

What does Private Yusuf Kenan Akım's diary tell us about Dersim 1938? Locating apathy, militarism and consent

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Abstract

After decades of silence, taboo, and indifference, Dersim 1937-38 gained an unprecedented publicity and coverage, particularly when Prime minister Erdogan issued an apology in 2010. Since then, many different archival collections became more accessible, resulting in the multiplication of scholarship on the Dersim Question. Similarly, documentaries and movies made it a familiar subject for the Turkish public. The academic and non-academic interest however mostly devoted itself to excavating the details of the military operation and different forms of violence inflicted on Dersimlis, and crucial questions such why such radical measures were taken in Dersim and how they were carried out remained inadequately addressed.

In this talk, I will try to seek answers to these questions by discussing an ego-text, a diary of a Turkish soldier kept during the year 1938, while he was doing his compulsory military service. This soldier -Yusuf Kenan Akım, served for two months in the sweeping stage of the genocidal military carried out with intent to resolve the "perennial Dersim Question" once for all. His diary contained short and dry notes about violence inflicted on people and landscape not only detailing the scale of destruction but also revealing its methods and perpetrators.

Based on this rare ego-document, I will discuss the impact of this diary on the image of the enlightened republic civilizing the ignorant and barbaric in Dersim. Secondly, I will revisit the debates that revolve around identifying "the perpetrator". I hope to show how this text forces us to think beyond singling out the mastermind and encourages us to explore the diversified roles and identities of many perpetrators. Finally, I will bring up the issue of sources, as this diary has only re-affirmed what the Dersimlis narrated for decades. As such, this diary also raises interesting questions on which voices and sources are considered legitimate, valid and authoritative for studying past crimes, and how such choices reveal ethical, political as well as psychological limits and potentials as Dersim case aptly demonstrates.

Bio

Zeynep Türkyılmaz received her Ph.D. from the Department of History at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 2009. She worked at Dartmouth College as an assistant professor of history between 2011 and 2016. She is currently a EUME Fellow at the Forum Transregionale Studien and at the Center for Global History of Freie Universität Berlin. Her research and teaching interests include state-formation, gender, nationalism, and religious communities with a focus on heterodoxy and missionary work in the Middle East from 1800 to the present.