

PRAGMATIC COEXISTENCE: LOCAL RESPONSES TO THE STATE INTRUSION IN DERSIM DURING THE EARLY REPUBLICAN PERIOD OF TURKEY (1938-1950)

Abstract

This article examines state building in Dersim with reference to local demands and the state capacity. It first analyzes how the Turkish nationalists aimed to transform the Dersim region. The focus then shifts to the local responses towards the state policies following the military operations of 1937 and 1938. I posit that the Kurds' relation with the state relied on pragmatism and negotiation rather than outright hostility. Moreover, I demonstrate that the locals' expectations from the state overlapped with the Turkish state's pre-operation agenda for the most part. Despite the local endorsement, the limited state capacity constituted a major obstacle in implementing land redistribution policy and expanding road networks with limited progress. The opening of schools, however, produced somewhat mixed results in the sense that the enrollment rates did not correspond to the increase in the number of schools.

Keywords: State-building, Turkey, Dersim, Nationalism, Kurds

The Dersim massacre of 1937-1938 marked one of the bloodiest events in the history of modern Turkey. Though long forgotten, the controversies about Dersim revived in the early 2000s in relation to the ongoing Kurdish question, which began to be discussed more widely in Turkey's politics. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, then the Prime Minister and the leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP), added to the debate when he officially apologized and held the Republican People's Party (CHP) responsible for what he called 'the Dersim incidents'.¹ Since then, there has emerged a renewed interest in Dersim's history and the military operation undertaken by the Turkish state, which had resulted in the deaths and displacement of thousands.² Whereas some studies emphasized the 'backward feudal socio-economic structure' and accused tribal leaders in what they labeled the 'Dersim Rebellion', some other studies addressed this question by focusing on the ethnic nationalism promoted by the Kemalist elite. Those accounts that analyze the issue with particular attention to the Turkish state's violent policies argued that the

Turkish state's policies in Dersim were a part of the nation-building process in Turkey and aimed to subsume Kurdish identity. In line with this argument, these scholars justifiably pointed out the atrocities committed by the army, the assimilationist policies, and the denial of the Kurdish identity, which they interpreted as a part of the deep-rooted and often neglected Kurdish question in the history of the Turkish Republic.³

Notwithstanding their affirmative push for the recognition of the Kurdish question and the Dersim massacre, however, these accounts often focus on the Turkish state's policies, neglecting the local inhabitants and their relationship with the state, resulting in a history of the Kurds in Dersim without the Kurds' voices, concerns or expectations. Overemphasis on the repressive nature of the Turkish state's policies has hindered efforts to explore the mundane, day-to-day interactions of the locals with the state officials, which were integral to the state-building in Dersim. Instead, the existing literature only paid attention to the Kurds' voices when there were armed encounters, insurrections, and rebels reacting to the Turkish state's assimilationist policies. The state, particularly in the Republican period, is so firmly identified with coercion and ethnic engineering that the local populations' experiences remain almost entirely unheard, paving the way for victimization of the Kurds.⁴ In an attempt to fill this gap, this article analyzes the locals' demands and expectations from the state officials and bureaucrats.

This article's overarching aim is to complicate the strong binary of the 'the Kurds vs the state' through an analysis of the local actors' stance vis à vis the state policies in Dersim. As this research moves away from the state-centric approaches reducing the state-building to the ambitious nation-building project of the Kemalist regime, it concurrently tries to understand how the local inhabitants' immediate needs influenced their perception of 'the state'. I posit that the Kurds' interaction with the state relied on pragmatism and negotiation, which was greatly informed

by concerns and conditions on the local level. Although it would be a grave mistake not to acknowledge the asymmetrical power relationship between the Kurds and the Turkish state, the relationship between the Turkish state and the locals was much more fluid and vacillating than scholars used to assume.

This research aims to go beyond the narratives of inherent antagonism between the ‘all-powerful Turkish state and defeated, silenced Kurds’. In this endeavor, I am both inspired by and hope to inspire the emerging literature that develops more nuanced explanations in grasping the complexity of the state-building in provinces predominantly populated by the Kurds. These recent studies expose the limitations of the earlier body of literature in two major ways, namely by scrutinizing the state’s capacity in Kurdish regions and local actors’ interaction with the actual process of the state’s expanding authority. Focusing on the ‘wide gap between what the state wanted to do and what it actually could do’, Senem Aslan, for instance, problematized the misleading portrayal of the Turkish state as an all-powerful, monolithic, and highly autonomous entity. Aslan demonstrated that the shortage of state personnel, financial constraints, and the language barrier between the local Kurds and the Turkish administrative officers hindered the implementation of ambitious social engineering projects and limited the central state’s ability to control the Eastern provinces effectively.⁵

Whereas Senem Aslan’s study emphasizes the limits of the state power to blur the sharp dichotomy between the state and the society, other scholars focused more on the resistance and negotiation of the grassroots actors with the Ottoman and Turkish central states. For instance, Nilay Özok-Gündoğan demonstrated how Muslims and non-Muslims in Diyarbakir exploited the relatively free political climate immediately after the 1908 Constitutional Revolution to prevent the unfair dispossession of their lands. Her research shows that the issues such as the codification

of land ownership, the development of property rights, and state centralization cannot be solely viewed in the top-down manner that the existing literature often employs.⁶ Lastly, Ceren Belge analyzed how kinship ties and local networks provided an alternative sphere of resistance for the Kurds, enabling them to contest the Turkish state's repressive policies with everyday practices and less confrontational ways.⁷ Although each of these studies focuses on different periods and slightly different regions, they emphasized the multi-dimensional aspects of the Turkish state and Kurds' relations through a more sophisticated understanding of the local dynamics.

Building on these recent studies, I substantiate my argument in two major sections. To understand the local responses to the growing state presence in Dersim, I first analyze the ruling elite's political agenda before the military operation. To this end, the first section briefly talks about Kemalist nationalism, exploring how Kemalist understanding of nationalism influenced the Turkish state's policies in Dersim. To analyze how the Turkish state attempted to incorporate Dersim into the main body of nationhood, I focus on the regime's policies, which had three main interdependent pillars. First was the elimination of the strong tribal structure through the pacification of armed groups. In line with this policy, the Turkish state aimed to intervene in the local social hierarchies and sought to curb the power of tribal leaders through the redistribution of lands. The second was to penetrate the region through infrastructural projects, primarily through the construction of roads. The third was to indoctrinate the Kurdish population in Dersim by opening new schools and assimilating them into the Turkish identity by teaching them the Turkish language.⁸ According to the Kemalist elite, the incorporation of Dersim into Turkish nationhood was inextricably related to implementing these policies, which scholars aptly described as a 'civilizing mission'.⁹ The military operations of 1937-1938 set the main ground for this incorporation process.

In the second section, I turn to the post-operation period and analyze the locals' multi-faceted interactions with state officials and policies. I argue that the locals' stance against the state in the post-operation period was neither a total alienation nor an exacerbated hostility triggered by nationalist fervor. Instead, those who remained in Dersim adopted a pragmatic attitude and expected the state to find practical solutions to their problem, inviting them in to support them whenever necessary. Through their day-to-day interactions with state officials, the locals placed demands on the state, including road construction, economic improvements in Dersim, and long-awaited land reforms, thus encouraging *more* state involvement in local affairs. In other words, what shaped the political domain of subaltern groups in Dersim in the post-operation period was not a nostalgia for the past but simply a desire to improve their living conditions. More importantly, the locals' expectations to benefit from the state's policies indicate their recognition of the Turkish state's 'vertical position as the supreme authority' in administrative affairs.¹⁰ The push for state intervention in specific administrative issues and their attempts to inform state policies proves that coexistence, on pragmatic terms, was viable.

These demands of the locals from the state also challenge the silenced image of *Dersimli* and allow us to hear their responses to the growing state presence. Put differently, one should avoid taking ethnic conflict and tensions as an inherent feature of the state and society relations in Dersim. With that said, I also show that *Dersimli*'s relationship with the state was not free of objections and resistance. In other words, locals' pragmatism did not mean that they entirely capitulated to the state policies and institutions. While the locals attempted to benefit from the state's presence in the issues of land redistribution and the road construction, their attitude towards the opening of new schools had been somewhat different. Although the Turkish state succeeded in substantially increasing the number of schools in the post-operation period, the locals remained

reluctant to attend educational institutions, as evidenced by low enrollment rates. This suggests the possibility of the locals silently dragging their feet from the state institutions, which were serving the state's assimilationist policies.

This research also demonstrates that the Turkish state faced difficulties not only in attracting students to the schools but also in the land redistribution and the construction of new roads. Although the Republican regime made partial progress in implementing these policies, that progress was not entirely satisfactory for the CHP/state officials. The policy of land redistribution suffered from the absence of qualified personnel to undertake this policy. The return of previously displaced people to Dersim further complicated the implementation of the policy, triggering disputes both between the citizens and state officials but also among the citizens themselves as well. The construction of new roads was rather slow due to financial constraints. All of this is not to say that the Turkish state's policies were a total failure; the state presence in the region indeed grew with the elimination of armed actors and tribes. Instead, I show that despite the local endorsement to implement the pre-operation policies, there were still significant limits to what the Turkish state could do in the region. The situation in the post-operation period was thus in exact accord with what Hannah Arendt once elegantly said: 'Violence can destroy power; it is utterly incapable of creating it.'¹¹

I contend that the approach adopted here has significant potential to offer fresh methodological insights into Turkish and Kurdish studies. Sensitive to the local actors' perception of 'the state', first and foremost, this perspective helps us avoid the contemporary political definition of 'national identity'. We instead attempt to grasp what 'nation' and 'ethnicity' meant for historical actors themselves in their proper historical context. Narratives of fixed hostility between the Kurds and the Turkish state do not allow us to grasp the ever-changing definitions of

such loaded concepts, leaving us with assumptions rather than explanations. The degree of the politicization of ethnic identity and the nationalist mobilization, the local actors' leverage to challenge the state's authority, and the locals' immediate practical needs are some of the variables that constantly redefine the relationship between the central state and the locals. It is thus these variables, not the irreconcilable ethnic differences, which determine the relationship between the minority groups and the state. More importantly, as this article shows, coercion, or the ability to eliminate the armed groups, does not necessarily abolish all obstacles in state-building. 'In weak developing states', says Andreas Wimmer, 'modern goods [infrastructure projects, equal treatment before the law] cannot be spread equally over the entire population, simply because the state is not strong enough and does not have enough resources to make these accessible to everybody.'¹² This research echoes Wimmer's argument that scholars should not take state capacity for granted even when the state uses its coercive power the most.

In this research, I primarily utilize the published documents from Necmeddin Sahir Silan's collection. Necmeddin Sahir Silan was the deputy of the Republican People's Party's (CHP) in Bingöl from 1939 to 1943 and then in Dersim from 1944 to 1959. The documents in Silan's collection are primarily based on the day-to-day interactions between Silan and the locals, which provide important insights into the local people's expectations and concerns. In addition to Silan's collection, I also rely on the primary sources from the Prime Ministry's Republican archive and the parliamentary minutes (*Zabıt Cerideleri*). Despite the apparent irony of analyzing the local issues from the central state's perspective, these documents demonstrate to what degree the previously designed policies were implemented.

When modernity marries nationalism: Civilizing Dersim through assimilation

Located in inner Eastern Anatolia, Dersim was a demographically heterogeneous district in Ottoman times (see fig. 1). A part of Mamuret-ul Aziz administrative district (later to become Elâziz in the Republican period), Dersim was populated by 65,976 Muslims, 13,367 Orthodox Armenians, 458 Protestants, and 264 Greeks in 1914.¹³ The deportation of Armenians by the Ottoman government in 1915 almost entirely annihilated the region's Armenian population.¹⁴ However, the Ottoman state's increasing sensitivity to Dersim had neither solely originated from the presence of Armenians nor ended with their annihilation. Since the Ottoman state's centralization efforts had been under way in the nineteenth century, the Ottoman rulers perceived the region as a threat to the imperial center because they could not fully subsume the autonomy of tribal leaders. Even during the era of Abdülhamid II, when the Ottoman state had achieved a certain degree of incorporation of peripheries to the center, Ottomans encountered serious difficulties in bringing the nomad tribes under state control for taxation and conscription purposes.¹⁵ The first detailed report compiled by the Ottoman officials in 1896 viewed the implementation of martial law and forced expulsion of 'dangerous elements' as legitimate methods in 'civilizing' Dersim.¹⁶ In the years to come, the Ottomans' concerns regarding the situation in Dersim persisted: from 1907 to 1916, the Ottoman state organized a series of military operations, each of which involved bloody encounters with various tribes.¹⁷



Figure 1. Map of the city of Tunceli within Turkey and the larger Dersim region (in red) before the establishment of the Turkish Republic.

Source: Pinar Dinç, 'Novels and Short Stories as Products of Nationalist Competition: The Case of Dersim 1937-1938 in Turkish Politics and Literature', *Nationalities Papers* 46, no.1 (2018), p.146.

Following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War, the nationalist cadres led by Mustafa Kemal were aware that the territories that the national liberal movement would inherit from the Ottoman Empire would still be intermixed in terms of ethnicity, language, and religion. As the leading figure of the liberation movement in Anatolia, Mustafa Kemal had manifestly acknowledged the existence of Kurds as a distinct ethnic group. He saw the support of Kurds as a vital step if the war for national liberation was to be a complete success and defined Kurds and Turks as 'brothers-in-race'.¹⁸

Some Kurdish notables responded positively to this policy with religious motives, but separatist tendencies also prevailed among Kurds from time to time. In 1921, for instance, Alevi Kurds, in line with the political agenda of the Society for the Rise of Kurdistan (*Kürt Teâli Cemiyeti*), launched a rebellion famously known as Kocgiri Rebellion, demanding that Ankara accept Kurdish autonomy and withdraw all Turkish officials from Kurdish regions.¹⁹ Although Turkish forces suppressed this rebellion, two more, known as the Sheikh Said and the Ararat

Rebellions, broke out after the foundation of the Republic in 1923 but, again, failed to produce expected outcomes for the Kurdish activists. Regardless of their outcomes, however, these violent encounters were tangible signs of the ongoing tension between the local Kurdish notables and the Turkish state.

As building a fully united and ethnically homogenous Turkish nation had increasingly become a source of aspiration after the proclamation of the Republic, Dersim had been one of the regions that the Kemalist regime perceived as a threat due to its predominantly Kurdish population. The image of Dersim as a threat was further exacerbated by other factors such as a weak state presence in the region, the region's rough spatial configurations, and the presence of tribes with some degree of economic and military power. For these reasons, the Kemalist regime paid close attention to the political situation in Dersim, as evidenced by various reports compiled on local political, economic, and social conditions in Dersim. Following the proclamation of the Republic in 1923, high-ranking state and military officials compiled six different reports concerning the situation in Dersim, with an additional report compiled by the General Directorate of Gendarmerie that is directed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.²⁰ Despite slight differences in their proposed solutions to the Dersim 'issue', these reports tended to depict Dersim almost like a foreign land, which needed to be reached and elevated by an outside force, a force that was temporally and spatially ahead of Dersim.

From the state officials' perspective, Dersimli was a vestige of pre-modern times, whose characteristics were determined by the absence of the state, the presence of certain environmental factors, and the inhabitants' ethno-religious identities. According to Kazım Karabekir, for instance, 'the wild' and 'bloodthirsty' nature of Dersimli derived from the fact that Dersim was 'jagged, mountainous, and difficult to pass by'.²¹ These spatial characteristics affected

agricultural production, preventing peasants from gaining self-sufficiency, let alone growing an economy built on trade and artisanship. In line with such views, the Chief of General Staff Fevzi Çakmak Paşa's report also portrayed Dersimli as ignorant and poor, and under the total control of tribal leaders. Hence, the report adds, they lived in horrible conditions: their homes resembled caves, in which Dersimli slept, cooked bread, and satisfied all their needs.²² If such living conditions could be improved, and poverty defeated, Dersimli would represent a Turkish youth (*Türk evladı*) with 'the potential of understanding the negative impacts of banditry' and thereby of living 'like a civilized person'.²³

Although the state officials such as Fevzi Çakmak Paşa viewed Kurds in Dersim as Turkish people in origin, the predominance of Kurdish identity in Dersim made it difficult to overlook the presence of Kurds as a separate ethnic group. This dilemma was perhaps most explicitly expressed by Third General Inspectorate Tahsin Uzer: 'There are three hundred thousand Kurds. Yes, they are Turks. Dersim, Eleşkirt are Turks. While they are all Turks, they [are also] Kurds.'²⁴ The Kurds' re-assimilation to Turkishness could only be possible with the liberation of the locals from tribal leaders, bandits, and sheikhs as state officials associated these figures with reactionary politics and defined them as evils belonging to Turkey's pre-modern past.²⁵ Kemalists believed that increasing state capacity through infrastructural projects in the region would eliminate the prominent role of tribes and banditry; 'liberate' peasants from the imprisonment by tribes; pave the way for more agricultural production; and, more importantly, help the state institutionalize its power. The replacement of tribalism with a non-tribal socio-economic order and poverty with prosperity would symbolize not only the transition to 'civilization' but also mean the completion of the shift from 'pre-modern' to 'modern' and from 'Kurdishness' to 'Turkishness'.

If the Kurdish ethnic identity was the first aspect of the ruling elite's concern regarding the local population, the second aspect was the predominance of Alevi religious identity in Dersim. The state officials often emphasized the distinct ethnic and religious identity of the locals, referring to the inextricable link between the Alevi and Kurdish identities. The report compiled by the General Directorate of Gendarmerie explained the link between Kurdish and Alevi identities by referring to the acts of Yavuz Sultan Selim, an Ottoman sultan known for his murderous acts against Alevis. According to this report, Yavuz Sultan Selim's horrendous actions towards Alevis exacerbated the hostility between Sunnis and Alevis, leading the latter to separate themselves from 'their Turkish siblings'. Due to this hatred and religious rivalry between Sunnis and Alevis, the author stated that Alevis ended up 'calling themselves as *Kürt* reading the word as *Türk* from tail to head' despite allegedly having the same native language – Turkish – as Sunnis.²⁶ These statements demonstrate that the Alevi identity represented a significant marker for the state officials in conceptualizing 'the other'. For these officials, Kurds represented a religiously alienated group of people who came under Alevism's influence and thus deviated from Sunnism and the Turkish identity.

Another layer of threat for the Republican regime was the presence of a strong tribal configuration in Dersim. Whether they prioritized violence or infrastructural expansion, all reports on Dersim referred to the need to either weaken or obliterate the tribes. One of these reports compiled by Şükrü Kaya argued that military intervention would be the most efficient solution for the cumbersome situation in Dersim. He opined that confiscating weapons, moving current and future tribal leaders away from Dersim, and providing lands to peasants who were landless and 'enslaved by tribal leaders (*ağa*)' would only be possible with a military intervention.²⁷ However, not every state official believed that military action was necessary to

maintain order in Dersim. Governor Cemal Bey's report proposed to solve the problems in Dersim with the institutional and infrastructural expansion of the state in the region. He argued that idealistic teachers and education would be enough for Dersimli to acquire 'the love for the nation'. Emphasizing the socio-economic basis of problems in Dersim, he contended that creating job opportunities through road constructions and resettlement of the local population in abandoned lands would lead the Dersimli to give up on their weapons on their own.²⁸ Lastly, some officials took a middle-way approach and advocated using violent and non-violent methods together. One example of that kind is Halis Paşa's report, which asserted that 'the force of the sword (*kılıç kuvveti*)' alone would not be sufficient to stabilize the region.²⁹ In addition to the security measures like disarming the population, his solutions included various measures ranging from appointing more 'experienced and courageous' officers for bureaucratic posts and suggesting that Dersim become a separate district.³⁰

Among these policies, road construction was probably the most central concern of the Republican elite. Improved transportation infrastructure would serve not only the overall economic improvement of the poor peasantry but also the assimilationist policies of the state. First and foremost, construction of new roads would make the logistics of military personnel and equipment easier for the upcoming military intervention, thus putting once unreachable locations under direct state control. Equally important for the impetus of such construction projects was that roads would prepare the conditions for trade to prosper in Dersim.³¹ To this end, Halis Paşa proposed the reconstruction of the roads between Erzincan-Hozat-Elaziz; Erzincan-Plümer-Kığı-Palo; Kığı-Nazimiye-Mazkirt- Hozat- Çemişkezek; Plümer-Kemah and Kemah-Hıç. Kemalists believed that local people who would engage in trade would steadily abandon plunder and

robbery. To this end, Kemalists proposed to supplement peasants first and foremost with lands and then with agricultural equipment and seeds to maximize agricultural production.³²

Another infrastructural project that would not only pacify Dersim but also transform Dersimli into a 'precious element (subject)' of the society was the opening of new schools.³³ The opening of new schools during the Republic was not something unique to Dersim. In every part of Turkey, there were tremendous efforts to open new schools that would promote literacy and Republican ideals. However, in Kurdish regions, these schools had assumed one additional duty, as expressed by Halis Paşa. He suggested that elementary schools be opened in each district (kaza) [of Dersim] as well as around Mazgirt to 'instill Turkishness and let [students] know that they are Turkish'.³⁴

In 1935, the National Assembly introduced two new laws to reorganize the administrative structure of the region. The first of these laws proposed the formation of new districts such as Rize, Hakkari, Bitlis, Bingöl, along with Tunceli. Designed to replace the Dersim region, this law included the sub-districts Nazımiye, Hozat, Mazgirt, Ovacık, Pertek, Çemişgezek, and Pülümür as part of Tunceli.³⁵ The second law, which directly concerned Dersim and famously known as *Tunceli Kanunu*, laid the groundwork for the extraordinary measures the Turkish state was planning to impose upon the Dersim region.³⁶ *Tunceli Kanunu* proposed that the governor of this new district, Tunceli, would be appointed from the high-ranking military officers, seeking to concentrate both administrative and military duties in the military governor's hands.³⁷ This law also equipped the military governor General Abdullah Alpdoğan with political authority to forcibly remove individuals and families from the region. In brief, *Tunceli Kanunu* demonstrated the ruling cadres' determination to establish an absolute rule and pacify the armed groups, whom the state officials believed to possess as many as 20,000 guns.³⁸

Approximately one and a half years after the parliament enacted *Tunceli Kanunu*, the first sweeping military operation took place in September 1937, followed by another one in 1938, to materialize the political agenda described above. Whereas the military operations aimed to annihilate the local armed groups, policies such as the redistribution of lands, the construction of new roads, and the opening of new schools would entirely transform the region's political and economic structure. More importantly, these reforms would redefine the relationship of Dersim with the state, making the former more 'obedient' to the latter. However, what started as a military operation aiming to enhance the central state's power effectively turned into a full-fledged massacre: scholars estimate that the human toll in Dersim ranged from 10,000 to 40,000, although it is impossible to provide a precise number.³⁹

The military operations changed the entire picture in Dersim. If, as Senem Aslan says, the Republic's aim in the Kurdish areas was to dominate the society without intermediaries, this mission was now achieved in Dersim through the armed groups' pacification.⁴⁰ Yet, most of the accounts on Dersim interpret this 'achievement' as the 'endpoint' of the history of Dersim. As such, they perceive the military operations as the peak point of the Turkish-Kurdish rivalry concluded with the decisive victory of the Turkish state. The general impression in the literature is that the post-operation period is merely a story of oppression and dominance, an unquestioned conclusion of Kurds' military defeat by the Turkish army. The following section moves beyond the approaches that portray Dersimli purely driven by Kurdish nationalism and national emancipation. Alternatively, I view Dersimli as citizens – indeed as Kurdish citizens – who attempted to benefit from what the apparatus of the modern state and its institutional presence would offer.

Land Redistribution Policies: ‘There is a great distance between what we want to achieve and what the reality imposes upon us’

After the military operations, one issue that shaped the relationship between the locals and the state was the redistribution of lands. Before the military operation, massive tracts of land in Dersim were concentrated in the hands of a few landlords. According to a report in 1936, about 150 persons controlled two-thirds of the total lands in Dersim, whereas one-third of the lands was shared by 70 per cent of the population.⁴¹ Peasants who owned lands were mostly sharecroppers (*ortakçı*), meaning that they still had to rent additional lands from the tribes/tribal leaders. The remaining part of the population, approximately 30 per cent of the whole population, earned their living by selling their labor power and were called *maraba*, meaning that they did not own any land.⁴² Therefore, the unequal distribution of lands in Dersim was in direct contradiction of Mustafa Kemal's ideals, who thought that ‘there should not remain any farmer without a piece of land of his own’.⁴³

The forced deportation of most tribal leaders in the post-operation period raised hopes among the locals that the state would redistribute some of the lands previously owned by the tribal leaders. To be sure, not everyone was happy with the forced deportation of tribal leaders. One report from the post-operation period informs us that ‘even though there are obedience and respect (for state authority), there is also fear and worry accompanied by a secret effort of taking revenge’.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding this fear and worry, some other people – or perhaps the very same people who feared and worried – wanted to take advantage of the emptied land. This desire of the peasants to own land also conformed to the state’s policy in the region as state officials believed that the redistribution of lands would connect the local people to the central government more closely:

The struggle for Kurdification and Turkification, one of the most fundamental issues of the East, somehow continued. Wherever small land ownership emerged, the people there wanted to rely on the government, and in such places settled administration and schooling, and therefore Turkish, took root. Wherever the aghas and sheikhs predominated, the land and villages there passed to the control of the aghas, and administration and schooling were withdrawn from those places, and in those regions, Kurdish turned out to be the native language of the people.⁴⁵

Two years after the operation, the state had already started the redistribution of lands in Dersim. For instance, as of 1940-41, the state redistributed 257 hectares of land in Çemişgezek to 46 families, comprising 222 members.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the pace of the redistribution was far from what locals had expected. More than 700 families were not given any lands, although families of landless peasants had previously applied to obtain lands.⁴⁷ The slow pace of the redistribution of lands was probably not unique to Çemişgezek, as peasants in other districts such as Kalan and Mazgirt, also complained about the same situation. For example, a peasant named Ahmet Sünger from Mazgirt stated that ‘we work as sharecroppers, but we do not manage to get by. We do not have lands; we were told that the land would be given to us today or tomorrow, but it is not given.’ Another peasant from the Tuldik village of Kalan district repeats the same demand: ‘The land we have is not enough; we request lands from our government’.⁴⁸ This complaint had a solid base because when the peasant complained about the situation, 25 per cent of the inhabitants in Kazan were still landless.⁴⁹

These examples do not only demonstrate the demands of the peasants from the state to redistribute the lands. They also show that the state’s promise before and during the operation ‘to liberate the peasants from tribes and aghas’ barely turned into a reality in the post-operation period. A complaint of Hızır Erer from the village of Zeranik is worth quoting at some length as he nicely summarizes not only the overall situation in villages but also the expectations of the peasants from the state:

Ours is a sharecropping village. The lands are in the hands of aghas. Our government should give us land to save us from sharecropping. Aghas not only get 500 kg of every 1000 kg but also receive one-seventh of the remaining 500 kg. Aghas only give seeds, and it is our job to sow and harvest. But because aghas get more than half of the crops, the remaining (crops) are not enough for us. We beg our government: save us from sharecropping.⁵⁰

Local state officials were aware of such complaints and came up with some suggestions to accelerate the land redistribution process. However, the issues related to land redistribution were not fixed totally despite the proposals from the local state bureaucracy. As late as 1948, three locals reported, the peasants in Dersim ‘were still suffering and being exploited under the tyranny of landowners due to not having residence’.⁵¹ The government’s ineffectiveness was well-known even among the prominent politicians, such as the CHP’s General Secretary Memduh Şevket Esendal, and top-rank generals, such as Abdullah Alpdoğan. In the first half of the 1940s, Memduh Şevket Esendal organized a trip to observe the Eastern provinces’ general situation and inspect local party branches. In his meeting with the General Inspectorate Abdullah Alpdoğan, Esendal noted his dialogue with Alpdoğan who reportedly said: ‘Only one out of four orders, which our Great Chief had issued for Tunceli, could be carried out. The order was maintained in the district of Tunceli. People’s weapons were collected. Forbidden areas are clear. We could not do much else. And things we did are not much of a big deal.’⁵²

While little was achieved in terms of the distribution of lands in Dersim, demands from the locals were sufficient enough to put some pressure, particularly on Dersim deputy of the CHP, Necmeddin Sahir Silan. As a party official who was in direct contact with the local population, Silan brought the issue to the parliament and inquired of the Minister of Agriculture, Tahsin Coşkan, about the slow pace of land redistribution. Tahsin Coskun responded to Silan’s questions by claiming that ‘our ideals are ambitious, ambiguous, and arduous; there is a great distance between what we want to achieve and what the reality imposes upon us’. He then asserted that the

Turkish state does not have adequate financial resources and state personnel to execute the distribution properly.⁵³ He exemplified this argument with the complaint that there were currently nine (land) commissions and a budget for six more commissions to be established in 1948, whereas one hundred commissions in total were needed for the full execution of the land distribution law.

In response, Sılan insisted that the land redistribution in Dersim was a matter of urgency for several reasons. He posited that a considerable number of locals still had to work as sharecroppers and tenant farmers (*yarıcı*) due to the concentration of arable lands in the hands of a few. He linked this argument to returning previously displaced people to Dersim because of a law enacted by parliament in 1947. Adding that ‘90 per cent of returnees were landless [...] citizens’, Sılan emphasizes the immediate necessity of realizing the land redistribution in Tunceli (Dersim). Lastly, Sılan criticized the central government’s decision to undertake land distribution in Kars and Erzincan but not to do so in Tunceli, questioning the reliability of the reasons which made the land distribution in Tunceli less urgent than the other two cities.⁵⁴

This debate between Tunceli deputy Necmeddin Sahir Sılan and the Minister of Agriculture Tahsin Coşkun is significant in many aspects. First, despite the slow pace of the distribution of lands, the state officials – in this case, particularly Necmeddin Sahir Sılan – was neither deaf nor blind to the locals’ expectations. This receptivity of Sılan is particularly worth emphasizing for the Republican period as the conventional view of the Republican regime is one that relies on brute force and/or ignores the societal demands, enjoying the complete arbitrariness provided by holding considerable political power for decades. Contrary to this conventional portrayal of the Republican regime, the way the locals raised their concerns to their deputies and the deputy’s push in parliament to fulfill these expectations reveal that the local CHP representatives still attempted to take some degree of its citizens’ consent. With that said, this

sensitivity to the local demands remained limited to the local party constituents because the Minister of Agriculture Tahsin Coşkun was still reluctant to respond positively to Necmeddin Sahir Sılan's demands regarding the land distribution despite Sılan's insisting and pushy attitude.

The issue of land redistribution in Dersim gained a whole new aspect in 1947, with a law enacted by the Turkish government. According to this law with the no. 5908, the displaced and relocated inhabitants of Dersim acquired the right to return to Dersim. Enacted under pressure from the Democrat Party, this law further exacerbated the Turkish state's incapacity to properly implement the land redistribution. Although those displaced and relocated were originally entitled to receive land and material support from the government in their new settlement areas, not everyone was able to benefit from this support, presumably because of the inadequate preparations before the relocation of displaced people.⁵⁵ Such problems made the relocation process of forcibly displaced people even more difficult, which pushed them to go back to the Dersim region after the government authorized them to do so in 1947.

As the displaced people started going back to Dersim, they soon realized that their villages had been destroyed because of the military operations, and they had no arable lands to work on.⁵⁶ This was the case for Eyüpoğlu Cemal Bulut and for his family, who had only found out about the destruction of their villages on their way back. Complaining that he and his family 'was deprived of any means to make their living', he requested the state authorities to provide land and an appropriate area for his family's settlement.⁵⁷ Baki Kılınçkaya, Hüseyin Erdoğan and Hıdır Çelik and their families were in a similar position; they were relocated in Çanakkale and Kastamonu but decided to return to their village, Danzig, upon the failure to receive support from the government. As in the previous case, Danzig was also destroyed (again, presumably during the military operations), which led the petitioners above to ask for a sufficient amount of land from the state

officials.⁵⁸ In short, the desire of the relocated families to return to their previous area of living in Dersim thus further increased the pressure on the government to accelerate the land redistribution.⁵⁹

Yet another difficulty that surfaced with the arrival of returnees in the region concerned the issue of the returnees' properties without title deeds. The properties without title deeds constituted a significant challenge for the Turkish state not only in the management of the taken-over properties but also in the redistribution of lands. According to the deputy Sahir Silan, the Turkish government brought some of these lands under the control of the Department of Treasury with the assumption that they were state-owned properties because the owners did not possess title deeds.⁶⁰ In what followed, the issue of how lands without title deeds would be put into use became even more complicated for two reasons. First, the Turkish government had distributed some of these undocumented lands – now registered as state-owned lands – to the local inhabitants as part of the land redistribution policy. Second, those staying in Dersim in the post-operation era started using some of these lands and became *de facto* owners unless the Turkish state had already redistributed them.⁶¹

The Turkish state's two decisions, first to relocate the so-called dangerous local elements and second to allow them to return to Dersim, is an excellent example of one state policy hindering the execution of another state policy. The introduction of a multi-party system in 1945, particularly the foundation of two new parties – the National Development Party (*Millî Kalkınma Partisi*-MKP) in 1945 and the Democrat Party (*Demokrat Parti* – DP) in 1946 – made the political climate increasingly competitive, consequently pushing CHP officials to abandon some of the previous 'anti-democratic' policies.⁶² The abandonment of these policies, such as the one that rendered the return of relocated people possible, clashed with the land redistribution policy and presumably

slowed it down. Even before the arrival of relocated people in Dersim, there were still many landless local inhabitants in the region, as evidenced by the inhabitants' complaints and petitions. With the return of the relocated people, not only the number of people in need of lands increased but also the policy of land redistribution gained a new dimension due to the destruction of villages and the use of previously owned lands by those who remained in Dersim. In sum, the implementation of the land redistribution policy remained quite limited because 37 per cent of the locals in Dersim were still landless, according to İsmail Beşikçi's study published in 1969.⁶³

One should also note that the redistribution of lands has been a contested policy from the first day, not just in Dersim, but in other eastern cities as well. Similarly, its limited implementation fell short of transforming existing social hierarchies in the entire region, a fact even President İsmet İnönü acknowledged.⁶⁴ Among these cities, while one would expect Dersim to receive special attention because of the Republic's sensitivity towards the region, this had not been the case, as expressed by the leading Republican statesmen such as Abdullah Alpdoğan, Memduh Şevket Esendal, and Necmeddin Sahir Sılan. Still, it appears that this puzzling picture in Dersim stemmed more from the inability of the bureaucracy to overcome unique difficulties in Dersim and less from intentional negligence.⁶⁵ For one thing, the central state authorities such as the Minister of Agriculture Tahsin Coşkun likely found the implementation of this policy challenging. It required a competent and resourceful bureaucracy with extensive knowledge of empty lands and *de facto* in use by the locals without title deeds. Moreover, the decision to allow the displaced to return had been a product of the increasing competitiveness of national politics, which also seemingly retarded the process. The apparent difficulty in implementing this policy was further accompanied by the decreasing urgency of the issue, particularly for the central state authorities, because a good number of tribal leaders had already been either decimated or exiled. In the end, the enormous

complexity of the issue pushed the state officials to remain content with the new political status quo and keep Dersim under control without addressing the local sources of socio-economic inequality. Leaving the elimination of armed groups aside, what the military operations left behind created chaos and mess, which the state officials were aware of, but were unable to manage.

Making Dersim accessible: The Construction of Roads

Another demand often raised by the locals through the local party/state officials was the construction of roads, which was as crucial as land redistribution for the overall economic improvement. It is not a secret that the designation of road construction projects by Kemalists aimed not only at economic development but also to maintain control over potentially ‘dangerous’ locations and assimilate Kurdish identity. That said, the construction of roads also contributes to the local economy as they connect the regions with their hinterland and provide locals the chance to export and import goods as they need.⁶⁶ Considering the advantages of what roads could bring into the local economy, there was no reason for the locals to consider road construction projects necessarily detrimental, especially in the absence of an alternative institutional structure that could provide this service.

A quick look at the road system of Dersim demonstrates that the existing roads in Dersim were often broken, unpaved, and in need of renovation. They were too narrow and could only be used for transportation with animals. Additionally, harsh weather conditions made the use of roads almost impossible, especially in the winter due to rain and snow accumulation.⁶⁷ Under such conditions, transporting goods to and from Dersim was not an easy task, which explains the isolated state of the economy in Dersim from surrounding regions. Even when the production, especially of grains, reached a high level, producers could not export their products because of the

adverse road conditions as expenditures on logistics usually exceeded the income generated by these products. In addition to the difficulty of finding a proper place to preserve the products, the inability of producers to sell their products in other markets usually caused their products to go to waste.⁶⁸

Aware of the constraints imposed by the absence of roads, locals not only took the initiative themselves to construct such roads but also transmitted their expectations through local party/state officials for road construction. In one of these cases, the inhabitants sent their letter from Çarsancak, a sub-district in Dersim, and the letter included the signatures of local party leaders, *muhtars*, and residents. In that letter, the signatories mentioned the need for constructing a bridge over Peri river and a macadam road, which would connect the region with a rail line in Palu. The signatories listed a series of reasons to convince the higher state authorities that the construction was a real need for the region. First, the soil of the area was fertile: the region was surrounded by plains, and the residents could reach water resources necessary for agricultural production. Second, a road and a bridge would connect the region not only with the rail line in Palu but also with Kalan, which the signatories believed would help the area to prosper economically with the support of viticulture and winemaking. Lastly, the signatories posited that several people drowned while they were trying to cross the river and that construction of a bridge would stop further losses.⁶⁹ In response to this request, the Minister of Infrastructure stated that this bridge could not be built because of financial constraints.⁷⁰

As the residential areas were highly dispersed in Dersim, another problem regarding the lack of roads was the inaccessibility of public institutions such as ones related to health and education. Building schools and health centers in every village was simply impossible, a situation which made the construction of new roads an unavoidable necessity. In a letter from Çemişgezek,

where there was not a single doctor appointed by the government for months, a tradesman complained that the macadam road between Elazığ and Çemişgezek was broken and not appropriate for transportation by car. That is why, he argued, patients who could not make it to the hospital in Elazığ in time either lost their lives on the way or right after they had reached the hospital. Although it was also necessary to build a bridge, the most immediate need for the tradesman was to make the road convenient for transportation by car so that the health center became accessible to residents in Çemişgezek.⁷¹

Locals also came up with suggestions about the routes of possible road constructions. In one of his day-to-day interactions with locals, Necmeddin Sahir Silan quotes a peasant named Mustafa Kantar from Mazgirt, who complained that they ‘were wretched from the lack of roads’. According to Silan, the peasant advised constructing a bridge between Mazgirt-Şeyhsu and connecting the road between Pertek-Mameki with Sorpiyan probably because this road would make Sorpiyan’s distance to Şeyhsu bridge shorter. Necmeddin Sahir Silan backed this demand, arguing that there was already an allocated budget for this road construction project. He also proposed this project be materialized by using the labor of inhabitants who were responsible for paying the road tax.⁷² Another peasant from the Germili village of Çemişgezek also came up with a route suggestion for a construction project that was already under way. For the peasant, ‘not only the old road between Çemişgezek and Elazığ was broken but also the new road to be constructed was not useful’. Instead, he adds, ‘This road should be constructed in the direction of Haçtun-Çemişgezek-Germili, not in the direction of Haçtun-Pağnik-Ağın.’⁷³

Necmeddin Sahir Silan expressed his open support for some of these local demands regarding road construction projects. Yet, there is no written record among the state documents that establish whether state officials met these expectations or turned them down. In parallel with

the military's need, some road construction projects, such as the road between Elazığ-Hozat-Pülümür, were already under way. Additionally, the government planned to construct roads between Pülümür-Seyithan, Hıdırdamı-Çemişgezek, Zeynigediği (Erzincan)-Pülür.⁷⁴ These demands pressured the local bureaucrats and politicians to take local interests into account and led the road construction projects to remain on the agenda of the policymakers. To be sure, Necmeddin Sahir Silan admitted himself that 'road (construction) affairs were not entirely satisfactory for the citizens (in the region)', because some road construction projects, such as the one between Seyithan-Tahsini or Mameki-Seyithan, had made only partial progress because of financial constraints.⁷⁵ Still, the fact that the state authorities began constructing these roads shows that they did not entirely neglect the road construction projects in the post-operation period.

Linguistic Homogenization and Turkification Policies through Education

For the Republican elite, who were motivated to incorporate the Kurdish population into the political system through assimilation, the redistribution of lands and the expansion of road networks were not sufficient to eradicate the use of the Kurdish language by the local inhabitants. As Zeynep Türkyılmaz contends, 'after the military operation, schools became the major mechanism, officials believed, that would transform the troubling Dersim into an orderly, hygienic, modern, and most importantly, Turkish region, thereby an ordinary site of the national homeland.'⁷⁶ Because the Republican elite did not explicitly accept the existence of Kurds as a separate distinct group and, thus, their language, their stance was one that perceived an inherent and irreconcilable contradiction between the Kurdish and Turkish languages. The infamous Sun Language Theory developed by the Kemalist regime dictated that all languages descended from a proto-Turkic language spoken in central Asia, and the Kurdish language was no exception.⁷⁷

Because the Kurdish language was a forgotten, deteriorated version of the Turkish language, the former had to be wiped out to make the latter the only language in the region.

Educational institutions were the most ‘useful’ state institutions to undertake the linguistic homogenization policies of the Turkish state.⁷⁸ Prime Minister İsmet İnönü attached utmost importance especially to the elementary schools as these institutions were an opportunity ‘to turn Kurdified (*Kürtleşmiş*) subjects back to Turkishness’.⁷⁹ The curriculum was designed with this purpose in mind: because most school-aged kids started elementary school without a basic knowledge of Turkish, the time allocated for Turkish classes, particularly in the Eastern districts, was higher than any other subject.⁸⁰ Moreover, at least in theory, state-supervised education was compulsory for every citizen of Turkey.⁸¹ In practice, however, the Turkish state had difficulties in turning this compulsory practice into reality in Dersim. In other words, having schools is one thing; putting people in touch with them is quite another.

It should be made explicitly clear from the outset that, at the end of the 1940s, Dersim had more schools than other Eastern provinces where Kurdish inhabitants were predominant. According to the statistics compiled on educational matters in 1941-42, the number of schools in Dersim exceeded the number of schools in Bingöl, Hakkari, Mardin, Muş, Siirt, Urfa, Van, and Diyarbakır.⁸² Moreover, following the military operation, the Turkish state exponentially increased the number of schools in Dersim. The total number of schools jumped from 26 in 1937 to 64 schools by 1943.⁸³ In later years, the number of schools in Dersim continued to surpass the number of schools in other Eastern provinces, as shown in Figure 2 below.

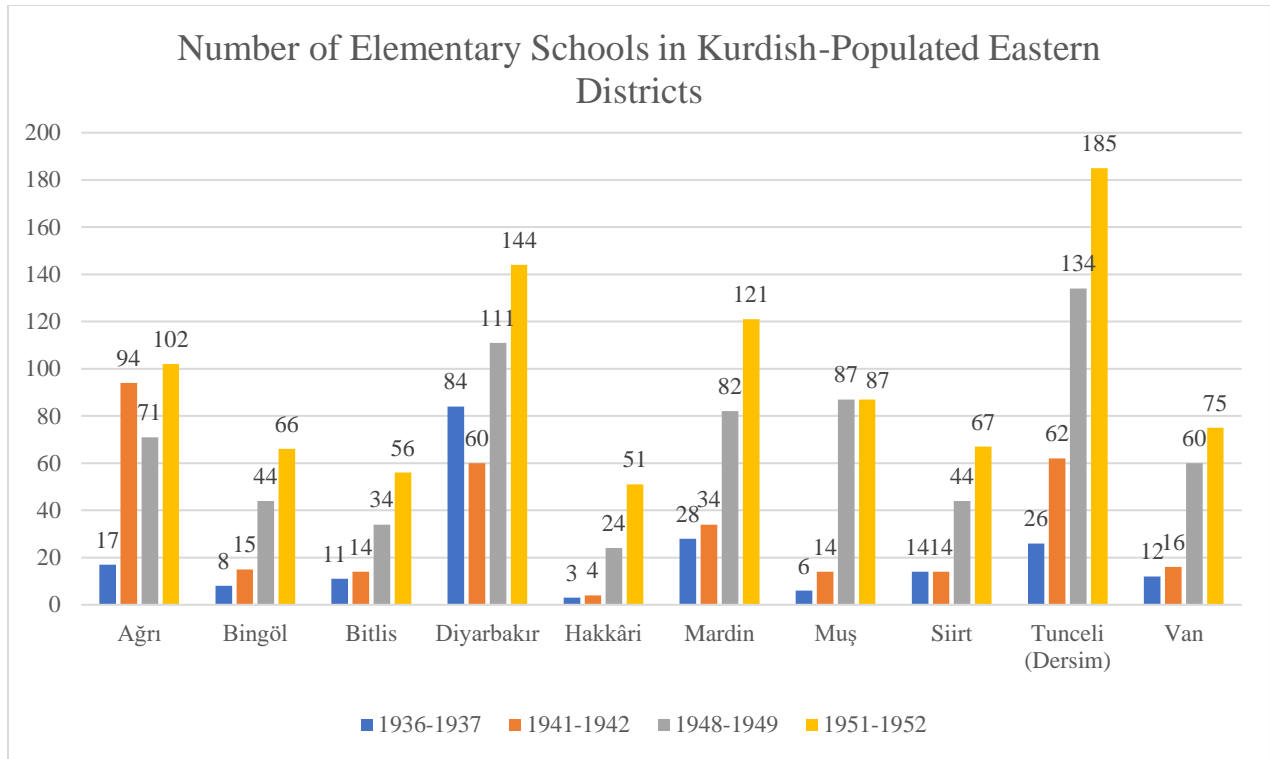


Figure 2. The Number of Elementary Schools in Kurdish Populated Eastern Districts

Source: The data was retrieved from various sources. For 1936-1937 see BCA 31.1.0.0.90.559.2; for 1941-1942 see Başvekalet İstatistik Umum Müdürlüğü, *Maarif İstatistiği 1941-1942* [Education Statistics 1941-1942] (Ankara: Ankara Basım ve Ciltevi, 1944); for 1948-1949 see Başbakanlık İstatistik Genel Müdürlüğü, *Milli Eğitim İlk Öğretim İstatistikleri 1948-1949* [Statistics of National Elementary Education 1948-1949] (Ankara: Yeni Matbaa, 1950); and for 1951-1952 see Başvekalet İstatistik Umum Müdürlüğü, *Milli Eğitim İstatistikleri İlk Öğretim 1951-1952* [Statistics of National Elementary Education 1951-1952] (Ankara).

Note that Dersim's population was (much) smaller than some of these listed cities such as Mardin, Diyarbakır, Van, Siirt, and Ağrı by 1945, with Muş to be added to this list in 1955. Although the number of schools in all Eastern cities listed above substantially increased from 1936 to 1952, the most consistent and dramatic change occurred in Dersim. In fact, by some margin, Dersim ended up having more schools than Diyarbakır, which was the largest urban center in the East. President İsmet İnönü took pride in this change and noted in his memoirs that 'when we renounced power in 1950, Dersim had the highest rate of elementary schools among all cities of

Turkey'.⁸⁴ Though not entirely true, for there were other cities in the West with a higher number of elementary schools, his statement accurately represented the unique position of Dersim, at least in Kurdish-populated cities. Nevertheless, the main question remains: how did the locals respond to the opening of new schools?

Necmeddin Sahir Silan's response to this question was quite optimistic as he emphasized the locals' enthusiasm to go to the schools and learn Turkish: 'The national education movement is making progress at a pleasing rate. Young girls, boys, and infants compete with one another to learn Turkish.'⁸⁵ Contrary to Silan's optimism, however, the number of people who sent their children to school remained relatively low throughout the 1940s. According to the 1940 population census in Dersim, the total number of school-aged children was 20,783, whereas the number of children enrolled in a state school was only about 4,183 in 1944, which meant that almost 80 per cent of children did not attend school.⁸⁶ The exponential increase in the number of schools from 64 in 1943 to 134 in 1949 brought about a gradual increase in the number of enrolled students. Yet, one year before single-party rule ended in 1949, the number of school-age children not attending the schools was still higher, though only slightly, than those attending.⁸⁷ In other words, more than 50 per cent of children in Dersim did not participate in school, to which the Republican elite attributed a considerable significance in the assimilation of locals.

It is not possible to compare the enrollment rates in Dersim with other Eastern cities because of the scarcity of evidence. However, the general overview of enrollments in Eastern cities implies that the low enrollment rates in Dersim reflected a general trend in Eastern cities. The DP deputy of Diyarbakır, Nazım Önen, brought this issue to the table in 1950 and sought information on the enrollment rates in the eastern cities.⁸⁸ In response, the Minister of Education Tefik İleri said that only 167,296 out of 400,218 school-age kids attended schools in the eastern

cities.⁸⁹ İleri explained this low enrollment rate with reference to the insufficient number of schools, arguing that the construction of 3,613 additional schools was necessary to boost the low enrollment rates in the region. Though the inadequate number of schools may indeed have been a factor in low enrollment rates in other Eastern cities, this was not quite the case for Dersim. Despite having a smaller population than most cities in the East, the number of schools in Dersim was rather exceptionally high, which was implicitly criticized by the deputies of other eastern cities. For instance, the DP Diyarbakır deputy Yusuf Kamil Aktuğ said that ‘the enormous barracks, schools, and roads’ have been constructed ‘by spending millions in Tunceli, Hozat, Kalan, Ovacık whose people were killed and subject to exile’.⁹⁰ Aktuğ’s criticism was directed towards the neglect of education in other eastern cities such as Diyarbakır, which he represented in the parliament.

Based on this evidence, it is obvious the central state authorities assigned special importance to the educational institutions in Dersim. In this picture, the exceptionality of Dersim stemmed not from the low enrollment rates but from the low enrollment rate despite having the highest number of schools in cities with a predominantly Kurdish population. When evaluating this picture, one should obviously take other factors into account in explaining the low number of enrolled students: logistical issues arising from the insufficient networks of roads, the use of children as a labor force by families, or the financial burden of educating children could also explain why enrollment rates remained low. Alternatively, one should also consider that the documents from state archives refrain from explicitly mentioning the political tension stemming from the uneasy presence of the Turkish nationalist agenda in a predominantly Kurdish city. Given the high-handed policies and authoritarian political climate of the single-party era, a silent

resistance may have been at stake, which either went unnoticed or was found too unpleasant to be discussed by the state officials.

Conclusion

The literature customarily interprets the relationship between the Kurds and the state as a zero-sum game, especially when it comes to the Republican period. This framework is evident in the analysis of the state-building process in Dersim, viewing Kurds as a homogenous and coherent entity that was inherently hostile to the Turkish state. Based on what I discussed above, it is not possible to view the local responses to the growing state presence in Dersim as either purely hostile or obedient. Trying to understand the state-building in Dersim in such dichotomous terms is highly misleading as it causes us to overtly dismiss the complex negotiation process between the state officials and the locals.

The locals, primarily the peasants, invited the state officials in to improve their quality of life and solve their long-lasting problems through the redistribution of land and the construction of new roads. In other words, that the locals were predominantly Kurds did not hold them back from pressuring state officials to implement some policies for their well-being. This, however, did not necessarily mean that the Turkish state could enforce its pre-operation political agenda without significant problems. Even when the locals pushed the state to follow policies which were already on the state officials' agenda, the Turkish state encountered considerable limits to implement these policies. Even after the military operation, the number of peasants who were landless was still high, and the construction of new roads was not particularly satisfactory. The state policies regarding education and the local responses to the opening of new schools produced much more complicated results compared to the other two policies. In education, the Turkish state made

considerable progress in increasing the number of schools – progress which nevertheless did not reflect on the enrollment rates.

Lastly, I believe that this article also offers implications for contemporary politics. Today it is undeniable that Kurdishness proved resilient as neither the Kurdish identity nor Kurdish language disappeared despite the intentional policy to Turkify the Kurds. As this article suggests, scholars should also account for the ruling elite's undelivered promises in the politicization of Kurdish identity. In other words, these undelivered promises likely bred public discontent and fueled Kurdish nationalist aspirations, turning it into a mass movement from the 1960s onward. Future studies, which would explore the connection between the inadequacy of public services and the politicization of ethnic identity, can open new doors for a more nuanced analysis of the ongoing Kurdish issue.

Acknowledgments

The research for this article was conducted at Binghamton University

Notes

¹ 'Erdoğan Dersim için özür diledi', [Erdoğan apologized for Dersim] *Milliyet*, 23 November 2011, <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/siyaset/erdogan-dersim-icin-ozur-diledi-1466430>.

² A list of recently published accounts on Dersim would include, but is not limited to the following studies. Mahmut Akyürekli, *Dersim Kürt Tedibi 1937-1938* [Dersim Punishment of Kurds 1937-1938] (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2011); Zeliha Hepkon, Songül Aydın, Şükrü Aslan (eds), *Dersim'i Parantezden Çıkarmak* [Taking Dersim out of Parenthesis] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013); Şükrü Aslan (ed.), *Herkesin Bildiği Sır: Dersim* [A Secret Everyone Knows: Dersim] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010); Şükrü Aslan, Gülay Kayacan, Bülent Bilmez (eds), *Belleklerdeki Dersim '38* [Dersim in Memories] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2015); Hüsnü Merdanoglu, *Tarihi Gerçekler Işığında Dersim'den Ders Almak* [Taking Lessons from Dersim in the Light of Historical Realities] (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2013); Hüseyin Aygün, *Dersim 1938 ve Hacı Hıdır Ataç'ın Defteri* [Dersim 1938 and The Notebook of Hacı Hıdır Ataç] (Istanbul: Yazılama Yayınları, 2016); Hüseyin Aygün, *Dersim 1938 ve Zorunlu İskan: Telgraflar, Dilekçeler, Mektuplar, Fotoğraflar* [Dersim 1938 and Forced Settlement: Telegraphs, Petitions, Letters, Photographs] (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları, 2011); Taha Baran, *1937-1938 Yılları Arasında Basında Dersim* [Dersim in the Media between the Years of 1937-1938] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2014).

³ For some accounts of this kind, see İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* [The Tunceli Law (1935) and the Genocide in Dersim] (Istanbul: Belge Yayınları, 1990), Denise Natali, *The Kurds and the State: Evolving National Identity in Iraq, Turkey and Iran*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005), pp.70-92. Robert

Olson, 'The Kurdish Rebellions of Sheikh Said (1925), Mt. Ararat (1930), and Dersim (1937-8): Their Impact on the Development of the Turkish Air Force and on Kurdish And Turkish Nationalism', *Die Welt Des Islams* 40, no. 1 (2000), pp.67–94, <https://doi.org/10.1163/1570060001569893>.

⁴ Notable exceptions to these accounts in the literature are Nicole Watts's and Martin van Bruinessen's studies. I should particularly acknowledge my inspiration from Nicole Watts's study. See Nicole Watts, 'Relocating Dersim: Turkish State-Building and Kurdish Resistance', in *New Perspectives on Turkey* 23 (2000), pp.5-30 and Martin V. Bruinessen, "Genocide in Kurdistan? The suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937-1938) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds," in *Conceptual and Historical Dimensions of Genocide*, ed. George J. Andreopoulos (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), pp. 141-170.

⁵ Senem Aslan, 'Everyday Forms of State Power and the Kurds in the Early Turkish Republic', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011), pp.75–93.

⁶ Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, 'A "Peripheral" Approach to the 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire: Land Disputes in Peasant Petitions in Post-Revolutionary Diyarbakir', in Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (eds), *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbakir, 1870-1915* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), pp.179-215.

⁷ Ceren Belge, 'State Building and the Limits of Legibility: Kinship Networks and Kurdish Resistance in Turkey', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (2011), pp.95–114.

⁸ Such efforts aimed to replace two native and widely spoken Zazaki and Kurmanji languages with the Turkish language.

⁹ See Tanıl Bora, '1930'lardan 1950'lere Resmi Milliyetçiliğin Dersim'e Bakışı: Asimilasyonizmin Kırılğanlığı', [The Official Nationalists' View on Dersim from the 1930s to the 1950s: Fragility of Assimilationism], in Zeliha Hepkon, Songül Aydın, and Şükrü Aslan (eds), *Dersim'i Parantezden Çıkarmak* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), p.78 and Martin van Bruinessen, 'Genocide in Kurdistan?', p.147.

¹⁰ Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta, 'Introduction: Rethinking the Theories of the State in an Age of Globalization', in Aradhana Sharma and Akhil Gupta (eds), *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), p.9.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1970), p.56.

¹² Andreas Wimmer, *Nationalist Exclusion and Ethnic Conflict: Shadows of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.93.

¹³ Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population 1830-1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), p.182.

¹⁴ When the Republic compiled its first population census in 1927, the number of Armenian-speaking people in Dersim were as low as 556. See Savaş Sertel, 'Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin İlk Genel Nüfus Sayımına Göre Dersim Bölgesinde Demografik Yapı', [The Demographic Structure of the Dersim Region according to the First Population Census of the Republic of Turkey] *Fırat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 24, no.1 (2014), p.556.

¹⁵ Cihangir Gündoğdu and Vural Genç, *Dersim'de Osmanlı Siyaseti: İzâle-i Vahşet, Tashîh-i İtikâd ve Tasfiye-i Ezhân 1880-1913* [The Ottoman Politics of Dersim: Destroying Ferocity, Correcting Faith, and Clarifying Mind] (Istanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2013), p.20.

¹⁶ Alişan Akpınar, Sezen Bilir, Serhat Bozkurt, Namık Kemal Dinç, 'II. Abdülhamid dönemi raporlarında "Dersim sorunu" ve zihinsel devamlılık', [The Question of Dersim in the Reports of Abdulhamid II's Era and Continuity in the Mindset], in Şükrü Aslan (ed.), *Herkesin Bildiği Sır* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), pp.311-35.

¹⁷ More information can be found in *Dersim: Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı'nın Raporu* [Dersim: General Directorate of Gendarmerie's Report] (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 1998), pp.118-44.

¹⁸ Andrew Mango, 'Atatürk and the Kurds', *Middle Eastern Studies* 35, no. 4 (1999), p.6.

¹⁹ David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1996), p.185. Some tribes in Dersim region also supported this rebellion although, according to some researchers, Alevi identity played a more important role than the Kurdish ethnic identity in this cooperation. See Dilek Kızıldağ Soileau, 'Belgelerdeki Mi, Belleklerdeki Mi : Hangi Seyid Rıza ?', [The Seyid Rıza of Documents or the Seyid Rıza of Memories] *Kebikeç*, no. 36 (2013), pp.7–36.

²⁰ These reports were written respectively by Inspector Hamdi Bey in 1926, Governor Cemal Bey in 1926, Chief of General Staff Fevzi Paşa in 1930, General-Inspectorate Ibrahim Tali Bey in 1931, the Minister of Internal Affairs Şükrü Kaya in 1931, the commander of 3rd Division Halis Pasa in 1931.

²¹ Faik Bulut, *Dersim Raporları* [Reports on Dersim] (Istanbul: Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2013), p.223.

²² Bilal N. Şimşir, *Kürtçülük* [Kurdism] (Ankara: Bilgi Yayınevi, 2009), pp.383-84.

²³ *Dersim Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı'nın Raporu*, pp.49-50.

²⁴ Bülent Varlık (ed.), *Umumî Müfettişler Konferansı'nda Görüşülen ve Dahiliye Vekaleti'ni İlgilendiren İşlere Dair Toplantı Zabıtları ile Rapor ve Hülâsası* [The Meeting Minutes, the Report, and the Summary of the Meeting

Concerning the Affairs of the Ministry of Interior, which Took Place at the General Inspectorates Conference] (Ankara: Dipnot Yayınları), p.185.

²⁵ Mesut Yegen, "Prospective-Turks" or "Pseudo-Citizens:" Kurds in Turkey', *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009), pp.597–615, <https://doi.org/10.3751/63.4.14>.

²⁶ Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivi 4, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950* [The Dersim Operation and the Republican Bureaucracy 1936-1950] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2011), p.4.

²⁷ BCA 30. 10.0.0. 110. 740. 22, 5.

²⁸ Şimşir, *Kürtçülük*, p.379 and Bulut, *Dersim Raporları*, pp.243-44.

²⁹ Bulut, *Dersim Raporları*, p.260.

³⁰ Ibid., p.262.

³¹ Ibid., p.277

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., p.264.

³⁴ Ibid., p.262.

³⁵ Resmi Gazete, 'Yeniden Dokuz kaza ve beş nihayet teşkiline ve bunlarla otuz iki nahiyeye ait kadrolar hakkında kanun', [The Law Concerning the Establishment of Nine Counties and Five Towns and the Staff of Thirty-two Districts] no. 2885, 25 October 1935.

³⁶ İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu*, p.20.

³⁷ See Saygı Öztürk, *İsmet Paşa'nın Kürt Raporu* [İsmet Paşa's Report on Kurds] (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2007), p.57.

³⁸ BCA 030.10. 110. 740. 23, 6, 12-3.

³⁹ Kieser, Hans-Lukas, Dersim Massacre, 1937-1938, Online Encyclopedia of Mass Violence, [online], published on 27 July 2011: <http://bo-k2s.sciences-pr.fr/mass-violence-war-massacre-resistance/en/document/dersim-massacre-1937-1938> (accessed 9 June 2011).

⁴⁰ Aslan, 'Everyday Forms', p.79.

⁴¹ Necmeddin Sahir Silan Arşivleri 4 (hereafter NSSA), The report about the general situation of Pülümür district by anonymous author, 1936, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, p.20.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Reşat Aktan, 'Problems of Land Reform in Turkey', *Middle East Journal* 20, no.3 (Summer 1966), p.320.

⁴⁴ NSSA 1, From Necmeddin Sahir Silan to the secretariat of Republican People's Party, 1943 in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları*, [The Eastern Question: Necmeddin Sahir Silan's Reports] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2010), p.211.

⁴⁵ Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *İkinci Adam Cilt 2* [The Second Man Volume 2] (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1968), pp.316-17, quoted in M. Asım Karaömerlioğlu, 'Elite Perceptions of Land Reform in Early Republican Turkey', *Journal of Peasant Studies* 27, no. 3 (2000), p.129.

⁴⁶ NSSA 1, From Necmeddin Sahir Silan to the secretariat of Republican People's Party in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, p.243.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p.244.

⁴⁹ NSSA 4, From Turan Çetin to Necmeddin Sahir Silan, 1943, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, p.238.

⁵⁰ NSSA 1, From Necmeddin Sahir Silan to the secretariat of Republican People's Party, 1943 in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları*, pp.244-45.

⁵¹ NSSA 6, The letter sent by Hıdır Gül, Hıdır Bakır and Ferhat Yeşil, 1948, in *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar (1941-1953)* [The letters from Dersimlis 1941-1953] (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012), p.108.

⁵² BCA 490.1.0.0. 571.2274. 1, 6.

⁵³ *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, 19 Nisan 1948, pp.75-76.

⁵⁴ Ibid, pp.78-79.

⁵⁵ Songül Aydın, '1938'de Dersim'den Batı İllerine Zorunlu Göç', [The Forced Migration from Dersim to the Western Cities in 1938] in Zeliha Hepkon, Songül Aydın and Şükrü Aslan (eds), *Dersim'i Parantezden Çıkarmak* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2013), pp.101-106.

⁵⁶ According to Şükrü Aslan, a total of 134 villages in Dersim 'disappeared' after the military operations of 1937-1938. Şükrü Aslan, 'Genel Nüfus Sayımı Verilerine Göre Dersim'de "Kayıp Nüfus"' ['Missing Population' in

Dersim according to the General Population Census] in Şükrü Aslan (ed), *Herkesin Bildiği Sır* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), p.409.

⁵⁷ NSSA 6, The letter sent by Eyüpoğlu Cemal Bulut, 1947, in *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar (1941-1953)* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012), p.77.

⁵⁸ Ibid. The letter sent by Alioğlu Yusuf Polat and Hüseyinoğlu Kamer Arslan, p.79. I should note that the Turkish state had done little to reconstruct the destroyed villages. See Celal Yıldız, *Dersim Dile Geldi: 1938'in Çocukları Konuştu* [Dersim found its tongue: 1938's Children Talked] (Ankara: Nika Yayınevi, 2012), pp.375-79.

⁵⁹ Note that the petitioners discussed in this paragraph were sharecroppers, not landowners, before the government displaced them. The criteria the Turkish state used to define who would be subject to forced displacement and relocation is still not known and requires further study on the topic.

⁶⁰ *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, 19 Nisan 1948, p.77.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Some deputies of the Democrat Party, such as Fuad Hulusi Demirelli and İsmail Hakkı Çevik, requested that some articles of the Settlement Law be changed as they were against basic human rights. For the changes in the Settlement Law, see *Düştur*, 3. Tertip, Ankara: 1948, volume XXVIII.

⁶³ İsmail Beşikçi, *Doğu Anadolu'nun Düzeni: Sosyo-Ekonomik ve Etnik Temeller* [The Order of East Anatolia: The Socio-Economic and Ethnic Foundations] (Istanbul: E Yayınları, 1969), p.65.

⁶⁴ '[Our critics] say that the feudal system and the influence (*tesir ve nüfuz*) of big landlords or sheikhs should have been abolished and its economic effects should have been seen; and because these were not done, the Eastern Question could not be resolved. However, one should consider [that] we were dealing with social problems to overcome the underdevelopment of the East and form a mechanism of development and integration, just as we did in the western and middle parts of the country. We also strove to complete the infrastructure facilities that needed time.' İsmet İnönü, *Hatıralar* [Memories] (Ankara: Bilge Yayınevi, 2014), p.530.

⁶⁵ Other cities in the Eastern areas such as Ağrı also suffered from the lack of qualified personnel to implement the policy of land redistribution. See BCA 490.1.0.0.614.9.1, 7.

⁶⁶ Celal Bayar, the Minister of Economy, also pointed out to the necessity of transportation networks to trigger economic development in Eastern provinces. See Celal Bayar, *Şark Raporu* [The Report on the East] (Istanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2009), pp.112-21.

⁶⁷ NSSA 4, The report about the general situation of Pülümür district by anonymous author, 1936, in *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, ed. Tuba Akekmekçi, Muazzez, 18-9.

⁶⁸ BCA 490. 01. 513. 2060. 2. 13.

⁶⁹ NSSA 6, Three letters sent by Mehmet Üstündağ along with some other people, 1946-1947-1948, in *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar (1941-1953)* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012), p.55.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.57.

⁷¹ Ibid., p.41.

⁷² NSSA 1, From Necmeddin Sahir Silan to the secretariat of Republican People's Party, 1943, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2010), p.314.

⁷³ Ibid, p.315.

⁷⁴ BCA 30. 10. 72. 471. 3, 3-6.

⁷⁵ NSSA 1, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları*, pp.305, 308-9.

⁷⁶ Zeynep Türkyılmaz, 'Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman's Burden in Dersim: Educating the "Mountain Flowers" of Dersim', *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2016), p.177.

⁷⁷ Michael M. Gunter, *The Kurds: A Modern History* (Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 2017), p.29.

⁷⁸ For a more detailed discussion on the assimilationist and modernist aspects of the education system in the late Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic, see Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia 1913-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp.170-86. For eugenicist approaches in the curriculum and textbooks with strong racist influences, see Ahmet Yıldız, *Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyebilene: Türk Ulusal Kimliğinin Etno-Seküler Sınırları 1919-1938* [How Happy is the one who can say I am a Turk: Ethno-Secular Limits of the Turkish National Identity 1919-1938] (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2001), pp.228-34.

⁷⁹ Saygı Öztürk, *İsmet Paşa'nın Kürt Raporu* (Istanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2007), pp.62-3, quoted in Bahattin Demirtaş, 'Doğu ve Güneydoğu Anadolu Bölgelerinde Eğitim ve Öğretim (1923-1938)', [Education and Teaching in the Eastern and Southeastern Regions] *Ankara Üniversitesi Türk İnkilâp Tarihi Enstitüsü Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 41 (2008), p.66.

⁸⁰ Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, p.177.

⁸¹ See Düstur, Tertip 3, volume 8, p.866, and Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), p.466.

⁸² Başvekalet İstatistik Umum Müdürlüğü, *Maarif İstatistiği, 1941-1942* [The Educational Statistics, 1941-1942] (Ankara: Ankara Basım ve Ciltevi, 1944), pp.18-25.

⁸³ See BCA 30.01.90.559.2, 4. Also see NSSA 1, From Necmeddin Sahir to the secretariat of Republican People's Party, 1940, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları*, p.257.

⁸⁴ İnönü, *Hatıralar*, p.529.

⁸⁵ NSSA 1, The report about my electoral region Tunceli, 1943 in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Doğu Sorunu: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Raporları* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2010), p.354.

⁸⁶ NSSA 4, A report by İbrahim Tuncay about the situation of education in Tunceli, 1949, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, p.344.

⁸⁷ NSSA 4, From Ali Yalçınöz about the situation of education and training in Tunceli, 1949, in Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan (eds), *Dersim Harekâtı ve Cumhuriyet Bürokrasisi 1936-1950*, pp.607-8.

⁸⁸ *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, 4 Aralık 1950, p.36.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *TBMM Tutanak Dergisi*, 25 Nisan 1951, p.261.