

REMEMBERING DERSIM – AN INTRODUCTION

Some general information on Dersim

Dersim is the original name of the modern Tunceli province situated in the East of Anatolia between the Western and Eastern Euphrates. In 1926, the name Dersim was banned and the land of historical Dersim was dismantled by the Turkish government. In 1935, the central part of historical Dersim was renamed into Tunceli. The military occupation during the time of genocide in 1937-1938 brought Dersim directly under Turkish rule. At present, the following cities neighbour the province of Tunceli: Bingöl in the east, Elazığ in the south and Erzincan in the north-west. Tunceli covers an area of 7.774 sq km with a population of approximately 84,022 in 2007. Nearly 70% of the Tunceli born population lives outside their homeland, either in the west of Turkey or in European countries, mostly in Germany.

Central Dersim, i.e. modern Tunceli is not ethnically homogeneous. However the indigenous population is generally known as Dersimis or Kızılbash. Two local languages are Zazaki and Kurdish. Turkish is the only official language imposed by the Turkish state.

The vast majority of the people belong to a religion originally known by the name “Surh-u Ser” in Iranian languages, Kızılbash or Alevi in Turkish. The term Kızılbash can be translated as ‘Red heads’, meaning people wearing a red dress or head-dress.

The distinction between the Dersimis and their neighbours is marked by their history, religion/culture, and language.

On Remembrance Night

A few words need to be said at the outset. I like to thank Dr. Tessa Hofmann, the Chairperson of Arbeitsgruppe Anerkennung - Gegen Genozid, für Völkerverständigung e.V, and all other contributors for organizing this meaningful night and bringing us together with the representatives of other genocide victims, Armenian, Greek and Syriac brothers.

This great solidarity would certainly be a relief for the people of Dersim.

This event is also an important step for a joint struggle against genocides. It is a great honour to participate in and address an audience of this composition.

The historical background

The poster that was designed for this night contains a photograph shot towards the end of the Turkish military operation in Dersim on July 24, 1938. With your permission I like to read the words that written at the back of this photo:

“The Demenan tribe was the last tribe exterminated by our brigade in the 1938 Tunceli operation. In the photograph the Demenan tribal chiefs and their tribesmen are seen after having been taken from the caves where they were hiding.”

This is one of numerous confessions of intentional extermination.

Already in 1930 a Turkish general called Halis Pasha while commanding a military campaign against Dersim (Pülümür), admits in his report that “the Dersimis had experienced at least 40 massacres up to the year 1930”. Shortly before the 1937-1938 military campaign against Dersim the Turkish Journalist Latif Erenel wrote in his newspaper “Tan”:

“According to what I heard in Dersim there has been 108 military campaigns against the Munzur Mountains. In neither of these campaigns the troops had been able to enter deep into the country.”

The Minister of Home Affairs Şükrü Kaya was confessing that “there have been 11 military campaigns on Dersim from 1876 to 1935 for punishment”.

According to the reports of the First Inspector General İbrahim Tali Öngören written between 1928 and 1933, there remained no tribe in Dersim that had not been punished during the last 20-30 years, from 1908 to 1933.

It is these very massacres that started as early as the 16th century that created the Dersim Question. The ethno-cultural differences of Dersim were not tolerable neither to the Islamists, nor to nationalist rulers of Turkey who intended to build up a Turkish nation from above by the hands of state since the Young Turks. For the nationalists, whether Unionists or Kemalists, Dersim with its centuries old autonomy was a model that could not be tolerated.

In 1927 in Dersim and Kurdistan a military regime was established under a General Inspectorate. This colonial rule lasted more than 20 years. The first Governor General at the head of the Inspectorate was the already mentioned İbrahim Tali Öngören, a close friend of Mustafa Kemal and equipped with extraordinary powers.

In his reports he recommends intelligence before the final military action, in order to determine the population of the tribes, the number of weapons each of them has in order to disarm them, to find out the disagreements between them and use their tribal conflicts in order to prevent them to unite against the military or to organize tribal militias, to locate all the caves and forests where they might seek refuge during the campaign and so on. He also suggests that the traditional authority, that is to say the tribal and spiritual leaders must be removed from Dersim first, before the designated zones are evacuated. He warns that everything must be accomplished before the army withdraws. He suggests a siege of Dersim in order to force surrender. To this aim he also proposed a food blockade to expose the people to starvation, to seize their livelihood, to burn down villages, to confiscate their flocks, etc.

All his recommendations were implemented during the years of 1937-1938.

After ten years of preparation the military campaign of 1937 started on May 19, lasting until September. Troops were under the command of the chief of the General Staff Fevzi Çakmak. From July to August 1937 most leaders of the resistance were assassinated one after another. Seyit Rıza, the most notable of them, had been imprisoned in early September. During a mock trial at a military court in Elazığ he was accused of an alleged insurrection and sentenced to death. On November 15, Seyit Rıza was hanged together with seven other Dersim leaders while Turkey's president Mustafa Kemal was waiting at the city's railway station until the extermination of Dersim's tribal and spiritual leadership was executed.

The military campaign of the following year began in June and lasted until the end of the August, without meeting any genuine resistance. The army's aim at this time was to depopulate by any means the central parts of Dersim. This process included both large scale massacres and expulsion. According to Celal Bayar, who was Prime Minister at the time of the second Dersim military campaign in 1938 it was Mustafa Kemal himself who gave the order "to kill the Dersimis". İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, who served as Minister of Foreign Affairs for three times, and was Chairman of the Senate right before the military coup of 1981 mentioned in a taped statement that the military had used poisoned gas in Dersim and killed the people of the age of 7 to 70 years like mice. The use of poisoned gas was also admitted by the former Air Force Commander Muhsin Batur, who participated in the military operations.

According to various sources the death toll ranged from 10 to more than 70 thousands, and was particularly high among the undefended women and children. Right after this military cleansing, Thousands of Dersimis were deported to Western Anatolia where they were dispersed among the Turkish majority in order to gain their Turkification. Hundreds of infants, mostly girls, were taken from their parents to be raised, turkified and Islamized by the families of Turkish army officers.

So far, official Turkey and the majority of Turkey's representatives have never apologized for the crimes, committed in Dersim and against its population and humanity. On the contrary - in later years, the policy of repression and assimilation was continued by various means.