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THE INVISIBLES: HIDDEN CHRISTIAN NATION(S) IN 20TH-CENTURY TÜRKIYE

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People endured horrors,
and then they couldn't talk about them.
The real stories of the world
were bedded in silence.
The mortar was silence
and the walls were sometimes impregnable.
(Sebastian Barry: Old God's Time, 2023)

Abstract

This article discusses the fate of survivors of the Young Turk and Kemalist genocide against the indigenous Christians of the Ottoman Empire (1912-1922). Although the phenomenon of Ottoman Christians converting to Sunni or Shiite Islam or Alevism has existed in the Ottoman Empire since the 17th century, the genocide in particular significantly accelerated Islamization and thus also the phenomenon of crypto-Christianity in various regions of present-day Republic of Türkiye that were previously predominantly Christian. However, Islamization did not protect Armenian and Greek genocide survivors from further discrimination. In addition to a comparative consideration of the affected regions – Sasun, Pontos, Hamshen, Cappadocia and Dersim – the analysis focuses on the Dersim region, whose Armenian inhabitants were affected by genocide no fewer than twice: in 1915/16 and in 1938. At the same time, I examine the effects of Kurdish tribality and the associated granting of protection at the price of serfdom. My empirical basis is the interviews conducted by Avedis Hadjian and Kazım Gündoğan in the 2010s with people of Armenian descent – defined as descendants of at least one Armenian grandparent or great-grandparent. These interviews confirm the fact, also known in other post-genocidal contexts, that the experience of genocide silences the survivors for at least two generations and socially marginalizes those affected. It was only in the generation of grandchildren that the crypto-Christians and Alevized Armenians were able to overcome their invisibility and confront the public with the demand for equal treatment and acceptance. What price did the crypto-Christians pay for

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remaining in their homeland? Despite the often-praised good relations between Armenians and Dersim Alevis, the price seems to have been particularly high in this region, because the forced adaptation to regional Alevism led not only to a change of faith, but also to linguistic assimilation into the Turkish and Iranian languages of the region (Kurdish, Kırmanc(k)i or Zazaki). If we consider language and religion to be essential components of collective and individual identity, then the preservation of an Armenian consciousness in this region is all the more remarkable. In other regions examined here, especially in Pontos and Hamshen, the Islamized Greeks and Armenians at least retained their language.

Keywords: *Ottoman Empire; Republic of Türkiye; religion; Islamization; Crypto-Christians; Armenian language; Greek language; linguistic assimilation; Armenians; Greek-Orthodox Christians; Regions; Dersim; Sasun; Pontos; Hamshen (Hemşin); Pontos; Cappadocia; genocide; social marginalization.*

Hidden Nation(s)

What happens to people who physically survive the ultimate crime – genocide – but only at the cost of complete self-denial, humiliation and socio-cultural assimilation? Under Ottoman and Turkish rule, forced Islamization occurred already before the 20th century, often to avoid tax disadvantages or the loss of privileges. In some regions, the converts managed to develop a crypto-existence, avoiding exogamy and partially preserving linguistic or religious traditions.

Crypto-Christians, referred to as Cryphi, klosti, Stavriotes and Kromledes in Greek, have existed in the Pontos region since 1650. The Islamization of the Pontic Greek population began in the Ofis region, followed by Surmena [Sürmene], Argyroupolis [Gümüşhane], Ionia and other regions.[1]

In contrast to the Islamized Armenians, however, the Pontos Greek Muslims or crypto-Christians managed to preserve their linguistic identity, the Pontos Greek dialect Pontiaka, which is said to be most closely related to classical ancient Greek. In Surmena, the district capital consists of 19 villages, five of which are now inhabited exclusively by Greek speakers. In the district of Galiena (ancient Guliena), which consists of 18 villages and settlements, half of the district's population are Islamized locals, while the other half were resettled from the villages of Kullish and Archangelos in the district of Surmena in the third decade of the 20th century. The Turkish language has only recently begun to displace the Pontic dialect, which is no longer spoken by young people, at least those under 20 years of age. The region of Tsaíkara (Kato-Chorion) is purely Greek-speaking and was the last to be Islamized (at the end of the 19th century), with a sufficiently developed religious sense of crypto-Christianity. The district of Of (the ancient

[1] Malkidis, Theofanis. *The Cryptochristians of Pontos*. https://pontosworld.com/index.php/history/articles/242-the-crypto-christians-of-Pontos?showall=1

region of Ofis) consists of 49 villages, which were all Greek, but today only Evenköy is a Greek-speaking village. There, the Muslim festival of Ramadan is celebrated, and the Lenten Triodion (from the Sunday of the Publican and Pharisee to the Friday before Palm Sunday). The majority of the inhabitants are Muslim (...). The inhabitants, mainly small farmers and cattle breeders, have rebuilt their communities in Constantinople and other cities.

Estimates of the number of crypto-Christians in Turkey vary considerably, depending on the political intentions of the estimators, who either emphasize or downplay the importance or danger of crypto-Christians. The assassinated by Turkish nationalist Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink estimated that there were one million Turkish citizens with at least one Armenian grandparent or great-grandparent.[2] According to the Armenian author and journalist Hadjian, hundreds of thousands of survivors were forcibly Islamized after 1915, with far-reaching consequences: „(…) the Islamicization of Armenians was the vehicle *par excellence* to de-Armenize them: they became non-Armenian non-Christians, for even after three generations Turkish or Kurdish neighbors still know them as *dönmes* (converts).“[3] The Greek historian Konstantinos Fotiadis mentioned in 2020: "Even 100 years after the Pontian genocide, there are still many Turks who are still crypto-Christians. There are many who recognize their Greek origin, but while their grandparents changed their minds due to the circumstances, they transmitted the Greek conscience to them. They are the descendants of the Greek-speaking Muslims, whom the Ecumenical Patriarchate had recognized in number to 180,000, who could not come to Greece because of the Treaty of Lausanne. (…) There were 43,000 crypto-Christians then. At that time, the population of Turkey was about 12 million. (…) If we take into account that the population of Turkey today is about 82 million, by a rough estimate we could say that there are about 2 million in Turkey today with Greek or Christian conscience, some of them crypto-Christians and some others obvious."[4] The late Austrian orientalist and Orthodox theologian Heinz Gstrein, on the other hand, mentioned in 2020: “The number of crypto-Christians in Turkey today is estimated at just under 100,000,”[5] whereby he only referred to Greek Orthodox crypto-Christians.

Armenian and Turkish nationalists, on the other hand, speculate that there are 300,000 and 500,000 crypto-Christians of Armenian and Turkish origin, respectively. In Germany, we became aware of the existence of crypto-Christians

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[2] Peroomian, Rubina. *And Those Who Continued Living in Turkey after 1915: The Metamorphosis of the Post-Genocide Armenian Identity as Reflected in Artistic Literature*. Yerevan, 2008, p. 211

[3] Hadjian, Avedis. *Secret Nation: The Hidden Armenians of Turkey.* London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018, p. 21, 123

[4] Zacharis, Lambros: “Professor Fotiadis: There's up to 2 million crypto-Greeks in Turkey and many visit Panagia Soumela in Pontos”. *Greek City Times*, November 18, 2020, https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/11/18/2-million-greeks-soumela-pontos/

[5] Gstrein, Heinz. „Türkische Geheimchristen im Visier“. May 29, 2020, https://hephaestuswien.com/turkey-kirche-und-islam/

in Turkey in the 1970s and 1980s, when Konstantinos Fotiadis, who later became an Ottomanologist at the Western Macedonia University in Kozani, studied empirical cultural studies in Tübingen. During fieldwork among the working class in Baden-Württemberg, he initially came across Turkish Greeks who had been expelled from the islands of Imbros (...) and Tenedos and who had slipped into the 'Turkish' guest worker contingents of the Federal Republic. Above all, however, he discovered numerous Turkish men and women from the Black Sea region who spoke the 'Pontic' dialect of Greek among themselves, were organized in the local Turkish cultural, i. e. mosque association, but practiced Christian customs at home. Their decision to emigrate to Germany was not only dictated by the search for better earning opportunities and living conditions, but also by the desire for more religious freedom."[6] The *Septembriana*, the anti-Greek pogrom in Istanbul on 6-7 September 1955, was the final impetus for many Turkish citizens of Greek or Armenian descent to emigrate.

Konstantinos Fotiadis was one of the first scholars to research the Islamization of Asia Minor and the crypto-Christians of Pontos for his dissertation, which he defended in Tübingen in 1985. Armenian authors such as Avedis Hadjian have also studied the fate of people of Armenian descent in Turkey over the last two decades. A. Hadjian, a descendant of genocide survivors from Zeytun, was born in Aleppo and grew up in Buenos Aires; he currently lives as a journalist in New York and Venice. His extensive and often perilous expeditions to the historical Armenian settlement area in western Armenia, to Cilicia and the Pontos coast were undertaken to meet the descendants of Armenian survivors who had remained in the country. From numerous interviews with people who can trace their ancestry back to at least one Armenian grandparent, anonymized for security reasons, a unique, differentiated and touching inventory of their living conditions during the years 2011 to 2014 emerged. A. Hadjian perceived this period as relatively tolerant.

In Sasun, to which Hadjian devotes the first and longest chapter, people of Armenian descent still remember exactly which of their Kurdish and Arab neighbors committed which crimes in 1915, and which tribes 'only' robbed and plundered. "We know each other," is how an Armenian-born Sasun resident summarizes the situation. The greed of their Muslim neighbors played and still plays a central role in the persecution of even Islamized Armenians. Blood feuds among Kurdish tribes over the plundering of Armenian deportees lasted until the 1980s.[7] Until the 1990s, there was a widespread belief throughout Anatolia that Muslim majorities (including Sunni Zazas)[8] had a right to all the property of the Armenians – silver, women, lives – as spoils of war.[9]

[6] Gstrein, op. cit.
[7] Hadjian, op. cit., p. 65
[8] Hadjian, op. cit., p. 123
[9] Hadjian, op. cit., p. 129

It is tempting to compare these earlier findings with the results of Kazım Gündoğan. The film director, who comes from Dersim, belongs to the Kurdish Alevi community and conducted 72 interviews with people of Armenian descent from Dersim and twelve interviews with Dersim Alevis in the 2010s. His collection has already been published in three editions in Turkey since 2022.[10] There is clearly a great deal of interest there, presumably particularly in the Alevi community. Unlike the interviewees of A. Hadjian, who remained anonymous, most of K. Gündogan's interviewees gave their full names.

A regional overview

The circumstances under which Christians in the Ottoman Empire were forced to convert to Islam varied considerably from region to region. While the Islamized Greek Orthodox Christians in the Pontos region retained their Greek language, the opposite was true in the neighboring region of Cappadocia to the south. Grigorios Faruk Güney, who is a German resident of Cappadocian Greek origin, analyzed the situation as follows: "The history of the Cappadocian Greeks can be divided into three different paths. The first group preserved their language, culture, and faith despite all oppression but was expelled to Greece during the population exchange [of 1923].

The second group, the Karamanlides, also known as 'Karamanlılar', lost their Greek language and instead spoke Turkish, but they preserved their culture, faith, and the Greek alphabet. The Karamanlides accepted the language decree of Karamanoğlu Mehmet Bey, making them a unique group among the Cappadocian Greeks. This decree from 1277 led to a change in their language and marked the beginning of an assimilation process in Anatolia that spanned centuries. This group, too, was expelled to Greece.

The last group, to which my family [the Galatades] belongs, experienced deep assimilation. These people mostly lost their language but continued to live their culture in secret while becoming Islamized. According to my research, my village was assimilated between the 16th and 18th centuries when Turks were deliberately resettled there, while this process had already taken deep root in Anatolian society. Therefore, they were exempted from the population exchange and remained in their homeland of Cappadocia, as they were considered fully 'Turkified'.

Their identity survived, albeit under difficult conditions. The Scottish historian and cartographer John Pinkerton reported as early as 1817: '…the cruel persecutions of their Mahomedan masters have been the cause of their present degraded state of ignorance, even in regard to their native tongue; for that there was a time when their Turkish masters strictly prohibited the Greeks in Asia Minor even from speaking the Greek language among themselves, and that they cut out the tongues of some, and punished others with death, who dared to disobey this

[10] Gündoğan, Kazım. *Alevileş(tiril)miş Ermeniler* [Alevized Armenians]. Istanbul: Ayrıntı Yayınlar, 2022.

their barbarous command. It is an indisputable fact, that the language of their oppressors has long since almost universally prevailed, and that in a great part of Anatolia even the public worship of the Greeks is now performed in the Turkish tongue…'

This deep connection to my roots enabled me to explore my family's history and rediscover my identity. My grandfather, who passed away in 2022, was the last in our family to speak Cappadocian Greek. I carry this awareness with great gratitude, and after two years of intense catechumenate, I was baptized Greek Orthodox in the same year, in line with the heritage of my ancestors. Many Greeks of Anatolian descent share life paths similar to those of my family. Their identities were suppressed or even lost due to systematic assimilation. While some have today accepted the identity imposed by the Turkish state, others live with the awareness of their true identity. This conflict has also left deep marks on my family and highlights the long-lasting effects of the systematic assimilation policies that began with the language decree in the Seljuk Empire, continued with oppression, exile, and massacres in the Ottoman Empire, and are still carried on today by the Turkish state."[11]

The case of the Hamshen Armenians is yet another example of ethnicity beyond the traditional religious component. This isolated Armenian community in a non-Armenian – Laz and Greek – environment goes back to the late 8th century when a part of the Armenian nobility rebelled against the harsh treatment by the Arab invaders and subsequently had to emigrate, including the Amatowni leader prince Šabowh Amatowni (Shabuh Amatuni), his son Hamam and 12,000 followers. They were given the town of Tambur in the mountains south of Rhizaion (Rize in Turkish), where they founded a new principality in the Byzantium-controlled mountains of Pontos. Tambur was then burnt by Hamam's brother-in-law, the Georgian prince Vašdean, and the new city that was reconstructed at the same place was called Hamamashen ('Built by Hamam') after Hamam Amatowni.

Ottoman records show that Hamshen Armenians remained overwhelmingly Christian until the late 1620s. Islamization seems to have taken place gradually, mainly as a result of the need for equality with Laz Muslim neighbours, the desire to avoid the oppressive taxation of non-Muslims, increasing Ottoman intolerance of non-Muslims in a period of weakness for the Ottoman Empire, and anarchy caused by local semi-autonomous Muslim rulers, or 'valley lords' (*dere-beys*). Islam took root in the coastal areas first, and then advanced to the highlands. Emigration of Armenians also took place during this period of pressure, from the 1630s to the 1850s, though fugitives who fled to other parts of the Pontos were still often forced to convert to Islam.

Conversion in Hamshen led to divided families, in which typically house-bound mothers persevered with Christianity, while men with their more frequent external

[11] Güney, Grigorios Faruk. "My Story". https://virtual-genocide-memorial.de/region/the-black-sea-marmara-and-aegean-littorals-eastern-thrace-and-central-anatolia/konya-vilayet-province/?searchedfor=Karamanlides

contacts became Muslim. In addition, there emerged a segment of crypto-Christians called *gesges* (in Armenian 'kes-kes' - half-half). These Hamshen Armenians privately kept practicing various Christian and pre-Christian customs, in particular the custom of popular pre-Christian feast days such as *Vardavar*[12], even sometimes including their attendance of church services. In difference to Pontos Greek crypto-Christians[13], who still have a visible presence in the region and beyond, the Hamshen crypto-Christians had disappeared by the end of the 19th century, for two reasons: During the liberal Ottoman *Tanzimat* (reform) period (1839-1876) with its proclamation of religious equality some Muslim Hamshenlis felt encouraged to revert. Reversion to Christianity, however, caused intensified Muslim mission and led to the opening of Turkish schools in the area and increased linguistic Turkification.

Relations between Muslim *Hemşinliler* and Christian Armenians in the region were sometimes uneven. In Khodorchur, the neighbouring area in the south, Muslims of Hamshen were hired by the Catholic Armenians as guides for travellers, guards, and seasonal workers. Despite these generally friendly relations, some Hamshen Muslims who engaged in banditry also periodically attacked the Khodorchur Catholic Armenians. During the genocide of 1915, some *Hemşinliler* and other Muslims of Armenian descent used the opportunity to rob their Christian Armenian neighbours and take over their properties. The last Christian Armenian village in Hamshen, Eghiovit (Elevit), was destroyed, with its population deported and killed. After the First World War, Khodorchur was partially repopulated by *Hemşinliler*. In Hopa and more particularly in Karadere Valley and regions closer to Trabzon, Islamised Armenians helped Christians instead of robbing them.

In public, many *Hemşinliler* reject an Armenian origin, and some even insist they were descended from Turks from Central Asia who allegedly founded the 'Gregorian' (Armenian-Apostolic) denomination of Christianity. They resent Lazes and others who call them Armenians. This may be a result of the experience of persecution and destruction during and after WW1, when some Muslim *Hemşinliler* were mistaken for Armenians because of their Armenian language and killed.

Unlike Armenian converts in other regions, there were no recorded instances of reversion to Christianity among the Islamized Armenians and Greeks of Hamshen or Pontos during the Russian occupation of the area from 1916 to 1918. But abroad Christian Hamshenlis can be found, in particular in the Krasnodar region of the Russian Federation and in Abkhazia, where nearly all Hamshen Armenians adhere

[12] Originally celebrated in veneration of the Southern Armenian goddess Astġik ["Little Star"], her feast day *Vardavar* ('rose glow') transformed through Christianization into the celebration of the Transfiguration of Christ. Astġik shares several features with the Greek goddesses of love and hunting, Aphrodite and Artemis.

[13] Fotiadis, Konstantinos. *Die Islamisierung Kleinasiens und die Kryptochristen des Pontos* [The Islamization of Asia Minor and the crypto-Christians of Pontos; in German]. Tübingen 1985 [Doctoral thesis].

to the Armenian Apostolic Church. Their presence in Abkhazia goes back to Tsarist nationalities and religious policies of the 19th century, when after the successful oppression of Northern Caucasian resistance to Russian conquest during 1864-1878, the Russian Empire tried to alter the ethnic and religious composition of the population by increasing the Christian share. While most Muslim Abkhazians and other Northern Caucasian ethnic groups were expelled and fled their destroyed villages during the *muhajiroba*[14], seeking refuge in the neighbouring Ottoman Empire as the self-proclaimed protector of Russian Muslims, Russia transferred Ottoman Christians – Pontos Greeks and Hamshen Armenians – from the southern Black Sea region to Abkhazia, with the result that the Abkhazian titular nation found itself in a minority position already one hundred years after the Russian conquest of Abkhazia 1810-1829.

The case of the Christian Hamshenlis of Abkhazia is indicative for the competition of self-identifiers in the Hamshenlis' identity: Hamshen can be used as a synonym for all Muslims from a certain region, even without the notion of Armenianness, or as a synonym for Islamized Armenians from this particular area, or as a synonym for all ethnic Armenians from Hamshen, not regarding their religious affiliation. There is also the option of identifying the Hamshenlis as an ethnos in its own right, as the website *Hamshenian Forum* suggests.[15]

The current Armenian interest in the Hamshen ethnos or sub-ethnos seems to be caused by the specifics of this ethno-religious group. In its understanding as a regional Armenian identity of the Black Sea Region the Hamshen case not only questions any limitation of Armenianness to the religious constituent of identity, but has the 'modern' capacity to bridge the traditional gulf between Muslim and Christian identities.

The Case of Dersim

The situation of the Armenians in Dersim differs from that in all the aforementioned regions – Sasun, Pontos, Cappadocia, Hamshen – in the extent to which the Armenians there were deprived of their individual and collective identity. This conclusion seems to contradict the fact that Dersim was considered a place of refuge for persecuted Armenians for centuries and especially in 1915. However, this conclusion is understandable when one considers the effects of the repeated genocide and continued violence that Armenians in this region

[14] From Ottoman Turkish 'muhajir' (a religious refugee) and the Georgian suffix –oba for abstract nouns. The massive flight of Muslim Caucasians was caused by Russian war crimes that some authors qualify as genocide. The subsequent difficulties of Northern Caucasian refugees to survive as an ethnic group in the Ottoman Empire increased the refugees' anti-Christian position. In future anti-Christian persecutions and massacres, Ottoman authorities took these anti-Christian sentiments into their calculations, making the belligerent Northern Caucasians – generally known as 'Circassians' – their all too willing executioners.

[15] Compare the website Hamshenian Forum (in English, Russian, Turkish, Armenian and Hamshen Armenian): http://www.hamshen.org/forum/.

experienced in 1915/16, as well as in 1938 and during their nine-year deportation until 1947.

The name Dersim first appeared as the official name of an Ottoman administrative unit in 1847. Dersim – called Desim until 1867 – is geographically divided into an eastern and a western part, or a flat and a mountainous part (Lower and Upper Dersim, the latter approx. 8,000-10,000 square kilometers). East Dersim consisted of the Ottoman districts (*kazas*) of Hozat, Çemişgezek, Pertek, Ovacık and Kemah, while West Dersim consisted of the *kazas* of Medzkert (Mazgirt), Kiğı, Çarsancak (formerly Peri, now Akpazar), Kızılkilise (Nazımiye) and Kuziçan (Pülümür). Since 1847 or 1848, Dersim formed the *sancak* of Dersim or Hozat, with the administrative center of the same name. In 1867, the districts of Çarsancak, Ovacık, Mazgirt and Kuziçan were annexed to the *sancak* of Erzincan in the province of Erzurum. The remaining districts formed an independent province (*vilayet*) for almost ten years, from 1879 to 1888, before being downgraded to the status of a *sancak* together with the nine *kazas* of Çarsancak, Mazgirt, Kızılkilise, Kuziçan, Ovacık, Hozat, Pertek, Çemişgezek and Pah (pronounced Pakh) and placed under the province of Mamuret-ül-Aziz (Kharberd, Harput; now Elazığ). In the following years, the number of *kazas* was reduced to six.

In the 8th and 7th centuries BC, the later Dersim belonged to the Kingdom of Urartu, whose center of power was located at Lake Van. In ancient times and in the early Middle Ages, Dersim became part of the province of Dzopk (Ծոփք; Greek Sophene, Latin Sophena) of the ancient Armenian kingdom (Medz Hayk or Great Armenia) and the Roman Empire (Armenia Maior – Greater Armenia).

Sophene was detached from Greater Armenia by Rome several times. In 66 BC, Pompey handed over Sophene to Tigran the Younger after he had defeated his father Tigran the Great, and then transferred it to Ariobarzanes I of Cappadocia. Around 54, the Romans installed Sohaemus of Emesa as king of Sophene. After that, Sophene fell under Armenian control again, but in 298 it came under Roman control for good. Sophene became a province of the Roman Empire with the capital Amida (present-day Diyarbakır) and in 530 it was incorporated into the Eastern Roman province of Armenia IV (›the Fourth Armenia‹).

The toponym Çemişgezek (Armenian: Չմշկածաձ - Čmškacag) indicates the close connection of Dzopk/Sophene with the Byzantine Empire. It is derived from the name of the Byzantine general and emperor of Armenian descent, Hovhannes Chmshkik (c. 925-976; reigned 969-976; Հովհաննես Չմշկիկ; Grk: Ἰωάννης ὁ Τζιμισκής – Ioannis I Tsimiskes), who was born there. The site was previously known as Hierapolis or Hieropolis ('holy city').

Until the 15th century, the area around Çemişgezek was densely populated and well maintained. After the Ottoman conquest in 1474, however, which involved the mass imprisonment of the inhabitants, the site was transformed into an insignificant village for centuries.

Under Ottoman rule, non-Muslims became legally disadvantaged subjects. “In the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state, non-Muslims were tolerated, but at the price of a subordinate status that excluded them from, among other things, ruling duties and military service. Thus, the minority status of the Armenians was accompanied by both a greater vulnerability and defenselessness, as well as a more pronounced social dynamism and spirit of optimism in the era of modernizing reforms, which was often observed among underprivileged minorities.”[16]

A region of ethnic and religious diversity: Turks, Kurds, Armenians

Dersim has been a multi-ethnic and multi-religious region for centuries. From the 14th century onwards, Kurds began immigrating from the Iranian highlands, and their numbers increased under Ottoman rule. According to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 16,657 Armenians lived in the *sancak* of Dersim before the First World War, “alongside two groups that together formed the majority – to the south and southeast, the Seyd Hasan tribe, supposed to have come from Persian Khorasan, and in the rest of the *sancak*, in the most inaccessible regions, the ‘Dersimlis’. Albeit partially Turkified, both groups, especially the Dersimlis, had elaborated a very particular religious syncretism under various influences (...).”[17]

Since the 16th century, the Alevi population of Dersim became known as Kizilbashes (Turkish: *Kızılbaş* – ‘redhead’). The Turkish loan translation of the Iranian term 'Surh-i Ser' refers to the red headgear worn by the male followers of the Iranian Safavid dynasty since the time of Shah (Sheikh) Haydar Safavi. The Kizilbashes of Dersim do not practice Islamic prayer (Namaz), do not visit mosques, do not make the pilgrimage to Mecca and do not fast in the month of Ramadan.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of the inhabitants of Dersim spoke two Iranian languages: Zazaki or Dımılki (also Kırmanc(k)i) and Kurmanci (pronounced: Kurmanji), which is also referred to as Northern Kurdish. Dımılki/Zazaki/Kırmanci belongs to the Northwest Iranian language group. Zazaki is most closely related to the extinct Parthian language. UNESCO’s World Atlas of Languages (WAL) lists Zazaki and Western Armenian as ‘potentially vulnerable’ languages in present-day Türkiye[18], whereas Greek is listed as ‘safe’ and ‘official minority languages’, as is Western Armenian despite its vulnerability.[19]

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[16] Hartmann, Elke. „Armenisches Leben im Osmanischen Reich vor 1915: Zwischen Hoffnung und Gefährdung“. https://www.bpb.de/themen/zeit-kulturgeschichte/genozid-an-den-armeniern/218100/armenisches-leben-im-osmanischen-reich-vor-1915/

[17] Kévorkian, Raymond. *The Armenian Genocide: A Complete History*. London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011, op. cit., p. 421

[18] UNESCO WAL: “Zaza in Türkiye”. https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/turkiye/languages/zaza

[19] UNESCO WAL: „Western Armenian in Türkiye“. https://en.wal.unesco.org/countries/turkiye/languages/western-armenian

At the beginning of the 20th century, Europeans and Ottomans, as well as many of those affected, almost always referred to the non-Turkish and non-Armenian population of Dersim as Kurds, usually without distinguishing between Sunni and Alevi Kurds. Today, many Alevi speakers of Kırmancki reject the assignment to the Kurds, similarly to how in Iranian studies Kırmancki was recognized as an independent language and not just as a Kurdish dialect.

As an orally transmitted religion, Alevism, in contrast to the 'book religions' (Judaism, Christianity), had no defined position in the Ottoman legal system. It was not assigned to Islam, nor to the tolerated 'book religions'. Today, many Alevi speakers of Zazaki or Kırmanci consider themselves to be a separate ethnic group. The question of whether Alevism is part of Islam remains open. About half a million Alevites live in Germany, 95 percent of whom come from Turkey. In December 2022, the Alevites were also granted the status of a public corporation in the state of Berlin, thus being accorded the same legal status as the other faiths (Protestant, Jewish, Catholic).

In the north of Dersim, the Dımılı belong to the Alevi or Kizilbash religious community, while in the southern half they follow Sunni Islam, as do the Kurds and Turks. Their faith is officially referred to as *Raa Haq* in Kırmancki, as the *path to truth (the path of God).* The Alevi Dımılı refuse to be classified as Muslims. They emphasize the autonomy of their orally transmitted syncretic beliefs, which include elements of nature religion, Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism and even shamanism. The nature-religious components of Dersim Alevism include the worship of sacred natural sites ("jiares", in Turkish "ziyaret") such as the Munzur River or a mountain near the village of Qil in Nazımiye, which symbolizes Duzgin Baba (Zazaki: Duzgin Baba or dial. Duzgın Bawa, also Kemerê Duzgını "the rock of Duzgın", Kurdish: Duzgin Babaı) . People believe that Duzgin Baba disappeared at the summit of this mountain, known in Zazaki as Kemerê Duzgını (the Rock of Duzgın), Bimbarek (sacred) or Kemerê Bımbareki (sacred rock). According to local legends, Baba Duzgin is the son of Sayyid Kures/Kureş, an ancestor of the Kureşan[20] community, and his real name is not Duzgın but Haydar or Shah Haydar (Zazaki: Sa Heyder). These sacred natural sites connect the *Raa Haq* with pre-Christian beliefs of the Armenians.

According to numerous Armenian sources, the central ancient shrines of the pre-Christian Armenian religion, which were dedicated to the gods Aramazd, Anahit and Mihr/Mher, were located in the north of Dersim. Christianity probably took over the most important places of worship, as in the case of the Armenian Surb Karapet Church (Church of St. John the Baptist; 10th century -1930s) in Halvor, which was blown up in the 1930s and was a place of pilgrimage for both Armenian Christians and Alevis.

[20] Also Koreyşan/Horeysan/Horasan, i. e. Khorasan in Persia as the origin of the Dersim Alevis.

The ruins of Halvori Vank (Trk: Venk)

Religious practices also form a common cultural heritage between the Alevis and Armenians of Dersim, such as the Kalandar or Kalanda New Year (from Latin calendae or the first day of the month), which is widespread from Greece to Georgia. The first day of the lunar calendar-based Kalandar corresponds to 14 January according to the Gregorian calendar. The New Year is also celebrated on the night of the 13th to the 14th of January. In the Black Sea region, especially in the provinces of Trabzon and Gümüşhane, this night has a special significance. Traditionally, children go out on this night and visit the houses of those who reward them for their singing with gifts. In Armenian folklore, the New Year was adopted under the name Kağant and was taken over by the Dersim Kurds and some Zaza tribes under the term ‘gağan(t)’ (gaxan) and celebrated with similar entertainment and ceremonies. It is believed that the person who enters the house

on the first day of the Kalandar month brings good luck.[21] Members of the *Raa Haq* faith – Alevi Kurds as well as Alevized Armenians in Dersim – celebrate the three-day *Gaxan* in different ways in different regions between December 10 and January 12 of the following year, with a three-day fast. In the faith of *Raa Haq*, the Islamic saint Xızır (Hızır; Arab. al-Khidr – "the Green"), as the embodiment of good and of cyclically renewing nature, fulfills the same task as the Armenian Pap(uk) Kaġand during the Gaxan festival. Papuk Kaġand is a figure who preserves and transmits national values and the traditional ritual system to future generations. He is accompanied by the twelve *Khlvliks* (խլվլիկ – "cunning") and *Arales*. Although Papuk Kağand, who visited children with his sleigh, did not give them any presents, he did give them seven pieces of advice for the New Year: mutual respect, peace, honesty, wisdom, hard work, modesty and contentment. Papuk Kağand is related to the historical church leader Catholicos Sahak Partev (c. 350 – c. 438), who, according to tradition, appeared with a shepherd's or bishop's staff and a sheepskin cloak.

The ethnographer Hranoush Kharatyan assumes a mutual religious influence between Armenians and Alevis in Dersim: "The slow, ongoing process of Armenian Alevization had resulted in Armenians and Alevis from Dersim sharing a very similar way of life. Alevized Armenians continued to practice many pre-Christian and even Christian rites, with Dersim 'Alevism' synthesizing many Christian and purely Armenian elements. Traditional Alevi oral histories tell the story of the origins of the Alevis and Armenians of Dersim, as well as their socio-religious past. Thus, most of the heroes in the 'massalanèr' stories of the Alevis of Dersim are borrowed from the local 'Armenian keshish [Trk: keşiş; 'Monk']' and the foreign 'baba', while the places of worship, whether the churches of St. George ('Hazrèt illssa', 'Kheder élia') and Saint -Serge ('Hazrèt Kheder'), or the former places of worship of Anahit and 'Ana [Mother] Fatima', the heir to Anahit's functions, and even Mesrop Mashtots ('Masroup') etc., play diverse roles in the historical past of the Dersim people."[22]

Like Kurdish and Kırmancki/Zazaki, Armenian belongs to the large Indo-European language family, or rather to its subgroup of *satem* languages. According to Armenian tradition, King Trdat III (the Great) declared Christianity the state religion in 301, making the Armenian Apostolic Church one of the oldest churches. Over the centuries of foreign rule, the church has become a central source of Armenian identity and a unifying force, especially in the Armenian diaspora, which now extends across the globe.

[21] Kalendar, https://tr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kalandar

[22] Kharatyan, Hranoush. „La recherche identitaire au Dersim Partie 2 : les Arméniens alévisés du Dersim." *Repair: Plateforme Arméno-Turque*, June 25, 2014; translated from French into English by T. Hofmann

Tribal society

In areas such as Dersim that eluded the control of the central state authority, regional specifics play a significant role. In Dersim, these included, above all, tribal structures. Alevism is likewise not based on an egalitarian system, but on a caste system of rank-and-file believers and their spiritual leaders (pirs, rehbers). Probably under the influence of the Kurdish tribal system, Armenian society in Dersim also saw the formation of clans and tribes, which was otherwise unusual for Armenians. In his travelogue 'Dersim', published in Tiflis in 1900[23], the Armenian author Andranik Yeritsian reported on the Armenian tribe of the Mirakian, who lived in harmony with the Alevis of central or mountainous Dersim. A. Yeritsian gives the number of Mirakian tribesmen as 8,000. They spoke a special dialect and are considered descendants of the Mamikonian noble family, famous in Armenian history. Together with the Kizilbash, they were traditionally considered the guardians of the Halvor sanctuary. The Mirakian tribe had three thousand men under arms when they took part in the Dersimis' battles against the Ottoman army.[24] When Reşid Pasha advanced with a force of 40,000 in 1834, the Mirakians played a prominent role in defending Dersim.

But not all the inhabitants of Dersim were tribesmen (aşiret), neither among the Christian Armenians nor among the Muslim or Alevi Kurds and Zazas. “Many farmers, by no means only Armenians, but also the Kurdish villagers, lived as subordinates (*maraba*) of their landlords in a personal relationship of dependency that in many aspects came close to serfdom, but at the same time also placed them under the protection of their *beys* (tribal leaders or urban notables). The *beys'* position of power was based on the institution of tax farming. In some cases, they controlled not only individual villages, but entire regions."[25]

The ambivalent character of the Dersim tribal system is clearly expressed in the interviews conducted by K. Gündoğan with Alevized descendants of Armenian genocide survivors. The Dersim Armenians and those who fled to Dersim in 1915 submitted to the local landlords (Aghas, Turkish Ağa) at the expense of their social, economic and cultural bondage or dependence: Alevization or Islamization with simultaneous linguistic assimilation and services or taxes for their protectors, who, among other things, married them at their own discretion.

The protection granted to those threatened with death was, as their descendants very clearly recognized, not out of affection but out of self-interest, because Armenians were prized craftsmen and farmers, not only in Dersim. Aida (Ayten) Güneş, born in 1960, for example, states in her interview: about her grandfather: “Of course the agha (landowner or landlord) did not release him, but married him off and had him and his wife work for him as slaves... They took Armenian

[23] French edition: Antranik: *Dersim: carnets de voyage chez les Kizilbaches et les Mirakian 1888 & 1895*. Paris: Société bibliophilique Ani, 2017; Turkish editions were published in 2018 and 2022 under the title *Dersim Seyhatnamesi*.
[24] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 421
[25] Ibid.

children under their 'protection', protected them, adopted them, but at the same time they used them as serfs; that too is a fact... Indeed, they often adopted the children of wealthy families at that time, because 'the more children of wealthy families you take in, the more prosperous you will be in the future'."[26]

Musa Teyhani (born 1954) mentions in his interview that sexual assault of Armenian women was part of this serfdom system: "First they expelled the Armenians and enslaved the rest (i. e. us)... They kept us as *marabas*, as slaves who took care of their horses, stables and work... Not because they liked us, but because they needed laborers... It is bitter to say this, but when the aghas wanted, they took the family and the wives of the marabas, used them, then returned them or left them... So, the Armenians had nothing...«

Şengül Gündoğdu Devletli explained: "My late father used to say sadly, 'We have become serfs on our own land.' Because this land once belonged to the Armenians. They took the land that belonged to them. They bought the fields of the Armenians, that is, the land of their ancestors. There were many land struggles. In these matters, the state was on the side of the Alevis. It was not in a position to support an Armenian..."

Countervailing tendencies only emerged with the pro-communist and revolutionary movements of the 1970s, when young people in Dersim in particular recognized and condemned the tribal system as backward and repressive. The 1980 coup d'état ended this development through the political persecution of the revolutionaries.

A safe haven in Dersim?

Until the 1870s, Dersim was a semi-autonomous province of the Ottoman Empire, consisting of a flat area and a forested, almost 2,000-metre-high mountain range. While the plains were increasingly brought under the control of the Ottoman state in the 19th century, the Dersimis were able to defend their independence into the 20th century in their almost inaccessible mountain stronghold.

From non-Armenian historical sources, we know that from the 17th century Armenians from Bingöl, Sebastia (Sivas), Yerznka (Erzincan), and Kharberd (Harput) fled Turkish pressure and sought refuge in Dersim, where some converted to Alevism. Dersim children in turn attended Armenian schools.

Statements about the relations between the Dersim Alevis and the Armenians, especially with regard to the behavior of the Alevis during the genocide of 1915, are contradictory. In general, their relations are considered friendly, since the majority of the Dersimis neither joined the *Hamidiye* cavalry murder squads or

[26] This refers to the fact that when an Armenian woman was 'adopted' or married, her Muslim stepparents or husband became the legal owners of the inheritance or possessions of the child or wife. It did not matter whether the person in question had consented to the adoption or marriage. - Gündoğan, Kazım: Alevileş(tiril)miş Ermeniler: Dersimli Ermeniler-2; "Biz İsa'ya Tabiyiz, Ali'ye Mecburuz". Istanbul: Arıntı, 2022, p. 52f.

their successors, the *Azadi* militias, nor did they take part in the Kemalist war of independence against the last indigenous Christians. During World War I, between 10,000[27] and 40,000[28] Armenian deportees from Erzincan and other places probably owed their lives to the intervention of Alevi Dersimis, even though their help, especially at the beginning of the deportation, was mostly self-serving; many Dersimis allowed themselves to be generously paid for their escape assistance, especially since the presence of so many refugees in Dersim triggered a famine.[29]

Henry R. Riggs, an American missionary working in Harput, wrote about the flourishing escape business in Dersim in his memoirs, which were written close to the events:

"After the first secret and tentative attempts had been made, both the Kurds and the Armenians took courage and the business grew rapidly. With the intermittent vigilance of the gendarmes, traffic increased and expenses decreased. Those who had paid such high sums at first later regretted not waiting for the price to drop to five dollars per person over time – and later some were taken for free when the Kurds were convinced that they were indeed destitute. After the occupation of Erzingian by the Russians, the Armenians of Erzingian made a kind of agreement with the Kurds, according to which all refugees from that city would be transported free of charge, with the result that practically all of them left Harpoot and returned to their hometown. (....)

Throughout the period I am writing about, from the summer of 1915 to the spring of 1917, the Dersim Kurds were actively and faithfully helping to transport the Armenians to Russia."[30]

The predominantly positive role played by the tribes in Dersim before and during the First World War sometimes obscures the fact that in Dersim, too, Armenians suffered at the hands of the arbitrary semi-autonomous regional tribal leaders, without the Ottoman state intervening to protect its Christian subjects. In the *Kaza* Çarsancak (today's Akpazar, formerly Peri between Harput and Tunceli), for example, local 'Kurdish groups' frequently confiscated Armenian property. Some of the Alevi tribes, who were considered 'Kurds' of Dersim, did not take part in the massacres of Armenians.[31] But the statements are contradictory: "However, it is not superfluous to add that many cases were recorded at the time when a number of Kurdish and Zaza tribes from Dersim were collaborating with the

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[27] Kévorkian, op. cit., 421; 15:000 according to Gerçek, Burçin: "Celal Bey ve diğerleri, interview with Raymond Kévorkian", *Radikal Newspaper*, 26.02. 2006; quoted from: ibid., "Report on Turks who reached out to Armenians in 1915", p. 60, footnote 232: 20,000 according to Marchand, Laure; Perrier, Guillaume. *Turkey and the Armenian Ghost.* Montreal & Kingston; London; Ithaca: McGill-Queen's University, 2015, p. 64.

[28] Virabian, Ashkhen. "Armenian Identity Zazas (Part Two)". *Westerarmeniatv*, 20 March 2023, https://westernarmeniatv.com/en/society_en/armenian-identity-zazas-part-two/

[29] Gerçek, op. cit., p. 60

[30] Riggs, Henry H. *Days of Tragedy in Armenia: Personal Experiences in Harpoot, 1915-1917.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Gomidas Institute, 1996, pp. 113, 116.

[31] Yerevanian, G.A.: *History of Armenian Charsandjak.* Peirut [Beirut], 1956, p. 65.

Ottoman authorities and participating in the massacre of Armenians and the looting of their property. Testimony of treachery by the Zaza tribes of Dersim has also been preserved."[32]

In the summer of 1918, a contemporary observer, the Protestant pastor and military chaplain Siegfried Graf von Lüttichau, also emphasized the ambivalent character of Dersim as a place of refuge and rescue: "It is interesting that in the area of the Dersim Kurds not only the Armenians were spared, who were already living there in a kind of serfdom, but that it was precisely this Kurdish tribe that led large groups of Armenians safely through its territory and over the Russian border, certainly not out of love for the Christians, but out of hatred for the Turks. Unfortunately, this willingness to help has now come to an end, as the Dersim no longer have the Russians covering their rear and, due to the diplomatic and extremely clever actions of the last commander on the Caucasus front, Izzet Pasha, they are once again obedient to the Turkish government. Their own sense of insecurity and fear of the notorious punitive expeditions that had been carried out against them in the past led them to hand over all Armenians who were still hiding from them, on the orders of the Ottoman government. This, of course, immediately led to executions. About 500 women and children from the Dersim region are in Mezré. The people of Dersim are not the only ones who have remained loyal to the persecuted. In the wild mountains between Malatia and Urfa, for example, a Kurdish brigand named Bozo ruled for a long time. Whenever he had the opportunity, he stripped Turkish officers and soldiers of their clothes and in this way supported Armenian families."[33]

Genocide in Dersim

It is difficult to make a consistent statement about the course of the genocide carried out by the C.U.P. regime in Dersim, as it appears to have been carried out under diverse power circumstances and, above all, in dependence on the local tribal leaders. As R. Kévorkian suggested, there is an obvious discrepancy in terms of numbers and facts between the *de facto* deportation in Dersim and the reports submitted to Constantinople. Instead, the following is a list of the special features of the four *kazas* mainly inhabited by Armenians:

Kaza Çarsancak

The *kaza* Çarsancak had the largest Armenian population in Dersim. According to the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 7,940 Armenians lived in 43 villages in the *kaza* on the eve of the First World War, where they maintained 51 churches, 15 monasteries and 23 schools for 1,114 children.[34] The majority of the population

[32] Virabian, op. cit.
[33] „Deutsche Gesandtschaft Konstantinopel an Auswärtiges Amt," *Armenocide.net*, October 18, 1918, http://www.armenocide.net/armenocide/armgende.nsf/$$AllDocs/1918-10-18-DE-001
[34] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 276.

worked in agriculture. They grew wheat, barley, rye, lentils, peas, beans, flax, etc. In *kaza* Çarsancak, there are deposits of salt, borax and oil.

"In 1914, 1,763 Armenians lived in Peri [Berri], the administrative center of the Çarsancak *Kaza*, and about 6,200 in 42 villages in the *Kaza*. The *Kaymakam*, Ali Rıza, was in office from March 2 to July 15, 1915. He was therefore present when the first massacres took place in Pertag/Pertak [Բերդակ - Berdak], near the ferry dock that connected Harput with Dersim across the Euphrates. In this *kaza*, the official number of deportees, 6,537, seems as unlikely as the census figures cited above when one considers the number of conscripts in the *amele taburis* [forced labor battalions] and the number of people who were able to retreat to the mountainous areas of Dersim.[35]

Kaza Çemişgezek

According to the statistics of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 4,494 Armenians lived in 22 villages of the *kaza* on the eve of the First World War, maintaining 19 churches, two monasteries and 17 schools for 729 children.[36] At the beginning of the 20th century, there were two Armenian schools in the district capital Çemişgezek, Mamikonian and Partjan, which taught around 200 students.

On 1 May 1915, raids began in Çemişgezek for weapons in the Armenian schools, the shops of the bazaar and the homes of officials; a day later, about a hundred people were arrested. The torture they were subjected to was said to be more cruel than anywhere else – some men were nailed to the wall – and lasted until 20 June, when the *Kaymakam*, the district chief, announced that the prisoners would be transferred to Mezere, the twin capital of the province, to be tried there.

On 1 July 1915, the town crier of Çemişgezek read out the deportation order. The following day, one thousand Armenians were forced to leave; beforehand, some children and young women had been abducted from Turkish families. The convoy took four days to reach Arapgir, and three days later it continued on to Harput. Although this route normally takes only a day and a half, it took three weeks this time because the deportees were forced to take huge, arbitrary detours. From Mezere, the convoy continued to Diyarbekir via Hanlı Han, where the male deportees aged 10 to 15 and 40 to 70 were taken out of the convoy and housed in a caravanserai. When the rest of the convoy reached Ergani [Argana] Maden, they saw hundreds of corpses rotting on the banks of the Euphrates. Six weeks later they reached Siverek, where the deportees from Çemişgezek were robbed and some of them massacred. In Urfa, the convoy was divided into two parts to continue to Suruc and Rakka respectively. After passing through the transit camps of Mumbuc and Bab, only 150 women from Çemişgezek reached the transit camp in Aleppo.

In the *kaza* of Çemişgezek, the village of Garmrig [Karmrik] was particularly affected by the search for weapons that took place there on 19 June 1915. On 4

[35] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 422.
[36] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 276.

July 1915, 200 men from Garmrig and the surrounding villages were arrested and executed in the following days by gendarmes and units of the special organization; at the same time, all boys under the age of ten were separated from their families. On 5 July, the women of Garmrig were summoned to the church to register their property before being deported to Urfa. On 10 July 1915, the first convoy of women left the villages of Çemişgezek *kaza* and reached the banks of the Euphrates that same evening, where their guards showed them the blood-stained clothes of their murdered husbands. The convoys from Çemişgezek united in Arapgir. "Some villagers from the *kaza*, especially from the northern villages, managed to escape to the Kurdish areas, where they survived as best they could until spring 1916. They moved on to Erzincan when the Russian army took control of the region."[37]

Kaza Hozat

In the 1880s, Hozat had 150 houses, 30 of which were inhabited by Armenians and the rest by Kurds and Turks. In 1915, there were already 864 houses with 8,640 Armenian inhabitants and 324 houses with 1,944 Kurdish inhabitants.[38] The data of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople differs greatly from this, almost by a factor of 25: according to this, only 2,299 Armenians lived in 16 villages of *Kaza* Hozat on the eve of the World War, 350 of them in the administrative center Hozat (an "ugly village" according to R. Kévorkian) with a total population of "almost 1,000"[39]. They maintained 18 churches (two of them, Surb Prkich / Holy Redeemer and Surb Gevorg / Saint George in the city of Hozat), eleven monasteries and five schools for 150 children.[40] In the administrative center of the *kaza* Hozat, the town of Hozat, there was a college with 70-80 students.

Some of the Armenian population were native, the rest came from Kharberd (Harput), Arapgir, Akn (Eğin) and Çemişgezeg. Of the 1,835 Armenians of the *kaza* Medzkert (Mazgirt), the majority of 1,200 lived in Hozat. The Armenians of Hozat were involved in trade, crafts, agriculture and horticulture. The main occupation of the Kurds was cattle breeding. Wool, carpets and fruit – especially walnuts – from Hozat were also known outside the town's limits. In the 1880s, there were 50 shops and kiosks, several dozen workshops and a market in Hozat.

According to an official report, 1,088 Armenians were deported from the Hozat *kaza*.[41] However, R. Kévorkian doubts the official figures for the deportations from the *kaza*: "In view of the district's geographical location, this seems unlikely. It is

[37] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 423.
[38] ԽՈՋԱԹ (Khozat'). - Արեւմտահայաստանի եւ Արեւմտահայութեան Հարցերու Ուսումնասիրութեան Կեդրոն. 2011/03/11. https://www.arevmdahaiastan.net/am/?p=9092
[39] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 422.
[40] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 276.
[41] Kévorkian, op. cit., p. 422.

more likely that about half of the town's Armenians fell victim to the persecutions, while the other half was able to flee to the mountains of Dersim."[42]

Kaza Mazgirt / Mazgird / Mazkert / Մեձկերտ – Medzkert

The Armenian place name Medzkert (Western Armenian pronunciation: Medzgerd) means 'great fortress' and probably refers to an Urartian fortress. It was destroyed in 837 by the Byzantine emperor Theophilos during his battle for Mesopotamia, along with other fortresses.

According to the statistics of the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, 1,835 Armenians lived in nine villages of the *Kaza* Mazgirt before the First World War and maintained 14 churches, 22 monasteries and two schools for 155 children[43]; however, the majority of the Armenians of Mazgirt - 1,200 - lived in the *kaza* of Hozat, the rest in eight Armenian-Alevi villages: Laswan, Dilan-Oğçe, Tamusdağ, Danaburan, Şorda, Khosengyur/Khushdun, Pakh (Trk. Pah) and Çukur. In the vicinity of these villages were the ruins of 15 medieval monasteries.

According to the official statistics, the entire Armenian population was deported, a total of 1,423 people. R. Kévorkian also suspects a strong discrepancy here between reality and the deportation 'successes' feigned by the local officials: "Above all, the number seems to prove the zeal of those responsible for the deportation in this area; they were undoubtedly more concerned with proving to Istanbul how well they were doing their job than with taking an accurate census."[44]

Kayışoğlu Cliff: site of two massacres (1915, 1938) near the village of Ergen (Author: Annika Törne, 26/05/2012. Source: https://journals.openedition.org/ejts/5099#tocto1n1)

[42] Ibid.
[43] Kévorkian, op. cit., 276.
[44] Kévorkian, op. cit., 422.

Deportations of Kurds in 1916 and 1938

Similar to the rule of the despotic Sultan Abdülhamit II (ruled 1876-1909), who was overthrown by them, the Young Turks treated the Kurds according to their usefulness for the regime's anti-Christian policy, their affiliation to the tribal regiments (formerly *Hamidiye*) and their affiliation to heterodox Muslim sects.

As early as July 1915, rumors were spreading in Dersim that the Ottoman government would annihilate the Kurds immediately after their anti-Armenian campaign. Home Minister «Talaat immediately ordered counter-propaganda to be disseminated. When the Dersimites were indeed deported a year later, they sang lamentations, praying to God for survival and accusing the Germans of deporting them. 869 Talaat immediately ordered counter-propaganda to be disseminated. When the Dersimites were indeed deported a year later, they sang lamentations, praying to God for survival and accusing the Germans of deporting them.»[45]

The historian Hilmar Kaiser summarized the first phase of the deportation of the Kurds as follows: "Some Kurdish tribes and peasants willingly joined the Ottoman troops in slaughtering the Armenians. Others, such as the Kurds in Dersim, resisted and organized the escape of the Armenians to the Russian lines. In response, the Ottoman army ordered the deportation of the Dersim Kurds to the western provinces. However, the deportation of the Dersim Kurds was not an isolated incident. Soon, entire tribal associations such as the Hayderanli were deported to the central plateau of Asia Minor. The reason for this deportation was not the fear of the advancing Russian army. The reason was the Ottoman government's goal of assimilating these Kurdish Muslims into the Turkish population. (...) The Kurds had to stop calling themselves Kurds. The authorities also tried to overcome religious differences, such as the fact that many Kurds belonged to a particular form of Shiism. Local authorities had to provide precise information about the available Armenian property and the ability of certain districts to 'accommodate' Kurds. Thus, the Ottoman Ministry of the Interior used the administrative units that had been set up to organize the extermination of the Armenians to assimilate the Kurds. Although the Kurds were not generally massacred, a large proportion of those deported died of malnutrition and disease, as they often had to pass through the same places where the Armenians had recently been exterminated."[46]

From spring 1916, around 300,000 Kurds were deported from the provinces of Erzurum and Bitlis, initially to the Urfa area (northern Mesopotamia) and westwards to Ayntap and Maraş; in a second phase, the Kurdish deportees were driven to the plateau of the Konya highlands. The German-Swiss missionary Jacob Künzler (1871-1949), an eyewitness of the first phase of the deportations, came to

[45] Üngör, U. U. *Young Turk social engineering : mass violence and the nation state in eastern Turkey, 1913-1950.* 2009. [Thesis, fully internal, Universiteit van Amsterdam], p. 223.
[46] Kaiser, Hilmar. "The Ottoman Government and the End of the Ottoman Social Formation, 1915-1917." 2001. - http://www.hist.net/kieser/aghet/Essays/EssayKaiser.html

the following conclusion in his memoirs *Im Land des Blutes und der Tränen* (In the Land of Blood and Tears, 1921):

"It was the intention of the Young Turks to no longer allow these Kurdish elements to return to their ancestral homeland. They were to gradually be absorbed into Turkishness in Inner Anatolia.

The treatment of these Kurds on their deportation train was very different from that of the Armenians. They were not harmed on the way, no one was allowed to harass them. But the most terrible thing was that the deportation took place in the middle of winter. When a column of Kurds arrived in a Turkish village in the evening, the inhabitants, fearing them, quickly locked their front doors. So, the poor people had to spend the winter night outside in the rain and snow."[47]

The aim of the Kurdish population's dispersal was their assimilation in the interest of the general Turkification program. To this end, tribal leaders and spiritual leaders were separated from their followers by order of the Turkish Ministry of the Interior and settled in small numbers in purely Turkish villages. At the same time, the urban sprawl was also aimed at heterodox faiths, i. e. against Alevis and/or Kizilbashes, and also against the non-Muslim Yazidis.

In 1938, a second deportation of the Dersim population took place, this time in the Republic of Türkiye, which also included the remaining inhabitants of Armenian descent, regardless of whether they had already converted to Alevism or Islam.

K. Gündoğan's interviews show that the approach depended again on local power relations. The methods were similar to those already used by the C.U.P. regime during the First World War: eliticide, i. e. the arrest and destruction of the intellectual and spiritual leadership, followed by massacres and deportations. In some places, the population was rounded up and machine-gunned, while in others the Turkish army "contented itself" with photographing the terrified people and then deporting them. The Turkish central government's primary goal was to smash the tribal system, which was considered pre-modern or backward, and to assert its control over a previously inaccessible and unruly region. The descendants of Armenians who had survived the genocide of 1915 were also victims of this policy. In the deportation area of Western Anatolia, the forcibly resettled people from Dersim were distributed among the villages in order to advance their Turkification and Islamization. Armenians who had not yet been Islamized were urged to have their first and last names Islamized or Turkified, to attend Koran classes and to convert to Islam. The method of demographic sprawl was also adopted from the Young Turks, as was the transportation of deportees in black cattle cars, which became the epitome of the 'Tertele', the 'end of the world', as the 1938 genocide is paraphrased in the Zazaki language.

[47] Künzler, Jacob. *Im Lande des Blutes und der Tränen.* Potsdam: Tempel-Verlag, 1921, p. 79.

The Price to Pay for the Homeland

The experience of a double genocide – in 1915 and 1938 – and justified fears of further persecution silenced the survivors and their descendants for at least two generations. In Turkey, they were referred to as the 'remnants of the sword'. Or as 'uncircumcised' (sünnetsizler), as pagans or non-Muslims (gâvurlar) and most often as *filla*, the Kurdish mutilation of the Arabic word *fallah* (farmer, fellah), which became a term of abuse in the Armenian context and always implies social inferiority, since, like the word *maraba*, it refers to serfdom.

It was only in 1947 that the deported residents of Dersim were allowed to return from their exile or to emigrate. Their property, which had been looted or confiscated in the meantime, was not returned. The price for remaining in their homeland of Dersim was very high: deprivation of civil and human rights, complete self-denial, and cultural and linguistic assimilation were widespread.

The statements of many of K. Gündoğan's interviewees are nevertheless ambivalent: on the one hand, they praise their good neighborly, amicable relations with the Alevi religious community, but on the other hand, many also report experiences of discrimination, of being called 'Armenian scum' or 'unbelievers' (gavurlar) even by their Alevi neighbors, and of being disadvantaged during military service or when applying for jobs. During the Second World War, Armenians and Greeks had to perform their military service in road construction units, called Nafia, and were not allowed to carry weapons. The Nafia soldiers were considered 'foreigners' and wore brown uniforms that visually distinguished them from the 'natives' (Turks, Muslims). Ethnic Turks were spared from this.[48] This discriminatory treatment merely perpetuated the practices introduced by the Young Turks.

Interviewees very often complained that Alevis were not willing to marry off their daughters to fellow believers of Armenian origin. Although the interviewees and their relatives did everything to keep their Armenian descent secret, their environment seemed to be well informed about it. Many children were confronted with the accusation of being 'gavur' through their neighborhood and at school.

Nevertheless, a member of the Armenian Mirakian tribe in Dersim proudly declared in 2013: "We are from here, we did not come from somewhere else... During the coup in the 1980s, they persecuted us a lot. The neighboring villagers always complained about us Armenians. (…) Now we are here and no matter what we are, we are from here. Maybe for 2,000, 3,000, 5,000 years, I don't know... That's why we don't leave our homeland... We have paid a high price. And we don't care about the rest...«

While all of the interviewees consider their Armenian descent to be an unalterable part of their identity, the question remains as to which role their affiliation with the Armenian Apostolic Church plays. Those who perceive Christianity as an integral part of Armenian identity have generally left Dersim,

[48] Gündoğan, op. cit., pp. 195, 241.

where there are no longer any intact places of worship. In Istanbul, it was mainly the Kumkapı district that offered more favorable conditions for the restitution of cultural and religious affiliation or reconversion. However, quite a few interviewees complained bitterly about the lack of understanding on the part of the Istanbul Armenians for the Dersim 'provincials', for their dialect and their ignorance of Armenian-Christian customs. For some, Istanbul was therefore only a stopover on their way abroad, to France, Germany or across the Atlantic to the USA and Australia. Such decisions led to more individual liberties, but at the same time accelerated the process of alienation, because by no means all those born later in the worldwide Armenian diaspora still feel they are Dersimis.

Other interviewees defend the view that you can change your religion, but not your ethnicity. They see themselves as Armenian Alevis, following the "path of truth (of God)". Those who were caught up in the wave of politicization of the 1970s regard themselves as atheists or agnostics, for whom the question of religious affiliation is irrelevant anyway. However, everyone seems to be aware that their attitude and that of their ancestors are not based on independent decisions, but on reactions to avoid extreme violence and humiliation.

Not all people of Armenian descent know the details of their ancestors' fate, who were often afraid to speak out. Hadjian's interviews and biographical portraits document a wide range of attempts at adaptation by people of Armenian descent in Turkey to the local or regional majorities: to Turkish, Kurdish, Arab and Zaza Sunnis, to Shiite Kizilbashes in Dersim. This raises the question of the role of religion in individual and collective identity. Many of Hadjian's interviewees denied that one can be both Muslim and Armenian. The author himself does not seem to rule it out. But a purely ethnically defined identity would be a relative novelty in Armenian history, in which religion and ethnicity merged early on. Six centuries of the Ottoman millet system have further solidified this equation.

As early as 1985, Konstantin Fotiadis came to an equally discouraging conclusion regarding the consequences of an identity separate from the original Greek Orthodox affiliation: "Greeks in Pontos ceased to exist with the demise of ecclesiastical life. Over time, the children of the 'hidden' will only have the memory of the Christian ancestry of their fathers. This is the reality in Turkey today. There is no salvation for the last 'secret' Christians. They are slowly disappearing into the great melting pot of Islam."[49]

The Re-Emergence of the Crypto-Christians

History does not know the word "never". Encouraged by the Kurdish national movement, people of Armenian descent founded self-organizations in Dersim (2010), Muş (2014) and Kayseri in the 2010s. Similar developments can also be observed on the Pontic Greek side. Typically, this revival of collective self-awareness only occurs at the third post-genocidal generation earliest. The Greek-

[49] Fotiadis, op. cit. p. 378.

speaking author Ömer Şükrü Asan from Erenköy [Çoruk; born 1961], who published the book *Pontos Kültürü* (1996) in Turkish, has made a major contribution to the recovery of the Pontic Greek identity, similar to Mi(h)ran Pirgiç Gültekin's contribution to the Armenian identity of the Armenians from Dersim.

So, what is an Armenian? The only answer that is justifiable from a human rights perspective is: each person determines that for him or herself. However, the most common external attributions are based on knowledge of the Armenian language and the Christian faith, especially the Armenian Apostolic denomination. Both language and faith have been lost on the Armenians of Dersim. Some interviewees reported how they had been amazed as children to see their mother hiding under the covers of her bed in the evenings, muttering something unintelligible, apparently saying a prayer in Armenian.

It was only in the 21st century that people of Armenian descent in Turkey gained the self-confidence to publicly acknowledge their descent and to address the decades-long taboo surrounding the persecution and discrimination of Armenians. Political activities in the socialist or Kurdish movements eventually led to the self-organization of the Dersim Armenians, both at home and abroad, thanks to Miran [Mihran] Pirgiç Gültekin, born in 1960. In a statement in spring 2011, the *Association of Armenians of Dersim* characterized the denial of identity as follows: "On a long journey, during which we had to conceal our origins under adverse circumstances and in our own country, we have now arrived here. The Ottoman regime responded to our demands for cultural and religious rights with repression, massacres and banishment. With our hands tied and subjugated, we had to accept a truly unsatisfactory socio-political order."[50]

The publication of the memoir *Anneannem* (My Maternal Grandmother, 2004) by Fethiye Çetin, a human rights lawyer in Istanbul, also marks an important turning point in the recovery of Armenian identity. Shortly before her death, the grandmother had confided her life story and tale of woe to her granddaughter, including the fact that she is Armenian – a revelation that was distressing and almost unbearable for Çetin at the time, as it leads to the loss of social status. It was only years after the grandmother's death that she dared to publish the book. In an interview during her first visit to Armenia, Fethiye Çetin explained the necessity of such recognition: "When people hide their origins or religious affiliation out of fear, threat or isolation, when they try to prove that they belong to the majority, then such an atmosphere contradicts global values, human rights, democracy and nature. Such an atmosphere cannot be protected from either ethical or legal sense. Above all, hiding and discarding one's own roots under pressure, threat or fear is inhumane."[51]

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[50] Hofmann, Tessa. *One Nation – Three Sub-Ethnic Groups: Armenia and Her Diaspora.* Yerevan: Narek, 2011, p. 86

[51] Melkonyan, Rouben. "'Armenia did not seem to be strange to me…': Interview with Fethiye Çetin." *Noravank Foundation*, May 4, 2009, http://www.noravank.am/en/?page=theme&thid=1&nid=1793.

It is to be hoped that since then it has been possible to deal openly with Armenian descent in Turkey, which is an essential prerequisite for healing the centuries-old pain of the Armenian population or those of Armenian descent.

Conclusion

Genocide is considered the ultimate crime. Raphael Lemkin, the principal author of the United Nations *Genocide Convention*, based his definition empirically on the genocides that took place during the two World Wars of the 20th century: the genocide of Christians in the Ottoman Empire and the extermination of European Jews during the Second World War. As his work *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944) indicates, Lemkin under

"(...) a coordinated plan of different actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves. The objectives of such a plan would be disintegration of the political and social institutions, of culture, language, national feelings, religion, and the economic existence of national groups, and the destruction of the personal security, liberty, health, dignity, and even the lives of the individuals belonging to such groups. Genocide is directed against the national group as an entity, and the actions involved are directed against individuals, not in their individual capacity, but as members of the national group. (...)

Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group; the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and the colonization by the oppressor's own nationals."[52]

Applied to the situation of Islamized or Alevized Christians or crypto-Christians in the Republic of Türkiye, as analyzed in this article, this means that genocide in Lemkin's expanded definition also continued after the First World War. In the first half of the 20th century, it was impossible to live openly and with equal rights as an Armenian or Greek Christian in Türkiye. Even Islamized Armenians felt compelled to conceal their descent for at least two generations and were still exposed to numerous forms of discrimination and insults.

The repeated massacres and deportations in Dersim (1938), which claimed the lives of both Armenians and Alevis, show how justified the fears of the 1915 genocide survivors and their descendants were. At the same time, the serfdom of Armenian farmers and artisans, which was based on the Kurdish tribal system, intensified. The Turkish nation-state's fight against socialist and Kurdish nationalist movements, which numerous young people of Armenian descent in Dersim had joined in the 1970s, led to further repressions.

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[52] Lemkin, Raphael: Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation; Analysis of Government; Proposals for Redress. Washington, 1944 (New edition: New introduction by Samantha Power. Clark, New Jersey: 2005), p. 79.

It was only in the 2010s that members of the third, post-genocidal generation overcame social exclusion and cultural invisibility by organizing themselves and confidently demanding equal rights. The question remains as to which significance Christianity can and should still have for the individual and collective identity of these "neo-Armenians".

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