state-centered, hierarchical bureaucratic system, both the late imperial and republican governments worked to strip the people of their bonds to each other and the natural world. By the end of the imperial period, government authorities were employing racialized language to describe 'uncontrollable' Dersim. Writing in 1908, an Ottoman administrator expressed his belief that a direct correlation existed between roads and civilization, and since Dersim had no roads, its inhabitants had 'not taken their share from the blessings of civilization'.⁵² In 1913, Dersim's governor

⁴⁴ BOA. Y.PRK.AZJ. 17–80, 26 August 1890. Another Ottoman administrator wrote in the same year that he was describing places such as Kulu Valley and Kalan Valley in detail because even though Reşit Pasha "moved with thirty-six battalions to reform Dersim," he could not penetrate these valleys. BOA. Y. PRK PT 10/77, 18 July 1890.

⁴⁵ Mutessarif of Dersim Hayri Bey's report. BOA. İ. DHÇ. 1467–1, 13 June 1908.

⁴⁶ H. Riggs, The Religion of the Dersim Kurds, in *The Missionary Review of the World*, 734–43, New York, 1911.

⁴⁷ E. Huntington, The Mountaineers of the Euphrates, *National Geographic Magazine* 20 (1909) 142–55.

⁴⁸ Özkök, *Osmalı Devrinde*, 11, 143. For details about the Hamidian Cavalry Regiments, see J. Klein, *The Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone*, Stanford, 2011.

⁴⁹ JKG, *Dersim*, 126–28. Also, see S. Önäl, *Tuggeneral Ziya Yergök'ün Anıları: Harbiye'den Dersim'e (1890–1914)* [Memoirs of Brigadier General Ziya Yergök: From Harbiye to Dersim], Istanbul, 2006.

⁵⁰ Özkök, *Osmalı Devrinde*, 16.

⁵¹ Archives diplomatiques—Centre de Nantes, Des Affaires Étrangères, Constantinople, 166PO/E (1903–1913), N: 131, Extract from a dispatch of American Consulate in Kharpout, Turkey, 3 August 1908.

⁵² Mutessarif of Genç Ibrahim Muhlis's report. BOA. DH. MUİ. 2–5/33, 16 September 1908.

continued the longstanding tradition of distinguishing the 'Real Dersim' from the rest and added that minimal interactions with government officials and soldiers had resulted in a lack of civilization among the locals. They were 'fully naked' individuals surviving on grass roots and oak fruits; drawing comparisons to 'savage clans of Africa,' he deemed them worthy of being classified as subhuman or animals rather than as fellow humans.⁵³ The same officer proposed that British colonial policies implemented in Sudan should be replicated in Dersim.

During World War I, the British, French, and Italian armies all approached Eastern Anatolia. However, only the Russians managed to reach Dersim, through Pülümür in early 1917. Because of the revolution unfolding back home, the disintegrating Russian army began withdrawing from the warfront shortly afterward. These developments and remarks underscore the significant role of contingency in history, while also showcasing interconnectedness of the historical events in Dersim with a global trend of racial thinking and colonial expansion. They further demonstrate that while the West Orientalized the Ottomans, Ottoman state elites Orientalized their own peripheries. During the republican period, this process of double Orientalization further escalated, as the country's elites became more preoccupied with racist ideologies, closely related to widespread racial thinking in the West, particularly the Ottoman Empire's wartime ally, Germany.⁵⁴

Republican elites' imagined Dersim

Dersim entered the republican era under similar conditions to the transition from the Hamidian autocracy to the Young Turks' constitutional monarchy. Yet, the shift to a republican form of government in 1923 marked a more radical departure from the previous imperial regime than had happened with the earlier transition to constitutional monarchy in 1908. The new government, many of whose members also held power in the Ottoman administration, not only sought to distance itself from the past but also undertook more sweeping reforms to modernize and westernize the country, intended to create a new generation of citizens detached from its Ottoman, Eastern, and Islamic past. However, the underlying process of state formation through military means continued with even more radical ferocity. As with the 1908 regime change, this new transitional government conducted a brutal military operation in Dersim in 1920 and 1921.

Targeting the Koçgiri tribe in Western Dersim, in contemporary Sivas province, the operation was ordered by Mustafa Kemal (later Atatürk) and carried out by the new Central Army under the command of Bearded Nureddin Pasha, alongside Topal (Lame) Osman's mercenaries from the Black Sea region. According to a transitional-government report, troops and mercenaries burned 107 villages, 1703 houses, and 39 b. Over 1000 Kurds died, while more than 100 sustained injuries, and hundreds were imprisoned merely for being in the area. The report documented an order sent to the neighboring towns and villages to seize the Kurds' property and possessions. The Koçgiri people's possessions were looted and distributed across a vast area, as far as Giresun. Based on interviews with surviving Koçgiri individuals, the parliament members preparing the report concluded that many girls and women had been sexually abused during the operation. They underlined that all

⁵³ Mutessarif of Dersim Mikdad Midhad Bedirkhan's report. BOA. DH. ID. 3–81, 17 February 1913.

⁵⁴ See M. Ergin, *Is the Turk a White Man?: Race and Modernity in the Making of Turkish Identity*, Leiden, 2016.

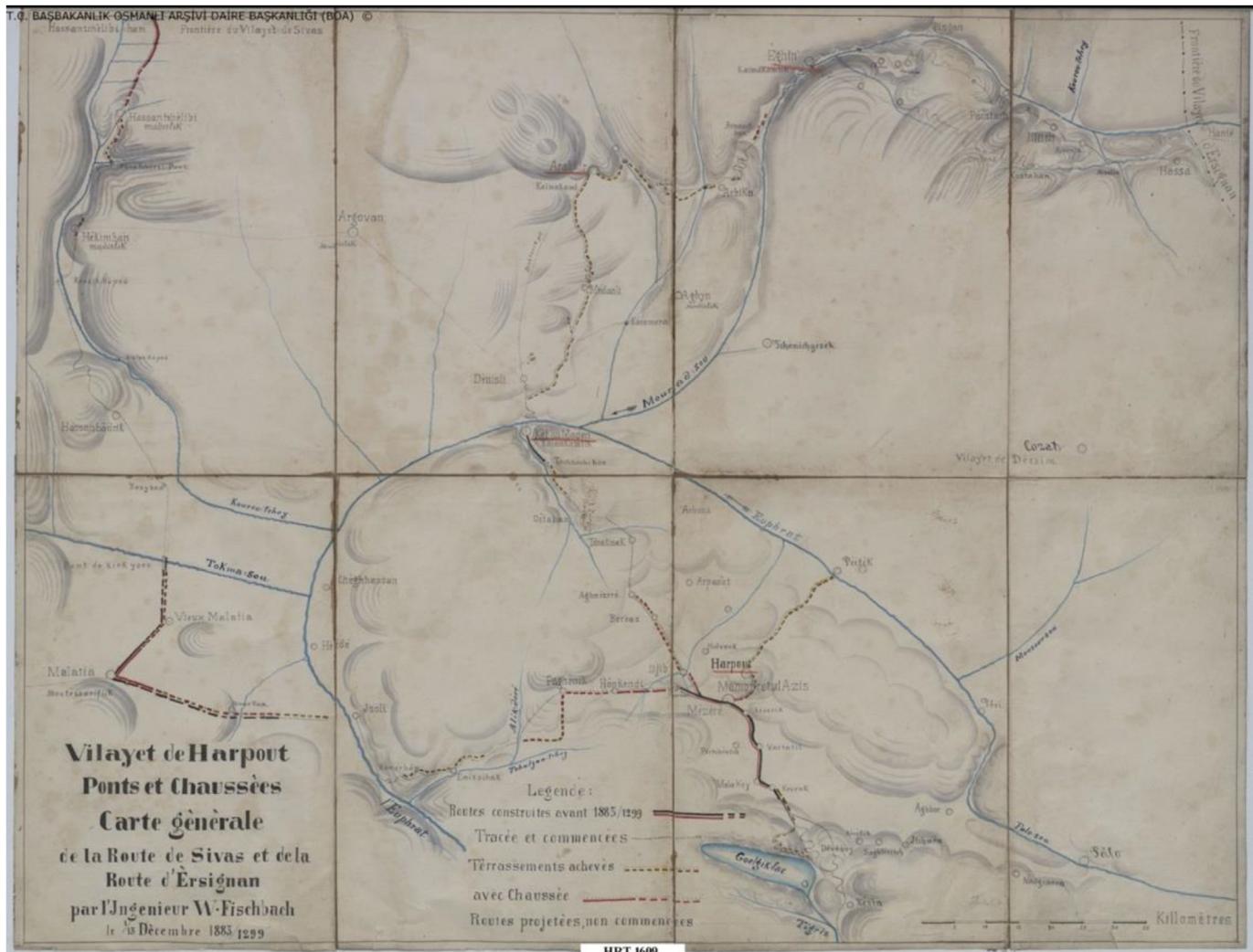


Fig. 3. Ottoman map to depict paved roads in Harput and Dersim as of 1883. BOA. HRT.1609.

these tragedies happened due to ill-intended orders from the higher authorities.⁵⁵

One of the earliest republican-period sources comes from Naşit Hakki Uluğ, a Turkish journalist and official who frequently accompanied officials to Dersim and published two books on the region. His first book, *Overlord and Dersim*, written in late 1920s, compared Dersim to Tibet and argued that while many explorers had crossed Tibet, 'Dersim has not been subject to even bird's eye view of anyone other than that of state officials and military officers.'⁵⁶ Uluğ's stated mission was to introduce Dersim to the Turkish public to 'increase the love towards it' and thereby contribute to the region's appropriation into the imagined Turkish homeland, yet his words reveal that many Turkish authorities did not consider Dersim part of 'their homeland' because it had not yet been 'made theirs.'⁵⁷

⁵⁵ The Report of the Board of Inquiry on the Koçgiri Incident. TBMM Archives, No: 34, Sayı: 43. For details, see See Ö. Çataltepe, Katliamdan İsyancı Çıkarmak: Koçgiri [Making a Rebellion out of a Massacre], in: Y. Çakmak and A. Özcan (Eds.), *Şekâvet, Hiyânet, İsyancı: Geç Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Eşkıyalık* [Brigandage, Treachery, Rebellion: Banditry from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Republic [of Turkey]], Istanbul, 2023, 89–114.

⁵⁶ N. Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim* [Overlord and Dersim], Istanbul, 1932, 21.

⁵⁷ He wrote that "to love all these lands, it suffices to be ours."

Dersim had remained outside state control, Uluğ claimed, deprived of 'Turkish enlightenment'.⁵⁸ Remorseful that Dersim had 'remained in the dark,' Uluğ nevertheless offered a ray of hope: a slow enlightenment had begun to emerge in the form of the Turkish state's growing ability to penetrate Dersim. In 1931, Minister of Internal Affairs Şükrü Kaya took a particularly severe stance on Dersim and declared that the 'government and its administrative structure, police force, and court inside [Dersim] were essentially nonexistent, the government in Dersim was 'nothing more than a ghost'.⁵⁹ Dersim's interior was in 'a state of complete anarchy' and Dersim was 'a hotbed and furnace of armed and well-organized robbers.' Unless urgent and decisive action was taken to 'extinguish this fire,' they would see 'the expansion of the Dersim system' into the surrounding regions. According to Kaya, Dersim represented 'an alternative system to the state,' which he attributed to the negligence of the Ottoman administration.

Other people also traced the Dersim question back to the Ottoman era. The authors of the *Dersim* book, led by General Kazım Orbay, depicted Dersim as an 'island' surrounded by impassable

⁵⁸ Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 36.

⁵⁹ CA. F: 30-10-0-0, K:110, G: 740, S:22.

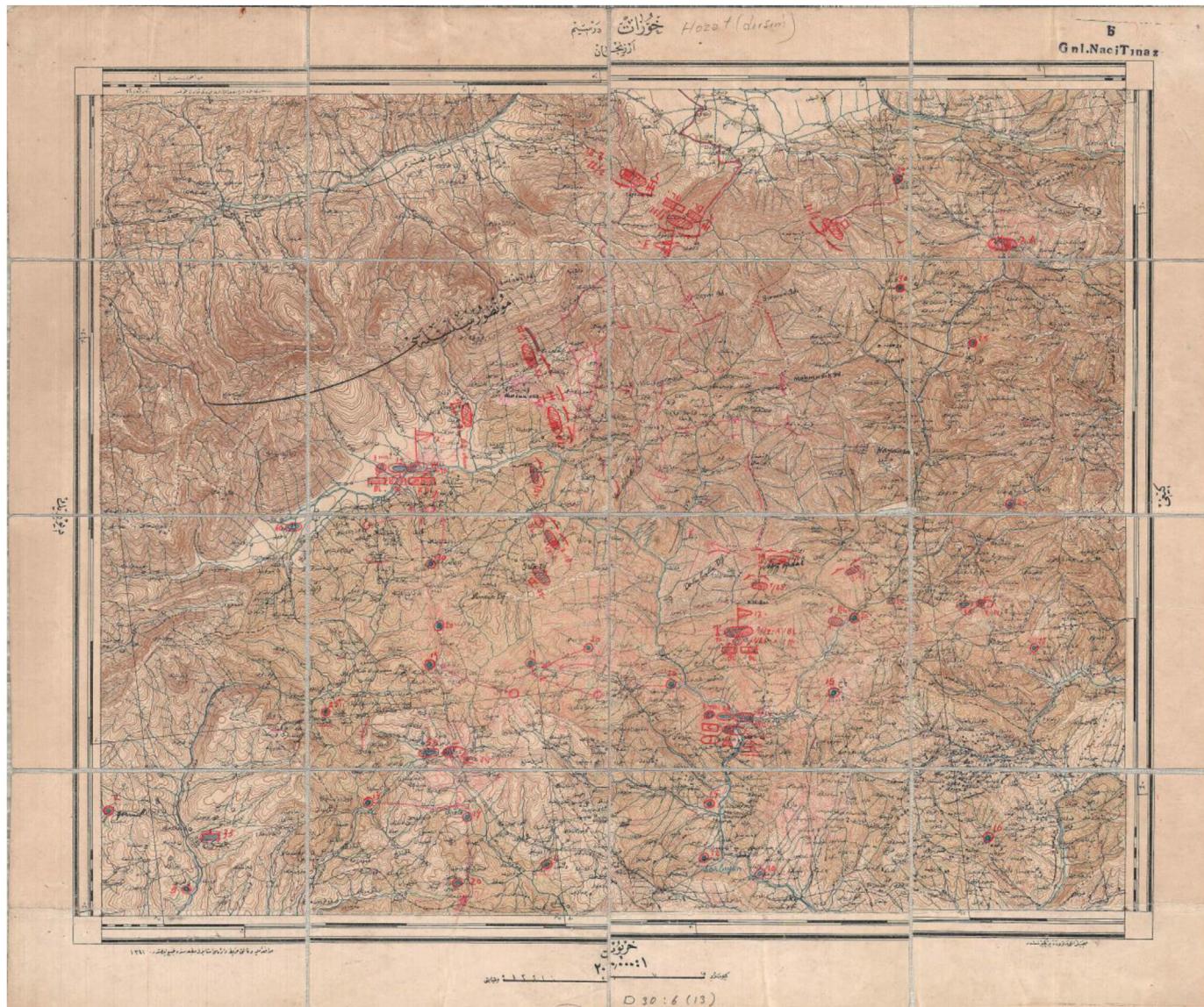


Fig. 4. Map to depict military installments in Dersim as of 1922. The National Library of Turkey (Milli Kütüphane), Ankara, D30:6 (13). H2570 (1922).

rivers, drawing a parallel between the Munzur Mountains and the Great Wall of China. Orbay counted eleven major military campaigns against the inhabitants of Dersim starting from the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War. He argued that the region's geographical features hindered the government's penetration and transformed it into a refuge for fugitives and criminals seeking to evade state service. He echoed the Armenian traveler Yeritsyan, asserting that until the late nineteenth century, 'Dersim was only nominally affiliated with the Ottoman Empire... it was essentially a state within state, living as an independent entity.'⁶⁰ Orbay believed that state influence began with the 1881 formation of the Dersim province, and he continued to define Dersim's geographical boundaries based on that historical governorate. Orbay viewed the Turkish republican state-building process in Dersim as a continuation of the Ottoman era, despite the republic's self-presentation as a distinct regime.

Coinciding with the completion of the region's colonization, Uluğ's second book, *Tunceli Is Opening Up to Civilization* (1939),

helped to perpetuate the state's narrative.⁶¹ It explored why Dersim continued to pose challenges within Turkey while other parts of the country had been pacified. His answer was the region's rugged mountainous terrain and untamed nature; although Dersim might appear small on a map, it was a vast universe characterized by magnificent landscapes of towering mountains and breathtaking cliffs. He acknowledged that the Turkish Republic rendered these landmarks more manageable and accessible. Uluğ even suggested that the harsh climate and the formidable Munzur Mountain range, a 'barren, terrifying, red wall,' had produced strong and robust individuals of Turkish race.

For Ottoman and Turkish state elites and European travelers, Dersim lacked state control, a nonstate space with an anarchic social structure. Uluğ summarized this perspective well: 'In Dersim: Nature is rebellious. History is rebellious. Tradition is rebellious. The conscience of Dersim people is captured by the steel

⁶⁰ JGK, *Dersim*, 108.

⁶¹ N. Uluğ, *Tunceli Medeniyete Açılıyor* [Tunceli is Opening Up to Civilization], Istanbul, 1939.

claws of superstition.⁶² They attributed this, at least partially, to the region's topography and natural environment. Government authorities also believed that the absence of state authority resulted in barbarity and lack of civilization. Like their European counterparts, Ottoman and Turkish state elites claimed that they were acting with a civilizing mission that would end anarchy and disorder in the region. And the only way to accomplish this mission was to establish direct state control through military violence.

Yet Dersim did not, in fact, possess an anarchic social and political structure; it was not a territory without any form of control. Instead, it operated through a sophisticated mechanism that regulated the conduct of community members, as well as the relationships between different tribes and various communities. By exploring the complex interplay among belief systems, tribal structures, and the natural environment from the perspective of the local inhabitants, we can uncover valuable insights into how the evolving dynamics between the state and the territory clashed with deeply rooted local traditions and attachments that predated the era of nation-states. We turn to that next.

Governance in nonstate Dersim

Dersim was governed by unwritten social, political, and spiritual rules that prevailed until their significant destruction and eventual replacement by modern laws and policing in the late 1930s. The governing mechanism relied on three fundamental pillars: the Alevi belief system, the Kurdish tribal structure, and the natural environment, within which both the spiritual and secular aspects of social life were deeply entrenched.⁶³ Alevism, also known as Rêa Heq (The Path of The Truth) or Kizilbashism, is a topic of debate. Some scholars consider it a distinct religion; others see it as an unorthodox Muslim sect linked to Shiism; and some argue that Kurdish Alevism in Dersim is a unique blend of indigenous beliefs and local traditions.⁶⁴

In Dersim, the sociopolitical structure of the Kizilbash Kurdish community is organized into several subunits, the smallest being *mal*. Multiple mals form an *ezbet*. The ezbets, in turn, belong to larger tribal entities known as *aşiret*. Around fifty tribes are grouped under two supratribal federations, *Desim* and *Sheikh Hesen*.⁶⁵ Additionally, tribes are categorized based on their spiritual status. Some are considered sacred, which is attributed to two sources: lineage and miracles. Lineage traces back to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, founding figure of the sacred tribe, possessing supernatural abilities.⁶⁶ Miracles make certain figures in Dersim, like Xizir, Duzgin, and Munzur, sacred, even without sacred lineage.⁶⁷ Male members of sacred families are known as *seyid*, while females are commonly referred to as *ana*,

⁶² Uluğ, *Derebeyi ve Dersim*, 21.

⁶³ For the significance of land and natural environment for both colonial oppression and Indigenous liberation, see B. Burkhardt, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures*, East Lansing, 2019.

⁶⁴ See D. Ozkul and H. I. Markussen, *The Alevis in Modern Turkey and the Diaspora*, Edinburgh, 2022; E. Gezik and A. K. Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim*, Lanham, 2019.

⁶⁵ The Desim federation seems to have given its name to the region, but there are also other theories about the etymology of the name Dersim. See N. Dersimi, *Kürdistan Tarihinde Dersim* [Dersim in the History of Kurdistan], Aleppo, 1952.

⁶⁶ Some of these founding figures are Kures, Bamasur, Seyid Sawun, Derwesh Cemal, Sheikh Choban, Üryan Xıdır, Sarı Saltık, and Sheikh Hesen. See E. Gezik, Rayberler, Pirler ve Murşidler: Alevi ocak örgütlenmesine dair saptamalar ve sorular [Raybers, Pirs and Murshids: Determinations and questions about the Alevi hearth organization], in: E. Gezik and M. Ozcan (Eds.), *Alevi Ocakları ve Örgütlenmeleri*, Ankara, 2013, 11–78.

⁶⁷ Duzgin is believed to be a member of the Kurêşan tribe, but his spiritual authority is not limited to that tribe's lineage.

referring to Ali's wife, Fatima. These lineages and miracles are preserved through oral legends and pedigree (*secere*) documents handed down within the sacred tribes across generations.⁶⁸

Two central concepts are *pîr* and *talib*. A *pîr*, a male member of a sacred tribe, serves as a spiritual guide, while a *talib* receives the guidance. Every member of the Alevi Kurdish community in Dersim, regardless of tribal or religious background, must have a *pîr*. This means that everyone, including the *pîrs* themselves, is a *talib*, a follower of a *pîr*. Members of sacred tribes, like Kurêşan, can serve as *pîrs* for secular or other sacred tribes. In the latter cases, they are considered *murshid*, the *pîr* of the *pîr*, for the *talibs* of those sacred tribes. For instance, Kurêşan tribe members are *talibs* of Bamasûran, making Bamasûran the *murshids* of Kurêşan's *talibs*.

The *rêyber* (guide), also from a seyid family, plays an important role by introducing *talibs* to the teachings and practices, preparing them for the religious services provided by the *pîr*.⁶⁹ The *rêyber* serves as the representative of the *pîr* when the *pîr* is absent. They may also accompany the *pîr* during travel, assisting in their duties. When the *pîr* embarks on extended journeys to visit *talibs*, a *koçek* acts as the *pîr*'s personal assistant. The *koçek* carries alms offered by *talibs* to the *pîr*, often with the help of a pack animal, and receives a portion of these alms.

Two other institutions are central to social and political life: *kîrîvî* and *mûsâhîbî*. The *kîrîvî* institution creates alliances and prevents conflicts between families and tribes, including non-Kurdish Alevi communities. It is symbolized by the *kîrîv*, who covers a boy's eyes during circumcision.⁷⁰ This relationship extends to both families, and romantic relationships between them are prohibited.⁷¹ The *kîrîvî* institution safeguards the community's identity by restricting intercommunal marriages and preventing potential conflicts. Even without an actual *kîrîvî* bond, members of these communities reverently refer to each other as *kîrîv*.⁷²

The *mûsâhîbî* institution provides support and accountability. A *mûsâhîb* is a lifelong companion on the true path, chosen by individuals before marriage. Women join their parents' *mûsâhîbî* contract until marriage, when they enter their husband's *mûsâhîbî* relationship. *Mûsâhîbs* are expected to know each other's secrets and difficulties and help overcome them, carrying the

⁶⁸ According to recently revealed *seceres*, the founders of the sacred tribes in Dersim are recorded to be the descendants of Ebu'l-Wefa (also known as Abu'l Wafa al-Kurdi or Seyyid Abu'l Wafâ Tâj al-Ârifîn, 925–1017) or Sheikh Safi (Sheikh Safi ad-din Is'hâq Ardabili, 1252–1334). These founders are believed to have descended from the Twelve Imams, the offspring of Muhammed's daughter Fatima and her husband, Muhammed's cousin Ali. *Seceres* have only recently been subject to scholarly analysis and have proved influential on the historical studies on Alevis. Scholars such as Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, Ayfer Karakaya-Stump, Rıza Yıldırım, and Yalçın Çakmak are using these sources. See A. Y. Ocak, *Türkiye Selçukluları Döneminde ve Sonrasında Vefai Tarikatı* [Vefai Sect in the Period of Turkish Seljuks and Afterward], *Belletoğlu* 70 (2006) 119–154; A. Karakaya-Stump, *The Kizilbash-Alevis in Ottoman Anatolia: Sufism, Politics and Community*, Edinburgh, 2019; R. Yıldırım *Alevîliğin Doğuşu: Kızılbaş Sufilikinin Toplumsal ve Siyasal Temelleri 1300–1501* [The Birth of Alevism: Social and Political Foundations of Qizilbash Sufism 1300–1501], İstanbul, 2017; Y. Çakmak, *Sultanın Kızılbaşları: II. Abdülhamid Dönemi Alevi Algısı ve Siyaseti* [The Sultan's Qizilbash: Alevi Perception and Politics in the Abdulhamid II Era], İstanbul, 2020.

⁶⁹ D. Deniz, Kurdish Alevi Belief System, Rêya Heqî/Raa Haqi: Structure, Networking, Ritual, and Function, in: Gezik and Gültekin, *Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim*, 56.

⁷⁰ See H. Gürbey, XX. Yüzyıldan Cumhuriyetin İlk Yıllarına Doğu Dersim: Kürtler, Ermeniler ve Şah Hüseyin Beyler [Eastern Dersim from the XX Century to the First Years of the Republic: Kurds, Armenians and Shah Huseyin Beys], İstanbul, 2019; H. Hayreni, *Yukarı Fırat Ermenileri: 1915 ve Dersim* [Upper Euphrates Armenians: 1915 and Dersim], İstanbul, 2016.

⁷¹ D. Deniz, *Yol/Rê: Dersim İnanç Sembolizmi* [Dersim Faith Symbolism], İstanbul, 2012.

⁷² For more details about intercommunal relations in Dersim, see A. K. Gültekin, 'Şavak' a Tribe among Ethno-Cultural Boundaries of Dersim, in: Gültekin and Gezik, *Kurdish Alevis and the Case of Dersim*, 99–116.

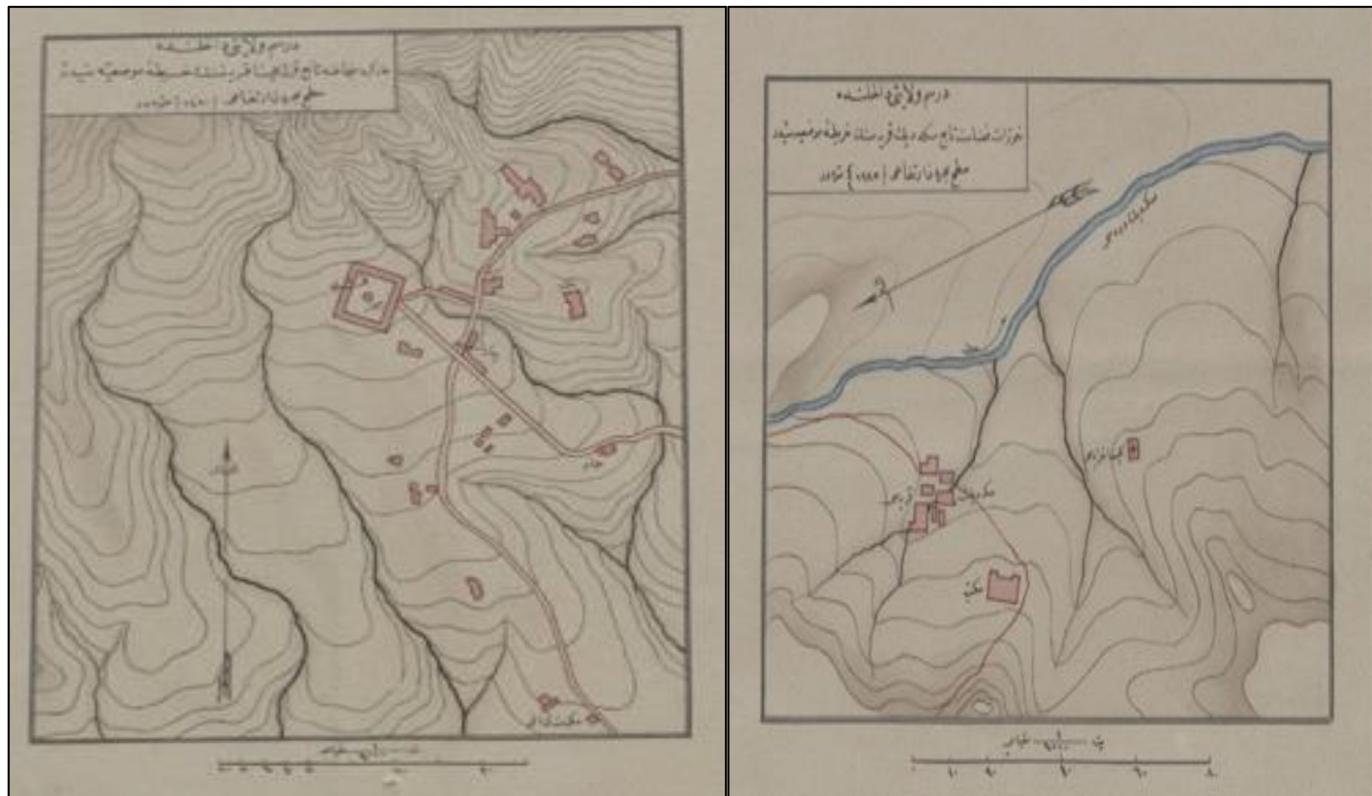


Fig. 5. Maps to depict Kızıl Kilise village of Mazgird district, and Segedik village of Hozat district. BOA. HRT. 1264. [12 August 1923].

responsibility of preventing wrongdoing. Failure to intervene may result in accountability and punishment by the pîr.⁷³

The most prevalent and potent figure in Dersim is Xizir, whose sacredness overshadows the dominant Islamic figure Ali in the Kızılbaş belief system. Although Xizir is a complex figure across and beyond the Islamic world, in Dersim, Xizir is believed to be omnipresent help for those in need. A common expression, 'Our language is the language of Xizir' (*Zonê ma zonê Xiziro*), highlights Xizir's significance in daily lives. All around Dersim, there are lakes and riverbeds called Gole Xizir (Xizir's Lake); the best known one is also called Gola Çetu.

Two other significant figures are Munzur and Duzgin. Natural landmarks, including the Munzur Mountains, Munzur Springs, Munzur River, and Duzgin Baba Mountain, are named after these two figures.⁷⁴ Another sacred place is Tujik Baba (Sultan Baba) mountain. Pre-nineteenth-century archival sources mostly refer to Dersim as Tujik. It is believed that during war, this mountain throws its 'bombs' at the enemy. Dersim has only a few man-made structures, known as *jiare* or *ziyaret* (shrines), that people consider sacred and visit occasionally.⁷⁵ Instead, religious service moves around constantly to the places of those who receive it. When a pîr

visits a house, that house becomes the place of worship for the visit.⁷⁶ As Dilşa Deniz points out, the religious system in Dersim may therefore be referred to as a 'mobile belief system'.⁷⁷ The mobility of the pîrs served many purposes. Dersim's scattered villages made it more practical to relocate pîrs instead of their talibs. Such mobility also ensured local governance continuity and minimized disruptions in residents' daily lives.

Another important aspect was the system's invisibility. Sacred places were centered around natural landmarks rather than recognizable religious symbols, which made the religious system less legible to outsiders, as it left no traces behind. State authorities' understanding was further complicated by the pîrs' winter visits to talibs, since military operations and tax collection primarily occurred during the summer. Additionally, ceremonies were inclusive, open to all community members regardless of gender or age (except for the excommunicated), which fostered a relatively egalitarian practice where everyone felt equally involved and indoctrinated.

These combined factors posed significant difficulties for state actors in understanding and disrupting the internal dynamics of Dersim. Instead, they racialized the region's inhabitants as wild, barbaric, and deviant, with an alleged anarchical social and political lifestyle. State absence itself attracted state-evading groups, who, once beyond the state's grasp, developed strategies to safeguard themselves against state intrusions. Whereas earlier, imperial elites would have been content to leave regions such as Dersim to govern themselves, as it made the state's job easier, modern state elites sought to conquer and colonize such regions and subject their

⁷³ For more details, see Gezik, *Rayberler, Pirler ve Murşidler*, 11–77.

⁷⁴ For more details on Duzgin Baba Mountain, see A. K. Gültekin, Kemerê Duzgi: The Protector of Dersim, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, n.d. (2022) 1–19. For more details on the locals' naming of the geographical landmarks in Dersim, see B. C. Zirh, Kirmanciya Beleke: Understanding Alevi Geography in Between Spaces of Longing and Belonging, in T. Issa (Ed), *Alevi in Europe: Voices of Migration, Culture and Identity*, Oxfordshire, 2017, 157–172.

⁷⁵ Two such places are Oriya Xidir in Zeve (Dorutay) village of Pertek and the Ağuçan's tomb in Bargini (Karabakır) village of Hozat.

⁷⁶ As Alevis migrated to cities in the latter half of the twentieth century, they began constructing worship houses called Cemevi.

⁷⁷ Deniz, Kurdish Alevi Belief System, 53.



Fig. 6. The 1937 map depicting roads and forbidden zones in preparation of military operations in 1937. Firestone Library, Princeton University.

inhabitants and territories to direct rule. To quote Naşit Uluğ, they aimed to make Dersim 'theirs.'

'To make Dersim our own'

Late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ottoman administrators produced detailed maps of Dersim and other peripheral regions of the empire (Figs. 5 and 6).⁷⁸ These maps, alongside reports and travel accounts, enabled Ottoman state elites to construct a mental map of Dersim. Encompassing geography, demography, social and economic structure, and political history, this picture combined actual observations, imagination, memory, depictions, aspirations, and visualizations found in textual and pictorial sources. Ottoman and Western travelers, officials, and scholars contributed thus to an empire-wide perspective, and Dersim's cartographic representation followed this trend.⁷⁹ Mapmaking advancements allowed state elites to envision Dersim as a territory

where they could exercise authority and reshape it in accordance with their own vision. The Ottoman Empire's interest in modern cartography began with the Translation Chamber in 1821, which translated military geography books into Turkish.⁸⁰ Map officer training at the Ottoman Military Academy started in the latter half of the century, leading to the Map and Science Department in 1880, not coincidentally shortly after the conclusion of the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War. In one of the earliest Ottoman maps depicting roads in Dersim and Harput vilayets (1883), Ottoman cartographers present Dersim as an empty space surrounded by tributaries of the Euphrates (Fig. 3). The lack of roads in this map reflects the Ottoman administration's difficulty controlling Dersim, and this remained unresolved until the empire's collapse. The map's French inscription signifies the influence of Ottoman cartographers who were educated in France.⁸¹ Maps played a central role in imperial governance after this date, and by the late nineteenth century, the empire was increasingly shown as a unified territory as opposed to previously being shown in its constitutive parts.⁸²

⁷⁸ See N. N. Dados, *Mapping Empire: Knowledge Production and Government in the Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Empire*, in: A. Strohmaier and A. Krewani (Eds), *Media and Mapping Practices in the Middle East and North Africa*, 7, Amsterdam, 2021, 27–44; and Y. Avci, The Application of Tanzimat in the Desert: The Bedouins and the Creation of a New Town in Southern Palestine (1860–1914), *Middle Eastern Studies* 45 (2009) 969–983.

⁷⁹ P. Brummett, *Mapping the Ottomans: Sovereignty, Territory, and Identity in the Early Modern Mediterranean*, New York, 2015.

⁸⁰ For European maps of the pre-modern Ottoman Empire, see I. Manners, *European Cartographers and the Ottoman World, 1500–1750*, Chicago, 2007.

⁸¹ R. L. Chambers, Notes on the Mekteb-i Osmani in Paris, 1857–1874, in: W. R. Polk and R. L. Chambers (Eds), *Beginnings of Modernization in the Middle East*, Chicago, 1968, 313–329.

⁸² B. C. Fortna, Change in the School Maps of the Late Ottoman Empire, *Imago Mundi* 57 (2005) 23–34.

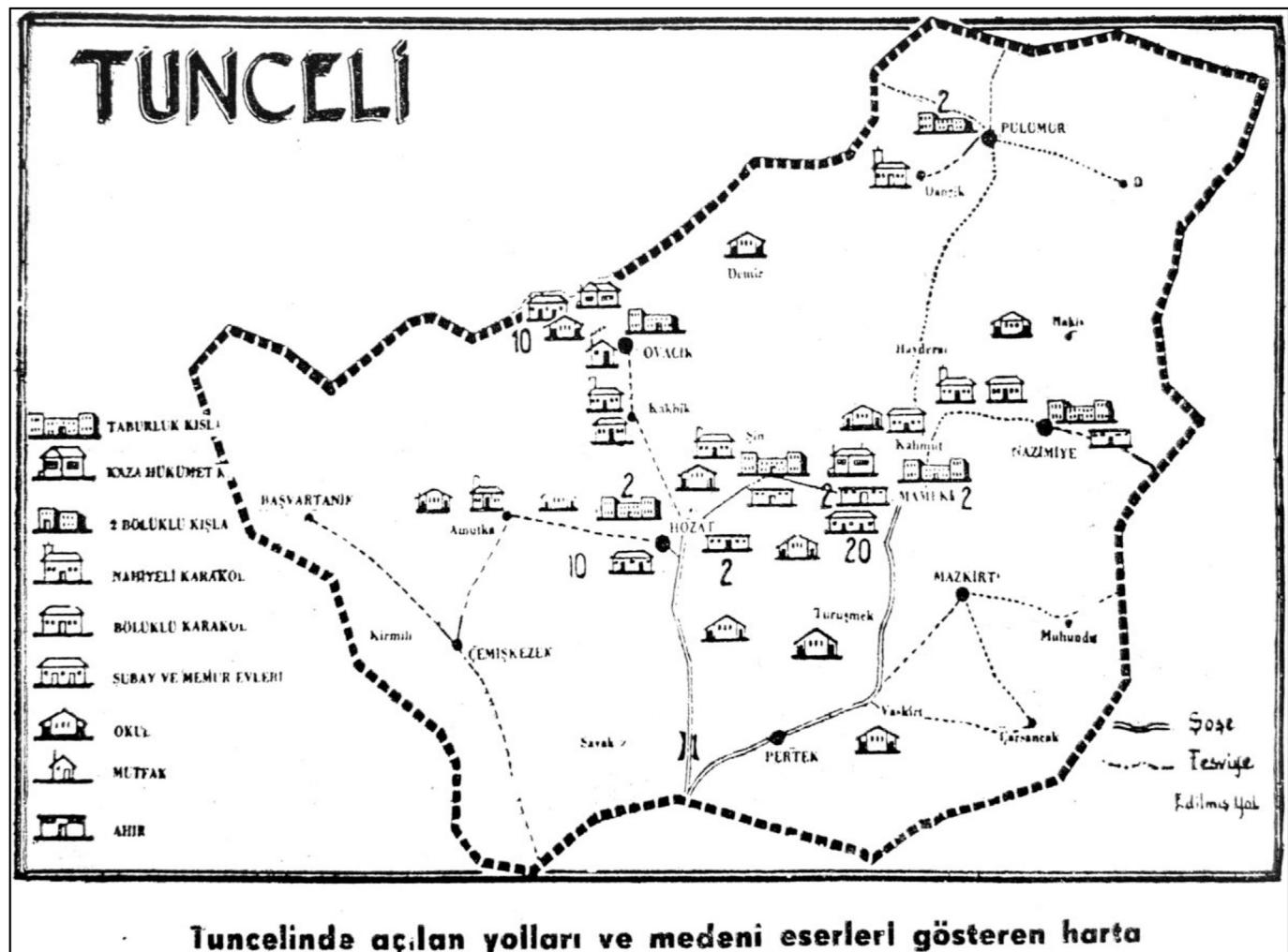


Fig. 7. The 1939 map to illustrate 'civilized institutions and paved roads' in Tunceli, Dersim's state-given name since 1935. Ulug, *Tunceli Medeniyete Açılyor*.

The Ottomans eventually started to develop their own modern cartographic capacities in collaboration with foreign mapmakers, like French cartographer Vital Cuinet.⁸³ The first Ottoman publication to use 'military geography' in its title was published in 1892,⁸⁴ and in 1895, the Ottoman government established its first Mapping Commission.⁸⁵ The Map Drawing School (Harita Ahz-i Tersim Okulu) started to educate cartographers or mapping officers in 1916, and the Ministry of National Defense founded its Mapping Department in 1918. These wartime efforts constituted the foundation for later cartographic institutions in modern Turkey.⁸⁶

Throughout World War I and onward, the Ottoman administration continued to produce Dersim maps primarily to facilitate state control. Relatively simple topographic sketches when compared to

those created by British Consul Taylor and Russian General Kartsov several decades earlier, these depictions nonetheless demonstrate the Ottoman state's progress in mapping Dersim during the war.⁸⁷ The map dating 1922 (Fig. 4), provides a more detailed representation of Dersim's administrative divisions and significant geographical features compared to previous Ottoman maps. Notably, military installations are superimposed on the map with red ink.

In 1923, the Treaty of Lausanne recognized the Republic of Turkey as the new political entity replacing the Ottoman Empire, and Turkish military authorities produced the most detailed maps of Dersim yet, down to the village level (Fig. 5). These maps demonstrate continuity in state making across two seemingly different—or even radically opposing—regimes as well as increasing state penetration into Dersim through advances in cartography after World War I.

Considering modern cartography's military origins in general and in the Ottoman Empire more specifically, the production of cartographic knowledge about Dersim and elsewhere can be seen as a disciplinary mechanism that appropriates a territory through the gaze of the sovereign, who controls the means to categorize and

⁸³ V. Cuinet, *La Turquie d'Asie: Géographie Administrative Statistique Descriptive et Raisonnée de Chaque Province de l'Asie-Mineure*, Istanbul, 2001.

⁸⁴ A. Cemal, *Memalik-i Osmaniye'ye Mahsus Coğrafya-yı Askerî* [Military Geography of Ottoman Territories], Istanbul, 1310 [1892].

⁸⁵ Y. Ben-Bassat and Y. Ben-Artzi, Ottoman Maps of the Empire's Arab Provinces, 1850s to the First World War, *Imago Mundi* 70 (2018) 199–211; and The Collision of Empires as seen from Istanbul: The border of British-controlled Egypt and Ottoman Palestine as reflected in Ottoman Maps, *Journal of Historical Geography* 50 (2015) 25–36.

⁸⁶ A. Aygün, *Türk Haritalılık Tarihi* [History of Turkish Cartography], Ankara, 1980.

⁸⁷ Milli Kütüphane (The National Library of Turkey), Ankara. D30:22 (10). H2437 (1912); BOA. HRT.825, 13 March 1916.

represent it. John Brian Harley stresses that power is inherent to cartography because the process of creating a map involves making choices about what to include and what to exclude.⁸⁸ The mapmaker's selections, omissions, simplifications, classifications, hierarchies, and symbolizations, Harley expresses, are all rhetorical acts that shape the way people understand and interact with the world. Cartography plays an indispensable role in shaping the relationship between state, human populations, and territory.

Nowhere is this more evident than in maps of Dersim. One of the maps (Fig. 6), created in preparation for 1937's military operations, depicts depopulated zones (forbidden areas) as well as the roads connecting different towns and villages, which highlights the integral link between mapmaking and the Turkish state's efforts to establish control. In contrast to the earlier map (Fig. 3), where Dersim was depicted as an empty space lacking paved roads, by 1937, the neighboring provinces are unimportant and empty areas, while Dersim, under its new state-given name Tunceli, appears as a colonized space under military occupation and crisscrossed by paved roads.

Similarly, the map taken from Ulug's *Tunceli Is Opening Up to Civilization* (Fig. 7), published when the 1930s military operations in the Dersim were ending, uses its new name and illustrates the newly built roads and 'civilized structures.' The map includes military barracks, government buildings, roads, and houses for military officers and their families. Local inhabitants are not mentioned. Such maps represent the state's attempt to symbolize Tunceli as a place of civilization under state control, erasing nonstate Dersim, the question or problem to be solved.

Conclusion

Ottoman and Turkish reform, centralization, and Westernization policies placed significant emphasis on military processes. This can be clearly seen in numerous portrayals of Turkish military operations (Fig. 8), one, where it is evident that military presence is central to representing power within Dersim.⁸⁹ Imperial and republican elites' regional reports often equated reform with military operations, including those in 1937–38. This understanding influenced postimperial state formation in Dersim and other former Ottoman territories.⁹⁰ The objective was to establish direct rule, using force and violence whenever necessary.

Ottoman and Turkish authorities constructed a distorted image of Dersim as a place of anarchy, chaos, and primitiveness, resembling misrepresentations of the Orient by Western scholars, as discussed in Edward Said's critique of Orientalism.⁹¹ As I discussed above, however, Dersimis had a sophisticated governance system, which effectively regulated interactions among individuals, tribes, ethnic and religious communities, and the natural environment. This system, characterized by its invisibility and mobility, proved a formidable barrier against state penetration for decades. State elites' perception of Dersim was, therefore, in direct contradiction to Dersimis' own perception of their living environment.

While Said's critique of Orientalism contributes substantially to our understanding of the historical developments in the Middle East, the process of Orientalization and colonization experienced in

Dersim presents a challenge to this approach, which is built on a putative dichotomy between the East and the West, where the East primarily refers to the Middle East, particularly the Arab world and, more specifically, Egypt.⁹² Dersim serves as a prime illustration of how the Ottomans actively participated in Orientalism and colonialism, even though they were simultaneously subjected to Orientalization and colonialism by Western powers.⁹³ Similar examples include Ussama Makdisi and Selim Deringil's work within the framework of Ottoman policies in the Arab world and, more recently, Mostafa Minawi's work on Africa.

With the advancement of state machinery and accumulation of knowledge about Dersim, a fusion of Orientalist, colonialist, and increasingly racist agendas allowed authorities to surmount natural obstacles and disrupt the internal dynamics of the region. This violent transformation was closely linked to developments in cartography, which radically transformed the relationship between state and territory. As happened in faraway places like Chicago, Paris, Cairo, and Delhi during the same period, where cartography also played a significant role, the incorporation of Dersim and other rural areas into the Turkish national space was driven by the demand for resources to support industrial centers in the country's west.⁹⁴ This global trend underscores cartography's importance in colonial and modern state formation as well as the transition from indirect imperial to centralized nation-state rule within the contexts of political, economic, and environmental history.⁹⁵

Cartography's crucial role in such changes sheds light on the evolving relationship between humans and the environment. The Dersim case offers a Middle Eastern viewpoint on the significance of territorial control for the formation of nation-states and the exploitation of natural resources and human capital.⁹⁶ Examining Dersim and comparable cases worldwide reveals that the shift from indirect imperial rule to centralized nation-state governance has disrupted the previously more sustainable and harmonious relationships between human populations and their environments. This transition, marked by the territorialization of state sovereignty, resulted in adverse consequences globally.⁹⁷ This process was intrinsically linked to modern state elites' desire to create both a homogeneous population and a flattened, homogeneous territory, eliminating intermediaries, local attachments, and traditions of cohabitation in the process.

On 18 June 1937, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü discussed Dersim with Chief of General Staff Fevzi Çakmak and other officials. Afterward, İnönü announced that the government's objective was to make Dersimis 'realize their place and identity,' which would result in 'a seven thousand square kilometer piece of land added to the

⁸⁸ J. B. Harley, Deconstructing the Map, *Cartographica* 26 (1989) 1–20.

⁸⁹ For similar maps, see R. Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde Ayaklanması (1924–1938)* [Rebellions in the Republic of Turkey], Ankara, 1972; N. S. Silan, *Doğu Anadolu'da Toplumsal Mühendislik: Dersim-Sason, 1934–1946* [Social Engineering in Eastern Anatolia], Istanbul, 2010, appendix.

⁹⁰ M. Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, Cambridge, 2017.

⁹¹ N. Harrison, 'A Roomy Place Full of Possibility': Said's Orientalism and the Literary, in: Rnajan Ghosh (Ed), *Edward Said and the Literary, Social, and Political World*, New York, 2009.

⁹² See T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge, 1988.

⁹³ M. Minawi, *The Ottoman Scramble for Africa: Empire and Diplomacy in the Sahara and the Hijaz*, Stanford, 2016.

⁹⁴ See W. Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, New York, 1992;

E. J. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870–1914*, Stanford, 1976; A. Ben-Dror, Cartographic knowledge, colonialized-colonizer spaces: Egyptian maps of Harar, 1875–1885, *Journal of Historical Geography* 77 (2022) 85–100. U. Kalpagam, Cartography in Colonial India, *Economic and Political Weekly* 30 (1995) 87–98.

⁹⁵ See Z. Kaya, *Mapping Kurdistan: Territory, Self-Determination and Nationalism*, Cambridge, 2020; S. Schulten, *Mapping the Nation: History and Cartography in Nineteenth-Century America*, Chicago, 2014; A. Nagaraj and S. Stern, The Economics of Maps, *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 34 (2020) 196–221; K. A. Brosnan and J. R. Akerman, *Mapping Nature Across the Americas*, Chicago, 2021.

⁹⁶ For other examples, see A. Mikhail, *Water on Sand Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, Cambridge, 2013.

⁹⁷ See J. Radkau, *Nature and Power: A Global History of the Environment*, Cambridge, 2008.

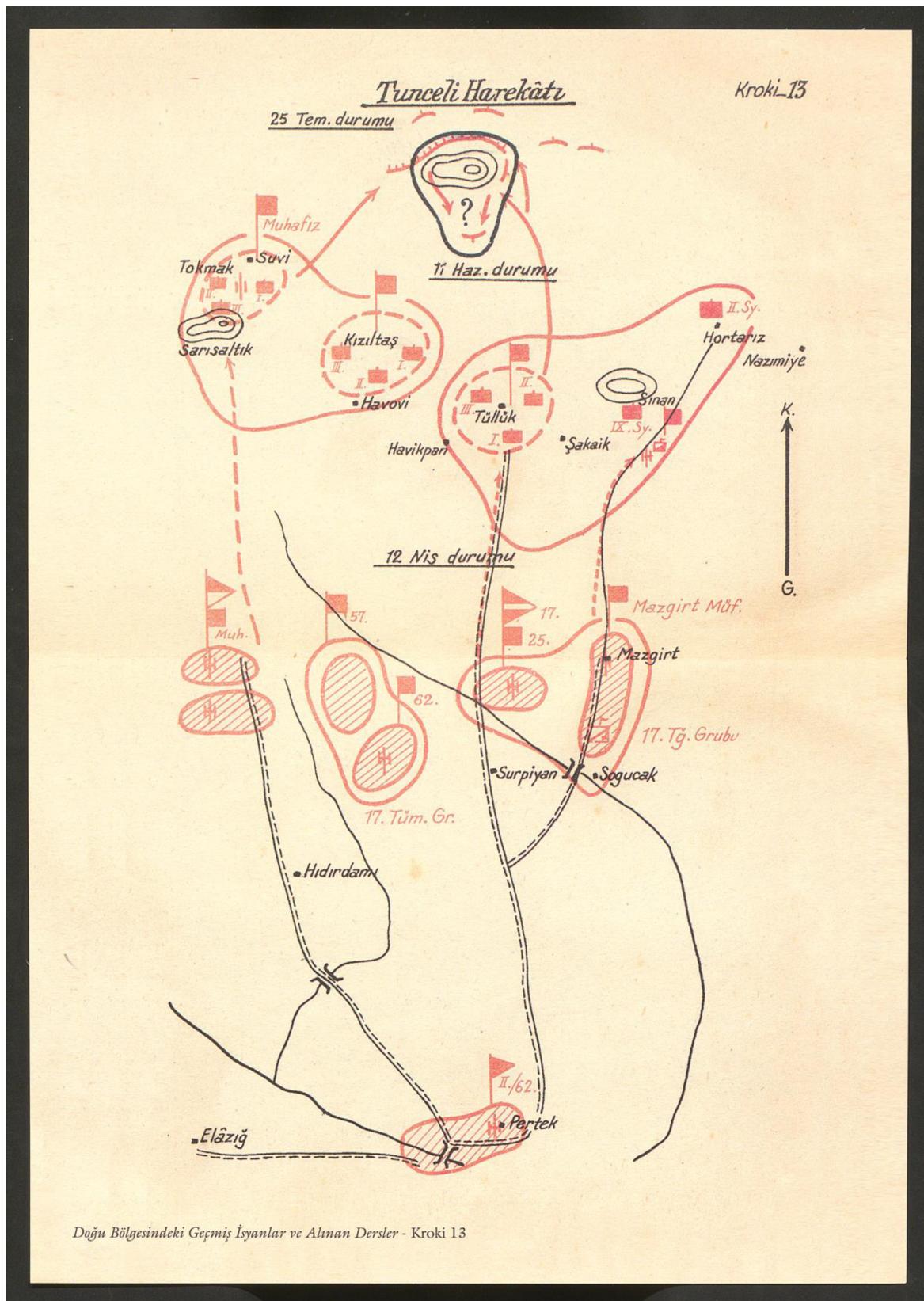


Fig. 8. 'Tunceli Operation' depicts the position of the military units in Dersim as of 25 July 1937. N. S. Silan, *Doğu Anadolu'da Toplumsal Mühendislik: Dersim-Sason, 1934–1946* [Social Engineering in Eastern Anatolia], Istanbul, 2010, appendix.



Fig. 9. Newspaper article titled 'What is the Dersim issue?' accompanied by a map that refers to the region with its recently state-given name Tunceli. Turkish Daily Newspaper Kurun, 18 June 1937.

map of the homeland and seventy thousand citizens added to its population.⁹⁸ İnönü's statements unambiguously indicate that territorial control and the subsequent exploitation of the natural environment were of equal importance with population control. These aspects were inseparable and interconnected, constituting

the foundation of nation-state formation. His words symbolize the pinnacle of this process in Turkey and beyond, albeit in different temporalities. After Dersim's violent transformation in 1937–38, the Turkish state implemented micromanagement strategies to ensure that 'anomalies' like Dersim were no longer conceivable

⁹⁸ Akgün, *Dersim İsyanları*, 120.

within the newly established nation-state-based world order, effectively erasing them from history.⁹⁹

During 1937's military operations, the Turkish daily newspaper *Kurun* featured a map naming the region 'Tunceli,' with the query, 'What is the Dersim Question?' (Fig. 9). The naming choice between Tunceli and Dersim, which has continued to be employed by state elites and local Dersimis, highlights the ongoing tension between the state's official narrative and the intricate history of the region. The 'Dersim Question' constitutes a Middle Eastern case of a global transformation from indirect imperial to centralized nation-state rule, which compelled state elites to embark on an engineering task that would secure congruity between a homogeneous population (the nation) and a flattened territory (homeland) under the gaze of an omnipresent sovereign (the modern state). This ongoing process has significantly eroded diversity among communities that once inhabited different historical geographies through various

self-governing mechanisms. It continues to fuel tensions and conflicts worldwide.

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⁹⁹ For another example, see E. Gök and E. Tuncer, An unsettling re-composition: Istanbul's lost Armenian April 11 Memorial, *Journal of Historical Geography* 81 (2023) 19–31. For a limited study of the post-1938 period in Dersim, see B. Basaranlar, Pragmatic Coexistence: Local Responses to the State Intrusion in Dersim During the Early Republican Period of Turkey (1938–1950), *Middle Eastern Studies* 58 (2022) 931–49.