

# The Contested Making of Modern Turkey in People's Words (1923–1948)

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## Approvals

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## Declaration of Originality

The intellectual content of this thesis, which has been written by me and for which I take full responsibility, is my own, original work, and it has not been previously or concurrently submitted elsewhere for any other examination or degree of higher education. The sources of all paraphrased and quoted materials, concepts, and ideas are fully cited, and the admissible contributions and assistance of others with respect to the conception of the work as well as to linguistic expression are explicitly acknowledged herein.



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## Abstract

The Contested Making of Modern Turkey in People's Words (1923–1948)

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Associate Professor Irmak Ertör, Thesis Advisor

This thesis explores the everyday experiences and political subjectivities of ordinary citizens in early Republican Turkey through a close examination of letters and petitions submitted to state officials and party headquarters (Republican People's Party, hereafter RPP) between 1932 and 1948. Drawing from archival sources, the study analyzes how individuals articulated grievances related to employment, poverty, injustice, and local political representation. Rather than treating the state as a monolithic or detached institution, the thesis adopts a relational perspective that views state-society interactions as mutually constitutive. By foregrounding the voices of petitioners, this research challenges elite-centered narratives and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the early Republic's social fabric. It also critically engages with the historiography of modern Turkey by incorporating perspectives from social history, archival theory, and theories of everyday resistance. Through these lenses, the thesis demonstrates how ordinary people navigated and negotiated the rapidly transforming political order of their time.

49,498 words

## Özet

Halkın Anlatılarıyla Modern Türkiye'nin Tartışmalı İnşası (1923–1948)

Işıl Karacan, Yüksek Lisans Adayı, 2025

Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Atatürk İlkeleri ve İnkılap Tarihi Enstitüsü

Doçent Doktor Irmak Ertör, Tez Danışmanı

Bu tez, Erken Cumhuriyet Türkiye'sinde sıradan vatandaşların gündelik deneyimlerini ve politik öznelliklerini, 1932 ile 1948 yılları arasında devlet yetkililerine ve parti merkezine (Cumhuriyet Halk Fırkası) sunulan mektup ve dilekçelerin yakından incelenmesi yoluyla ele almaktadır. Arşiv kaynaklarına dayanan bu çalışma, bireylerin istihdam, yoksulluk, adaletsizlik ve yerel siyasi temsil gibi konulardaki şikâyetlerini nasıl dile getirdiklerini analiz etmektedir. Devleti tekil ve toplumdan kopuk bir yapı olarak ele almak yerine, bu tez, devlet-toplum ilişkilerini karşılıklı olarak kurucu bir çerçevede değerlendiren ilişkisel bir perspektifi benimsemektedir. Dilekçe sahiplerinin sesini merkeze alarak, bu araştırma elit merkezli anlatılara meydan okumakta ve erken cumhuriyetin toplumsal dokusuna dair daha incelikli bir anlayışa katkı sunmaktadır. Aynı zamanda modern Türkiye tarih yazımına, sosyal tarih, arşiv kuramı ve gündelik direniş teorileri gibi yaklaşımları dâhil ederek eleştirel bir katkı sağlamaktadır. Bu kuramsal mercekler aracılığıyla tez, sıradan insanların hızla dönüşen siyasal düzende nasıl yol aldıklarını ve pazarlık yaptıklarını gözler önüne sermektedir.

49,498 kelime





To Mom , Dad  
and Bella



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## Abbreviations and Acronyms

|     |                                                                                  |
|-----|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| BCA | Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (The Republican Archives under the Prime Ministry) |
| CUP | Committee of Union and Progress                                                  |
| RPP | The Republican People's Party                                                    |



## Acknowledgements

Like every creative work, this thesis could only come into being as the result of a collective effort. First and foremost, I owe immense gratitude to Seda Altuğ, who has been far more than an advisor and has profoundly touched my life throughout my academic journey. Her suggestions and the course I took with her at the Atatürk Institute have greatly transformed my intellectual trajectory. My other main advisor, Irmak Ertör, taught me so much about academic discipline and the principle of building egalitarian relationships in the academy, which became guiding values for both my academic ethos and intellectual production. I am also deeply thankful to committee members Berna Yazıcı and Bülent Bilmez for their invaluable interventions and comments.

The idea of studying letters written by ordinary people during the founding years of the Republic emerged one night while having tea with Kadir Selamet. Throughout every stage of writing this thesis, Kadir listened to me for hours, continually surprising me with his enviable intellect, and shared the same semantic universe with me – my gratitude to him is beyond words. Furkan and Onur stood by me in every hardship, and spending time with them, sometimes simply studying together, was always a tremendous joy. Without Maya's support—someone I've shared a lifetime of memories with—the journey of writing this thesis would have felt far darker and lonelier. During my coursework at the Institute, the company of Lilah, Finlay, Elif Bengüsu and Cenk made life far more meaningful and enriched this journey.

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## Introduction

*History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.*

– James Joyce, *Ulysses*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis examines letters, petitions, and denunciations authored by ordinary individuals between 1932 and 1948 to explore how citizens in early Republican Turkey navigated state power, negotiated everyday grievances, and articulated political subjectivities. Rather than focusing solely on elite actors or institutional transformations, the thesis focuses on the voices of those who wrote to the state, not as passive subjects, but as individuals who strategically mobilized available discourses to pursue material and legal claims. These documents offer critical insights into the practices of everyday resistance, negotiation with bureaucratic structures, and the complex processes through which individuals positioned themselves vis-à-vis the new Republican order.

Through conceptualizing subjectivity as a historically contingent formation, shaped through language, discourses, and engagement with

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<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses*, (New York: Random House, 1961), 34.

power, this thesis treats petition writing not solely as a bureaucratic tool, but as a political act.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, it attempts to contribute to the social historiography of early Republican Turkey by centering the micro-politics of ordinary life and the discursive spaces where state and society met. The letters examined in this thesis, while often seeking tangible outcomes such as employment, property restoration, or exemption from taxes, also reveal how Republican ideals, citizenship, duty, and sacrifice were appropriated and redeployed by citizens for personal and communal purposes. Through the performative language of loyalty, victimhood, or moral uprightness, writers engaged with the meta-narratives of the nation-state, at times mirroring, subverting, or instrumentalizing them.

Importantly, this thesis aims to rethink the assumption of a homogeneous or totalizing subaltern condition. While many of the letter writers came from similar socio-cultural, impoverished, and politically marginalized backgrounds, they inhabited different positions within the social hierarchy shaped by class, ethnicity, gender, and access to state resources. Rather than treating the “people” as a unified or romanticized category, the project seeks to highlight the fragmentation within the subaltern sphere and the uneven ways in which individuals encountered and contested state authority.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, this research argues that early Republican citizenship was not a static legal status imposed from above, but a dynamic and contested space negotiated from below as well.<sup>4</sup> The voices captured in these letters expose a dialogical relationship between the state and its citizens, one shaped by compliance, resistance, appropriation, and the strategic use and reproduction of official discourse. By attending to these narratives, the thesis focuses on the everyday politics of

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<sup>2</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1994); Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 4 (1982): 777–95.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (2003): 113–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jsh.2003.0143>.

<sup>4</sup> Timothy Mitchell, “2. Society, Economy, and the State Effect,” in *2. Society, Economy, and the State Effect* (Cornell University Press, 2018), <https://doi.org/10.7591/9781501717789-005>; Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” *American Political Science Review* 85, no. 1 (1991): 77–96, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1962879>.

the early Republic and tries to understand the texture of how modern Turkey was made not only through laws and reforms, but also in the words and actions of its people.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis pays special attention to the intersectionality (and diversity?) of subaltern voices. It recognizes that social, economic, and gendered positions significantly shaped how individuals experienced the state and articulated their claims. A widow petitioning for her pension, for example, did not write from the same positionality as a male landowner contesting a tax. These variations challenge homogenous categorizations of 'the ordinary people' and demonstrate the need for a more nuanced understanding of citizenship as lived experience. Petition writing in this context functioned as a space of both compliance and critique. While many letters internalized the moral frameworks of the Republic, reiterating loyalty to the nation, respect for the founding name, Atatürk, and adherence to civic duties, they also illuminated the gaps between official ideology and material reality. The dissonance between the promises of modern citizenship and the actual conditions of poverty, exclusion, and bureaucratic neglect is a recurring theme across the documents examined.

By closely analyzing the language, narrative structure, and affective appeals of these texts, the thesis reveals how petitioners navigated multiple registers of address. Some employed legalistic discourse, citing laws and regulations to bolster their claims; others drew on emotional appeals, describing their suffering, hunger, or despair to elicit sympathy. Others invoked their contributions to the War of Independence, aligning themselves with the heroic national narrative to secure favor or justice. This multiplicity of rhetorical strategies underscores the agency of the

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<sup>5</sup> Yiğit Akin, "Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in Early Republican Turkey: Politics of Petitioning," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39, no. 3 (2007): 435–57; Murat Metinsoy, *The Power of the People: Everyday Resistance and Dissent in the Making of Modern Turkey, 1923-38*, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009025775>; Hale Yilmaz, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey 1923-1945* (Syracuse University Press, 2013).

writers. Even in conditions of extreme precarity, individuals find ways to assert presence within the emerging political order. Their writings usually reveal a sort of tactical engagement with the language of the Republic, selective, situational, and shaped by living conditions.

The reason this thesis adopts the timeframe of 1923 to 1948 is not to reaffirm the dominant historiographical narrative of a clean rupture between empire and republic, but rather to trace how the foundational rhetoric of the new Turkish state, its political vocabulary, ethical claims, and citizenship ideals, began to emerge and evolve in the writings of ordinary people during this period. Rather than treating 1923 as a sharp rupture, the thesis approaches it as a moment of rearticulation, in which the continuities and transformations from the late Ottoman period were negotiated and reframed through everyday interactions with the early Republican state. The decision stems from a textual observation: it is in the correspondence from this period that one begins to detect a rhetorical engagement with the construction of a new political order, a new nation-state, along with a rising political stance. These shifts do not necessarily confirm a total break with the Ottoman past but instead point to an emerging language of modern governance that begins to appear with in the writings of ordinary people around this time.

The endpoint of the research, 1948, is equally significant. It marks the aftermath of the 1938 Dersim Tertele, which also led to the large-scale deportation of the Dersimi population. Following the enactment of the 1947, some members of the displaced community were allowed to return to their places of origin.<sup>6</sup> Many of these returnees wrote letters that narrated their experiences of exile and loss, while articulating legal and political claims concerning restitution, property, and reintegration. Including these letters allows the thesis to capture the long-term effects of state violence on certain communities and examine how the language of rights and citizenship was mobilized by those returning from the margins. Moreover, the year 1948 also overlaps with the broader transition to

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<sup>6</sup> Dilek Kurban et al., *Adaletin kıyısında: "zorunlu" göç sonrasında Devlet ve Kürtler : 5233 sayılı Tazminat Yasası'nın bir değerlendirmesi : Van örneği* (TESEV, 2012).

multi-party politics in Turkey. This moment of political pluralization carries implications for how individuals imagined and articulated their place within the Republic, making it a particularly fertile ground for analyzing the evolving social and political fabric.<sup>7</sup>

Importantly, the thesis does not proceed in a strictly chronological fashion. Instead, it is organized thematically in order to better capture the distinct socio-political conditions and narrative strategies embedded in different categories of documents. The thesis begins with letters and petitions from the early Republican period in Chapter II, but then moves to analyze denunciation letters collected by the Republican People's Party (CHP/RPP) around the 1939 local elections in Chapter III. Finally, in Chapter IV, it concludes by examining letters written by those who were forcibly displaced from Dersim in 1938 and later attempted to reestablish their lives following the Pardon Act. This thematic structure is based on three central motivations. First, it allows the thesis to highlight how everyday complaints, demands, and narrative strategies differed significantly between citizens who had remained in the center of the Republic's civic vision and those who had been exiled or marginalized. In the first chapter, which deals with early petitions, the grievances often concern employment, land, bureaucratic injustices, or poverty, but they are expressed within a framework that presumes a relationship of accountability between the citizen and the state. In contrast, the letters written by the Dersim exiles are marked by themes of loss, displacement, erasure, and a precarious legal status. These individuals, having experienced deportation and exclusion, narrated their stories from the margins of the citizenship regime. I claim that their appeals reveal a stark inequality in how the early Republican state treated different populations, rooted in ethnic, religious, and linguistic distinctions.

The other reason why the thesis does not follow a chronological fashion is to enable the study to track the evolution of political discourse across two key moments: the early 1920s and the late 1930s. In the first

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<sup>7</sup> Cemil Koçak, "Parliament Membership during the Single-Party System in Turkey (1925-1945)," *European Journal of Turkish Studies. Social Sciences on Contemporary Turkey*, no. 3 (December 2005): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.497>.

period, the fluidity of identity categories, Ottoman, Muslim, and Anatolian, still echoes through the petitions, reflecting the imperial past's lingering influence.<sup>8</sup> The rhetorical forms are often shaped by longstanding bureaucratic traditions of supplication and deference, and by a legal imagination that still bears Ottoman traces. However, I argue that in the denunciation letters sent before the 1939 elections, a different tone emerges. Here, one can observe the consolidation of the nation-state's discursive architecture to a certain extent: terms such as "loyalty," "service to the state," "traitors," "proper citizenship," and "democracy" circulate with increased frequency. The senders of these letters do not merely address the state as petitioners; they actively participate in defining and policing the boundaries of citizenship. Denunciation becomes a form of civic performance through which individuals express political belonging by accusing others of disloyalty.<sup>9</sup> These texts thus offer rich material for understanding how ordinary people internalized, appropriated, and weaponized Republican norms in their local environments.

In this context, one of the primary analytical goals of this thesis is to highlight the dual character of citizenship in the early Republic. That is, while all individuals were formally designated as citizens of the new nation state, the actual experience of citizenship was fractured along lines of ethnic identity, religious affiliation, and language. The final chapter argues and intends to demonstrate that Dersim community, composed predominantly of Kurdish Alevis, was structurally excluded from the normative model of "ideal citizenship" promoted by the Republican regime. Their marginalization is not only observable through physical displacement, but also through their textual representations in their letters,

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<sup>8</sup> Michael E. Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (University of California Press, 2001), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/j.ctt1pncp9>; Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey* (University of Washington Press, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Ewick and Susan S. Silbey, "Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales: Toward a Sociology of Narrative," *Law & Society Review* 29, no. 2 (1995): 197, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3054010>; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Editor's Introduction: Petitions and Denunciations in Russian and Soviet History1," *Russian History* 24, nos. 1–2 (1997): 1–9, <https://doi.org/10.1163/187633197X00014>.

which testify to the exclusionary practices of the state. Tracing these differences across the two bodies of letters allows the thesis to theorize citizenship not as a uniform legal status, but as a field of contestation shaped by state power and local subjectivities.

The Republican project did not merely impose categories from above; it also depended on everyday participation, surveillance, and moral discourse from below.<sup>10</sup> The denunciation letters reflect this bottom-up dynamic, wherein individuals sought not only to appeal to the state but to demonstrate their own conformity with its ideological demands. The comparative reading of these letters and those written by the Dersim exiles, who were structurally excluded from such ideological participation, helps to uncover the multiple, unequal registers of political subjectivity at play.

The third motivation for structuring the thesis thematically is to analyze the patterns of language and political self-fashioning used by different groups, particularly how the language of civilization, loyalty, democracy, and progress was adopted by those who were not in direct ethnic or linguistic conflict with the Republican regime. Citizens who were aligned with the Republic's foundational identity claims often used state's own vocabulary to frame their demands and grievances. These individuals positioned themselves as rightful beneficiaries of the new order, appealing to the principles of Kemalist modernization in order to claim justice or protection. By contrast, the Dersim exiles, whose very identity was marked as outside the bounds of acceptable citizenship, often adopted a more juridical or moral emphasis on rights, suffering, innocence, and restoration rather than alignment with state ideology. This contrast in narrative patterns is key to understanding the multilayered nature of early Republican political life. It suggests that the language of modernity and democracy was not uniformly distributed or equally accessible. The ability to speak "as a citizen" depended on one's proximity to the ethno-

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<sup>10</sup> Antonio Gramsci and Joseph A. Buttigieg, *Prison Notebooks*, European Perspectives (Columbia University Press, 1992).

national ideals of the Republic.<sup>11</sup> The thesis argues that this asymmetry can be traced not only in the content of the letters but also in the narrative forms, rhetorical strategies, and underlying assumptions embedded in them.

The thesis is structured as follows: The first chapter focuses on letters sent to the RPP headquarters during the early years of the Republic. These letters largely reflect the material and emotional aftermath of World War I, widespread death, hunger, and poverty shaped how people addressed the new regime. Many petitioners drew on a language that emphasized past sacrifices made for the Ottoman Empire, recalling the honor of serving the state and reminding the new government of their loyalty and suffering. This language reveals not only their difficult conditions but also how they understood their place in the emerging political order. Although the Republic was declared as a break from the imperial past, the people writing these letters did not necessarily experience this as a clean rupture. Their words often reflect a continuity of memory and expectation: they had been subjects of an empire, and now they were trying to make sense of what it meant to be citizens of a Republic. There's a clear trace of imperial belonging in their tone, deferential, formal, and filled with references to duty and hierarchy. At the same time, these letters show how people tried to position themselves within the new political framework, appealing to Republican values to demand jobs, recognition, or justice. Rather than heroic or dramatic acts, what we see here are usually small, everyday negotiations. People wrote in to be seen, to be helped, and to remind the state that they had a history. In doing so, they

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<sup>11</sup> E. F. Keyman and Tuba Kanci, "A Tale of Ambiguity: Citizenship, Nationalism and Democracy in Turkey," *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 2 (2011): 318–36, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2010.00462.x>; Ioannis N. Grigoriadis, "Between Citizenship and the Millet: The Greek Minority in Republican Turkey," *Middle Eastern Studies* 57, no. 5 (2021): 741–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2021.1894553>; Ayse Kadioglu, "Citizenship and Individuation in Turkey: The Triumph of Will over Reason," *Cahiers d'études Sur La Méditerranée Orientale et Le Monde Turco-Iranien*, no. 26 (June 1998): 26, <https://doi.org/10.4000/cemoti.34>; Ayşe Kadioğlu, "An Oxymoron: The Origins of Civic-Republican Liberalism in Turkey," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007): 171–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10669920701378887>.

left behind valuable traces of how ordinary individuals experienced the founding of the Republic, not from above, but from the margins of hardship.

The second chapter shifts both temporally and thematically, focusing on a different moment in the life of the early Republic: the lead-up to the 1939 local elections. This chapter draws from a specific collection within the Presidential Republican Archives, which documents the internal preparations and political atmosphere surrounding the first elections to take place after Atatürk's death. With the absence of Atatürk, this election represented a turning point.<sup>12</sup> It required both the RPP and the newly appointed President İsmet İnönü to adopt a new approach. İnönü launched the campaign with a strong emphasis on internal party meritocracy and democratic renewal, signaling a rhetorical shift in the party's political agenda.

However, as a relatively young political organization still consolidating its authority, the RPP lacked deep knowledge of local political landscapes. Its understanding of informal power structures, patronage networks, and grassroots dynamics, what might be called infrapolitics, was limited.<sup>13</sup> To address this gap, the party encouraged local actors to send letters of denunciation and recommendation to the party headquarters.<sup>14</sup> These letters served a dual purpose: they provided the party leadership with intelligence on regional figures and political currents, and they helped determine which candidates would be suitable to represent the party in the dual electoral system.

By promoting this practice, the RPP was not only trying to exert more control over local politics but also attempting to broaden its appeal and

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<sup>12</sup> Erik-Jan Zürcher, "Three Turning Points in the Political Development of Modern Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 24, nos. 3–4 (2023): 435–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2022.2143266>.

<sup>13</sup> James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (Yale University Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Murat Metinsoy, "FRAGILE HEGEMONY, FLEXIBLE AUTHORITARIANISM, AND GOVERNING FROM BELOW: POLITICIANS' REPORTS IN EARLY REPUBLICAN TURKEY," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 699–719, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000912>.

legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> The act of writing to the center offered a way for individuals and communities to influence candidate selection, often by framing others as unworthy, disloyal, or corrupt. These letters thus became key tools for navigating power within the party, and for negotiating belonging in a rapidly centralizing political structure. This chapter explores how these denunciations reveal the evolving relationship between citizens and the single-party state, where loyalty to the Republic and alignment with party ideals became central criteria for political participation. At the same time, they expose the entanglement of local rivalries, personal grievances, and moral accusations with the formal mechanisms of party-building in the early Republic.

The third and final chapter focuses on the return letters written by citizens from the Dersim region who had been forcibly exiled following the 1938 *Tertele*.<sup>16</sup> These letters were accessed through a published collection of Necmeddin Sahir Silan's personal archive, a source that preserves the voices of individuals directly affected by the state's campaigns. The decision to place this chapter last is intentional. As previously discussed, one of the aims of the thesis is to highlight the asymmetrical citizenship regimes imposed across Turkey's geography, especially the stark contrast between how the state governed the country's different regions. The return petitions from Dersim provide perhaps the clearest example of how these unequal regimes operated. Unlike the letters analyzed in the earlier chapters, the correspondence from petitioners of Dersim reveals a distinct narrative structure. These texts are marked by references to dispossession, forms of violence, and the psychological trauma of displacement. At the same time, they reflect efforts to manage and articulate that trauma, often through a form of cautious yet deliberate negotiation with the very state that inflicted the violence. The tone is neither fully submissive nor openly defiant; it is a layered and coded form of

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<sup>15</sup> Metinsoy, "FRAGILE HEGEMONY, FLEXIBLE AUTHORITARIANISM, AND GOVERNING FROM BELOW."

<sup>16</sup> The term *Dersim Tertele* is used by many members of the Kurdish Alevi community to refer to the violent military campaign carried in 1937–1938.

engagement that underscores both the fragility the resilience and struggles of the writers.

One of the most important aspects of these letters is that they were written by survivors themselves, in their own words. This makes them not only significant counter-narratives to dominant state discourses but also intimate reflections of lived experience, documents that offer access to the emotional, legal, and material struggles of individuals navigating life after mass displacement. By bringing these letters into conversation with the rest of the thesis, this chapter highlights how Dersim Tertele, as a historical event, stands out as a site of intensified repression. It also demonstrates how individuals, even under extreme conditions, continue to write, petition, and negotiate, leaving behind traces of dissent, grief, and demands for justice in the margins of official history-writing.

## § 1.1 Primary Sources and Methodology

The primary corpus of the sources used in this thesis consists of petitions and letters written to the RPP headquarters, as well as to the deputy Necmeddin Sahir Silan, particularly after the 1938 Dersim Tertele and the resulting displacement of the Dersimi population.<sup>17</sup> These sources are treated not merely as records of administrative procedure but as subjective, negotiated texts that offer insights into the modes of political speech and affective expression available to ordinary citizens. To locate these materials, archival research was conducted at the *Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Cumhurbaşkanlığı Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı* in Ankara and Istanbul for 2023 summer. Keyword-based searches were carried out in relevant catalogues using terms such as *dilekçe* (petition) and *mektup* (letter). For the post-1938 period concerning Dersim, geographic identifiers and specific terms like *Dersim*, *Tunceli Koçgiri*, and *sürgün* (exile) were employed in combination with document type identifiers. However, these efforts did not yield a consistent or cohesive body of documentation related to the

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<sup>17</sup> Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan, eds., *Dersimlilerden mektuplar (1941 - 1953)*, 1. basım, Tarih Vakfı - Necmeddin Sahir Silan arşivi 6 (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012).

displaced Dersimi population within state archives. In addition, archival documents were consulted to trace the state's systematic preparations for repression and infrastructural penetration into the Dersim region.

Due to the archival gap about the petitions and letters of the Dersim community, a significant portion of the Dersim-related material was drawn from published letters compiled in *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar*, edited and released by *Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları*. The volume presents letters sent to Necmeddin Sahir Silan by survivors and returnees in the aftermath of the Tertele. Although this collection is derived from Silan's personal archive, thus placing it within the realm of unofficial or para-archival materials, it remains a vital and rare source of subaltern voice, legal appeals, and affective registers of dispossession.<sup>18</sup> As a parliamentary figure tasked with overseeing the region, Silan occupied a pivotal yet ambivalent role: both as an intermediary between the state and the population, and as a participant in the bureaucratic machinery of pacification. The letters, preserved from Silan's personal collection, are not part of any official state archive. This "alternative" archive functions as a counter-discursive space where legal grievances, affective appeals, and critiques of administrative cruelty were voiced by those subjected to state violence and displacement.

This thesis analyzes a total of 150 letters from the book collection, organizing them thematically around three central axes: demands for the return of property and land, appeals to reverse or resist forced displacement, and accusations directed at local administrative officials for acts of cruelty, neglect, and corruption. By clustering the letters according to these categories, the thesis foregrounds the political rationalities and emotional vocabularies employed by petitioners, strategically invoking state rhetoric while simultaneously exposing the contradictions of the Republic's promises of citizenship and equality. The use of this source is also closely linked to the structural decision to position the Dersim

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<sup>18</sup> Antoinette Burton, "Ann Laura Stoler . Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense . Princeton : Princeton University Press . 2009 . Pp. Xiii, 314. \$22.95.," *The American Historical Review* 115, no. 2 (2010): 501–2, <https://doi.org/10.1086/ahr.115.2.501>.

chapter as the final section of the thesis. The absence of corresponding material in official state archives also reveals the limits of what the state was willing to record.

## § 1.2 Literature on Everyday Modes of Negotiation, Resistance and Contestation by Ordinary Citizens

The concept of “everyday resistance” has an extensive literature fed by diverse fields like history, sociology, anthropology, and critical theory. Defined by its subtlety, ordinariness, and embeddedness in daily practices, it contrasts sharply with organized, overt forms of dissent such as protests, strikes, or revolutions. The term “everyday resistance” was popularized by James Scott in his seminal work *Weapons of the Weak*.<sup>19</sup> Scott sought to expand the definition of political resistance by including covert, non-confrontational acts performed by subordinate classes. These included foot-dragging, gossip, feigned ignorance, and small-scale sabotage. Rather than organized protest, these acts were dispersed, anonymous, and often carried out in the face of extreme repression. Scott coined the term “infrapolitics” to describe these hidden transcripts of dissent. Scott’s work drew attention to the ways ordinary people navigate and subvert dominant power structures without necessarily mobilizing visible collective action. His contributions influenced the emergence of subaltern studies in South Asia.<sup>20</sup> Everyday resistance thus became a critical entry point for studying the political agency of marginalized groups. However, the approach was not without criticism. Scholars such as Asef Bayat questioned the over-identification of subaltern groups with passive or hidden forms of resistance, pointing out that such groups are also capable of overt and collective mobilization.<sup>21</sup> Still, Scott’s legacy remains

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<sup>19</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

<sup>20</sup> Gyan Prakash, *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*, 2024; Ranajit Guha, *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford University Press, 1982); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (Afterall Books, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> Asef Bayat, “From ‘Dangerous Classes’ to ‘Quiet Rebels’: Politics of the Urban Subaltern in

foundational, establishing a new domain for understanding how resistance operates under the radar of dominant institutions.<sup>22</sup> However, ambiguity surrounds what exactly counts as everyday resistance, how it operates, and whether it requires conscious intent or explicit outcomes. Johansson and Vinthagen and Johansson's article provides a much-needed theoretical refinement.<sup>23</sup> They argue that everyday resistance is not defined by intention or effect alone, but by its embeddedness in power relations, its performative aspects, and its routine character under the influence of a Foucauldian approach. This intervention is also well articulated by Lila Abu-Lughod in her anthropological work in Bedouins communities, considering resistance as the diagnosis of the power rather than romanticizing it.<sup>24</sup>

This thesis builds on three major theoretical strands shaping the discourse on everyday resistance: Scott's infrapolitics, Antonio Gramsci's counter-hegemony, and Michel de Certeau's practice theory.<sup>25</sup> Gramsci emphasized the ideological struggle within civil society, where subaltern groups challenge dominant narratives through counter-hegemonic practices. Scott, however, focused more narrowly on class relations and everyday tactics used by peasants and other subordinate groups to resist material, status-based, and ideological domination. His typology distinguished between public and disguised forms of resistance. Meanwhile, de Certeau offered a cultural perspective, viewing everyday acts like walking

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the Global South," *International Sociology* 15, no. 3 (2000): 533–57, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026858000015003005>.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen, "Dimensions of Everyday Resistance: An Analytical Framework," *Critical Sociology* 42, no. 3 (2016): 417–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920514524604>.

<sup>24</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod, "The Romance of Resistance: Tracing Transformations of Power through Bedouin Women," *American Ethnologist* 17, no. 1 (1990): 41–55, <https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1990.17.1.02a00030>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Ahearne, "Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life," *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16, no. 1 (2010): 2–3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10286630902971595>; Antonio Gramsci and Lynne Lawner, *Letters from Prison*, 1st Harper Colophon ed (Harper & Row, 1975).

in the city or reading as tactical appropriations of dominant systems. His concept of “tactics” as the art of the weak resonated with Scott’s notion of hidden resistance but added an emphasis on creativity and spatial practice.

Defining everyday resistance is inherently difficult. One risk is making the concept so broad that nearly any non-conformist and bold behavior qualifies as resistance. Johansson and Vinthagen Johansson seek to avoid this pitfall by emphasizing four key criteria: (1) resistance as practice, (2) its entanglement with power, (3) its intersectional nature, and (4) its heterogeneity and contingency.<sup>26</sup> This definition addresses several conceptual debates. First, they reject the idea that resistance must be intentional. Actions may resist power without the actor(s) explicitly aiming to do so. Second, they argue that resistance cannot be fully separated from power; it is both shaped by and shapes the power relations it contests. Third, resistance is rarely directed at a single axis of power. Instead, it engages overlapping structures of domination, including race, gender, class, and sexuality. Lastly, resistance practices are contingent on context; they vary by time, space, actor, and observer.

Historians also have played a crucial role in shaping the study of everyday resistance, particularly through efforts to recover the experiences and agency of marginalized groups across different periods and geographies. While the concept gained traction in anthropology and political science through the works of James Scott, it was historians who grounded it in archival research, and micro-historical analysis. Their contributions often emphasize the material conditions, temporal specificity, and documentary traces of resistance, bringing a critical historical lens to questions of visibility, voice, and power.<sup>27</sup>

Edward P. Thompson, for example, in his landmark book *The Making of the English Working Class*, demonstrated how working-class people were not passive victims of industrial capitalism but active historical

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<sup>26</sup> Abu-Lughod, “The Romance of Resistance”; Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 1–150.

<sup>27</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995).

agents.<sup>28</sup> Thompson revealed how everyday cultural practices, rituals, festivals, and local customs were infused with political meaning and sometimes became vehicles for resistance against enclosure, wage suppression, and state repression. His concept of "moral economy" highlighted how traditional notions of fairness shaped protest and everyday defiance. Thompson also challenged elite-centric historiography by recovering the lived experiences and resistant capacities of the poor.

Eric Hobsbawm, another towering historian of resistance, introduced the concept of "primitive rebels" in his 1959 book of the same name.<sup>29</sup> Hobsbawm focused on social banditry, millenarian movements, and rural insurgencies in pre-modern societies. He argued that these seemingly spontaneous, informal acts of rebellion often reflected broader structural grievances and nascent forms of political consciousness. In *Bandits*, Hobsbawm emphasized how everyday resistance emerged in societies lacking formal political representation, often operating in the grey areas between crime, custom, and protest.

In African history, historians such as Frederick Cooper and Luise White explored how everyday resistance manifested under colonial rule, often through labor slowdowns, manipulation of bureaucratic procedures, and subversive storytelling, rumors.<sup>30</sup> These studies emphasized that resistance was not always revolutionary; it could be strategic, pragmatic, and partial. By embedding acts of resistance within colonial labor regimes and domestic life, historians expanded the concept beyond its initial association with peasant societies by the scholars to include urban workers, women, and children.

One of the methodological challenges historians face is the scarcity or distortion of sources. Everyday resistance often leaves faint traces in official records, if any. Historians such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot have

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<sup>28</sup> E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Penguin Books, 1968).

<sup>29</sup> Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2000).

<sup>30</sup> Luise White, "Social Construction and Social Consequences: Rumors and Evidence," in *Rumor Mills* (Routledge, 2005); Frederick Cooper, "Conflict and Connection: Rethinking Colonial African History," *The American Historical Review* 99, no. 5 (1994): 1516–45, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2168387>.

pointed out how silences in the archive are not accidental but produced through power.<sup>31</sup> As a result, uncovering everyday resistance requires reading subtext, paying attention to anomalies in records. Importantly, historical work on everyday resistance has also been attuned to the problem of interpretation. Historians have warned against projecting contemporary political meanings onto past actions. For example, Walter Johnson cautions that while resistance is important, scholars must also reckon with the ambiguity and limits of liberal agency. Not every act of non-compliance is a political gesture; some may be motivated by survival, despair, or ambivalence.<sup>32</sup>

### § 1.3 Petitioning as a Form of Interactive Political Expression

Petitions, written requests addressed to authorities, have long served as a vital channel for participation and grievance redress across social hierarchies. Petitioning has long occupied a paradoxical space in historical scholarship. Situated between loyalty and protest, obedience and critique, it has served as a channel for political communication, social negotiation, and the articulation of grievance across imperial, monarchical, and republican regimes. David Zaret's *"Petition-and-Response and Liminal Petitioning"* foregrounds petitioning not as an inherently insurgent act but as an "instrument of state," ubiquitous across Eurasian patrimonial regimes. Petitioning served as a form of vertical communication, individuals and collectives articulated needs, complaints, or appeals to state power with the expectation of benevolent intervention. This petition-and-response logic, Zaret argues, relied on deferential rhetoric and legitimized the role of the state as an arbiter of justice and order. Tarrow argues that Zaret's model challenges Charles Tilly's depiction of petitioning as a rustic form of modern protest, part of the modular, national repertoire of contentious politics. While Tilly sees petition campaigns as the hallmark of collective action after the late eighteenth century, Zaret

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<sup>31</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.

<sup>32</sup> Johnson, "On Agency."

pushes back against this teleology approach, showing that petitions functioned as legitimate, routinized mechanisms even in the absence of modern citizenship and public opinion.

Natalie Zemon Davis's "Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France" is another foundational text that explores how ordinary people crafted compelling narratives in petitions for royal pardon.<sup>33</sup> Davis argues that these pardon tales were not straightforward legal testimonies but carefully constructed stories designed to persuade the crown by aligning with prevailing moral, legal, and political norms. These "fictions" reveal the strategic agency of petitioners—often illiterate or marginalized—who collaborated with scribes to frame their actions within acceptable justifications.

Sheila Fitzpatrick's work on Stalinist Russia reframes petitioning as part of a broader culture of surveillance and denunciation. In her study of denunciation letters, especially in "Stalin's Peasants" and "Everyday Stalinism", Fitzpatrick reveals how Soviet citizens wrote to state authorities not just to complain about bureaucratic inefficiency, but to accuse neighbors, co-workers, or even family members of political deviance.<sup>34</sup> These letters, although not petitions in the classical sense, share structural and rhetorical kinship with petitioning. They were often framed in deferential language, employed emotional appeals, and invoked the authority of the state as moral and political arbiter. Fitzpatrick's analysis challenges the assumption that petitions are always about justice or rights; instead, she shows how they could serve instrumental and strategic goals in authoritarian regimes. Fitzpatrick's findings echo Zaret's argument that petitioning cannot be understood solely as democratic expression, it is deeply shaped by institutional cultures and regimes of power.

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<sup>33</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford University Press, 1987).

<sup>34</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996): 831–66, <https://doi.org/10.1086/245396>; Fitzpatrick, "Editor's Introduction."

## § 1.4 Petitioning in the Ottoman Empire

Petitioning in the Ottoman Empire has garnered increasing scholarly attention as a lens through which to understand the everyday workings of imperial governance, subjecthood, and legal pluralism. Recent studies highlight petitions (arzuhâller) not as static bureaucratic documents but as dynamic records of negotiation, contestation, and agency. Historically, the petition (arz) was a primary mode of communication between subjects and rulers in the Ottoman Empire, a practice deeply embedded in Islamic and Middle Eastern bureaucratic traditions.<sup>35</sup> In the Ottoman context, petitions served to inform sultanic authority about grievances, legal disputes, administrative corruption, or requests for tax relief. The work of Ronald Jennings and Suraiya Faroqhi opened up early inquiries into the quotidian experiences of Ottoman subjects through court records and petitions. Jennings, using sharia court records from the 16th-century Kayseri, demonstrated that petitions were integral to the functioning of justice, revealing not only procedural norms but also the social fabric of Ottoman towns.<sup>36</sup>

More recently, Ariel Salzmann and Karen Barkey and George Gavrilis have reframed petitions within broader frameworks of negotiation and patrimonial governance.<sup>37</sup> Barkey and Gavrilis, for instance, argues that

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<sup>35</sup> Andreas Würzler, "Voices From Among the 'Silent Masses': Humble Petitions and Social Conflicts in Early Modern Central Europe," *International Review of Social History* 46, no. S9 (2001): 11–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859001000311>; Akin, "Reconsidering State, Party, and Society in Early Republican Turkey"; Alexandros Lamprou, "Political Petitioning, Denunciation, and State–Society Relations during the Single-Party Period in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 18, no. 3 (2017): 514–41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1300535>; David Zaret, "Petition-and-Response and Liminal Petitioning in Comparative/Historical Perspective," *Social Science History* 43, no. 3 (2019): 431–51, <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2019.16>.

<sup>36</sup> Suraiya Faroqhi, "Political Activity among Ottoman Taxpayers and the Problem of Sultanic Legitimation (1570–1650)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 35, no. 1 (1992): 1–39, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3632686>; Ronald C. Jennings, "The Office of Vekil (Wakil) in 17th Century Ottoman Sharia Courts," *Studia Islamica*, no. 42 (1975): 147–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595461>.

<sup>37</sup> Ariel Salzmann, *Tocqueville in the Ottoman Empire: Rival Paths to the Modern State* (Brill, 2

petitions reflect a flexible, relational imperial order in which power was negotiated across multiple levels of authority rather than unilaterally imposed. Petitions thus appear not as acts of resistance per se, but as embedded forms of mediated loyalty, where subjects sought redress by reinforcing imperial legitimacy. Another critical dimension of petitioning studies is the intersection with Ottoman legal pluralism. Scholars such as Boğaç Ergene have shown that petitions often traveled across multiple legal regimes, sharia, customary, and imperial, and thus served as sites of legal forum shopping.<sup>38</sup> In *Local Court, Provincial Society and Justice in the Ottoman Empire*, Ergene highlights how plaintiffs used petitions strategically, appealing to different authorities depending on the nature of the grievance and the desired outcome. This interpretation departs from a top-down legalist reading and aligns with a more anthropological and sociological understanding of Ottoman law in practice.

Leslie Peirce's *"Morality Tales"* highlights how women, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries used petitions to navigate the constraints of gendered power structures.<sup>39</sup> Her analysis of court records and petitions reveals that women did not hesitate to address sultans, judges, or provincial governors, even in patriarchal legal landscapes. Peirce frames these acts not only as legal interventions but also as performances of moral virtue and social credibility.

Scholars have also examined the rhetorical and performative dimensions of petitioning. Fariba Zarinebaf has emphasized the careful deployment of Islamic moral language, Qur'anic references, and loyalty tropes within petitions.<sup>40</sup> The success of a petition often depended on how well

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003), <https://www.degruyterbrill.com/document/isbn/9789047400141/html>; Karen Barkey and George Gavriliş, "The Ottoman Millet System: Non-Territorial Autonomy and Its Contemporary Legacy," *Ethnopolitics* 15, no. 1 (2016): 24–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2015.1101845>.

<sup>38</sup>Boğaç A. Ergene, *Local Court, Provincial Society and Justice in the Ottoman Empire: Legal Practice and Dispute Resolution in Çankırı and Kastamonu (1652-1744)* (BRILL, 2003).

<sup>39</sup> Leslie P. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab* (University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>40</sup> Madeline Zilfi, *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era* (BRILL, 2023).

it adhered to expected forms and moral registers. Petitions thus operated not just as legal claims but as narrative acts, shaped by genre conventions and audience expectations. In this context, petitioning overlaps with the broader turn in historiography toward affective archives and performative legal cultures. In the late Ottoman and early Republican periods, the role of petitioning began to shift, increasingly becoming a tool of modern subjecthood and political participation. This transformation is evident in the emerging literature on petitioning as a form of early citizenship practice, where subjects no longer merely asked for justice but claimed rights. Petitioning in the Ottoman Empire stands at the crossroads of legal, political, and social history. The scholarship reviewed here demonstrates how petitions served not only as administrative documents but also as sites of political participation, legal creativity, and social negotiation.

Çiğdem Oğuz's Master's thesis, *"Negotiating the Terms of Mercy: Petitions and Pardon Cases in the Hamidian Era"* also offers an important contribution to the literature on Ottoman petitioning, especially in relation to state power and political negotiation during the reign of Abdulhamid II.<sup>41</sup> Drawing from a wide array of pardon petitions submitted by convicts or their relatives, Oğuz argues that the act of petitioning for mercy was not merely a form of obedience but a site of reciprocal negotiation. The petitions, while framed within deferential and loyalist discourses, reveal active strategies of bargaining and selective self-presentation by the petitioners, often emphasizing poverty, illness, loyalty, and repentance to secure a favorable outcome. Oğuz situates these interactions within a broader Hamidian policy of centralization and legitimacy-building, where pardons served as political instruments to consolidate sultanic authority, particularly in moments of crisis such as the Armenian events, tribal unrest, and local dissent. Her work challenges the simplistic view of petitions as subservient documents, and instead frames them as dialogic and strategic acts embedded in the socio-political context of late Ottoman governance.

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<sup>41</sup> Çiğdem Oğuz, *Negotiating the Terms of Mercy: Petitions and Pardon Cases in the Hamidian Era* (Master's thesis, Atatürk Institute for Modern Turkish History, Boğaziçi University, 2011).

Self-narratives formulated by ordinary people serve as both sources and methods of historical inquiry. Building on this literature and theoretical lenses, this research has aimed to capture the subjective, situated, and affective dimensions of early Republican social life by analyzing petitions and letters written by a range of social actors. Against the backdrop of a foundational narrative shaped by heroic masculinities, linear temporality, and nationalist teleologies, these documents offer fragments of a more complex, relational, and contested history. Rather than embracing a master-narrative structured around coherence and closure, this thesis focuses on what might be called conceptual narrativity, a lens attuned to the intersections of class, gender, ethnicity, and everyday agency. As scholars like Booth reminds us, archives are not neutral spaces of truth but curated sites of power, shaped by selective processes that legitimize certain voices while excluding others.<sup>42</sup> Prakash's notion of the "code of pacification" similarly warns us of the layered filters through which subaltern voices are disciplined and historicized.<sup>43</sup> Ultimately, the petitions and letters examined here do not merely reveal what was said, they show how people sought to speak, negotiate, and intervene. These are not just documents of grievance, but traces of historical subjectivity, produced within and against the very structures that sought to contain them.

## § 1.5 Literature on the Early Republican Turkey

The historiography of the early Turkish Republic has produced a rich and diverse body of scholarship over the past several decades. Scholars from a wide array of disciplines including history, sociology, political science, anthropology, and legal studies have interrogated the foundations of the Republican project from multiple angles. Their work has illuminated the ideological underpinnings of state formation, the institutional

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<sup>42</sup> Douglas Booth, "Sites of Truth or Metaphors of Power? Refiguring the Archive," *Sport in History* 26, no. 1 (2006): 91–109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17460260600661273>.

<sup>43</sup> Prakash, *Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism*.

transformations of the post-Ottoman polity, the complex role of reformist elites, and the varied ways in which citizens engaged with, resisted, or accommodated these sweeping changes. This study would not be possible without the foundational contributions of these scholars. Their research has not only shaped our understanding of the early Republic but has also made space for newer inquiries into the margins, silences, and ambiguities of that transformative period.

Over time, the field has evolved from celebratory and state-centered accounts to more critical and multi-vocal interpretations that foreground issues such as class, gender, ethnicity, and regional difference.<sup>44</sup> Scholars have examined not only the discourses of power but also the structural conditions that shaped public life, the lived experience of reform, and the diverse forms of agency exercised by ordinary people.<sup>45</sup> In this way, focusing on the Late Ottoman and Early Republican period the historiography has moved beyond static binaries, such as state versus society, tradition versus modernity, and has embraced more fluid and contested understandings of historical change. The literature reviewed in the following sections reflects this broader historiographical trajectory. It includes foundational texts that framed the Republican project as a civilizational rupture such as Bernard Lewis and Ezel Kural Shaw, as well as later

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<sup>44</sup> Murat Ergin, "Is the Turk a White Man? Towards a Theoretical Framework for Race in the Making of Turkishness," *Middle Eastern Studies* 44, no. 6 (2008): 827–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200802425973>; Büşra Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de "Resmî Tarih" Tezinin Oluşumu (1929-1937): Türkiye'de "Resmî Tarih" Tezinin Oluşumu (1929-1937)* (İletişim Yayınları, 2018); Christine M. Philliou, *Turkey: A Past Against History* (Univ of California Press, 2021).

<sup>45</sup> See the related works: Filiz Meşeci Giorgetti, "Nation-Building in Turkey through Ritual Pedagogy: The Late Ottoman and Early Turkish Republican Era," *History of Education* 49, no. 1 (2020): 77–103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760X.2019.1676921>; Grigoriadis, "Between Citizenship and the Millet"; Yunus Emre, *The Emergence of Social Democracy in Turkey: The Left and the Transformation of the Republican People's Party* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014); Deniz Kandiyoti, "End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey," in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1991), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21178-4\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-21178-4_2); Faik Gur, "Sculpting the Nation in Early Republican Turkey\*," *Historical Research* 86, no. 232 (2013): 342–72, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2281.12000>.

interventions that have questioned this rupture, as Erik Jan Zürcher highlighted continuities, and opened space for bottom-up analyses. This study aims to build on these insights by contributing to the growing interest in everyday politics, archival silences, and the narrative practices of non-elite actors, particularly through the lens of petitions and personal letters. Rather than displacing earlier works. This thesis seeks to work in productive dialogue with them.

Early scholarship on the Turkish Republic, particularly those influenced by modernization theory, laid important groundwork for understanding the transition from empire to nation-state. Seminal works such as Bernard Lewis's *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* offered a compelling narrative of reform and transformation, positioning the Republic as the culmination of a civilizational trajectory rooted in earlier Ottoman modernization. Lewis's work, despite its now well-recognized limitations, was pathbreaking in synthesizing vast historical change and in situating Turkey within broader global currents. His framing of the early Republic as a rational, secular break from tradition would shape scholarly debates for decades. The contributions of Niyazi Berkes and Stanford and Ezel Shaw further enriched this foundational layer of Republican historiography.<sup>46</sup> Berkes's *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* is particularly notable for its deep engagement with Enlightenment ideals and its articulation of secularism as a defining axis of modern Turkish identity. The Shaws' comprehensive two-volume history remains a monumental achievement in scope, offering readers a coherent and accessible account of the Ottoman twilight and the birth of the Republic. While these works have been critiqued for their state-centric lens and time to Orientalist approach along with the limited attention to contestation or plurality, they opened the field to sustained inquiry and provided a necessary scaffolding for later critical interventions.

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<sup>46</sup> Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (McGill University Press, 1964); Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and Modern Turkey. 2: Reform, Revolution, and Republic: The Rise of Modern Turkey, 1808 - 1975*, Transferred to digital print (Cambridge Univ. Pr, 2005).

While focused on post-1950 politics, Feroz Ahmad's earlier essays and articles were crucial in contextualizing the Republican period as a product of both revolutionary change and historical constraints.<sup>47</sup> His critical take on the single-party period, economic policy, and civil-military relations helped open the field to more complex political readings. His earlier collaborative works, such as *"Vanguard of a Nascent Bourgeoisie: The Social and Economic Policy of the Young Turks 1908–1918,"* also connect late Ottoman policies with early Republican visions.<sup>48</sup> The 1980s marked a turning point in the historiography of modern Turkey, as scholars began to complicate linear and top-down narratives. Erik Jan Zürcher's *Turkey: A Modern History* stands out for its balanced approach and its insistence on tracing the continuities between the late Ottoman Empire and the early Republic.<sup>49</sup> Zürcher's work has been widely influential in offering a more layered understanding of political and institutional transformation, while also maintaining clarity and narrative discipline, a rare combination in historical writing. Şerif Mardin, whose work, though contemporaneous with modernization theorists, offered a critical rethinking of Turkish political and social structures. His center-periphery model has become a foundational framework for analyzing the asymmetries of power in Turkish political culture.<sup>50</sup> By shifting focus from reformist elites to the social dynamics between the centralized state and marginal communities, Mardin opened up a more sociologically grounded and less celebratory perspective on the Republic. His careful analyses of ideology, religion, and bureaucracy remain essential for understanding how authority circulates through negotiated and uneven terrain.

Zafer Toprak's scholarship has significantly deepened the historiography of the early Turkish Republic by revealing the ideological and

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<sup>47</sup> Ahmad Feroz, *The Making of Modern Turkey* (Routledge, 2002).

<sup>48</sup> Feroz Ahmad, "Vanguard of a Nascent Bourgeoisie: The Social and Economic Policy of the Young Turks 1908–1918," in *Social and Economic History of Turkey (1071–1920)*, ed. O. Okyar and H. İnalcık (Ankara: Hacettepe Üniversitesi, 1980), 329–30.

<sup>49</sup> Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History*, 3rd. ed (I.B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>50</sup> Şerif Mardin, *The Genesis of Young Ottoman Thought: A Study in the Modernization of Turkish Political Ideas* (Syracuse University Press, 2000).

scientific foundations of state-led reform. His work, particularly on eugenics, public health, and population policy, demonstrates how the Republican elite adopted European-inspired notions of biological modernization to regulate society. Through institutions like the Turkish Hearths and People's Houses, the state pursued a project of shaping citizens not only politically and culturally, but also physically and morally. Toprak's contributions underscore how reform was conceptualized as both a social and biological imperative, tying national regeneration to bodily discipline and demographic engineering. Toprak's emphasis on biopolitics and disciplinary modernization offers a valuable lens for understanding the Republic's ambitions to engineer an ideal citizenry. His research also illuminates the racialized and exclusionary aspects of early Republican ideology, particularly in its treatment of non-Turkish and non-Sunni populations. While largely focused on the institutional and ideological coherence of the state, his work opens the door for further inquiry into how these reformist logics were internalized, negotiated, or contested by those at the margins of the national project.

The pioneering village studies by Mübeccel Kıray, İbrahim Yasa, and Behice Boran also contributed significantly to this literature by grounding abstract theories in ethnographic detail.<sup>51</sup> These early sociological engagements provided a textured view of rural life, revealing how communities experienced and interpreted Republican reforms. Asım Karaömerlioğlu's *Orada Bir Köy Var Uzakta* represents a valuable extension of this tradition, skillfully analyzing how rural life was not only shaped by the state but also became central to the symbolic imagination of the Republic itself.<sup>52</sup>

Michael Meeker represents another pioneering voice who brought anthropological and ethnographic methods into the study of

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<sup>51</sup> Mübeccel Belik Kıray, *Toplumsal yapı, toplumsal değişme* (Bağlam, 1999); İbrahim Yasa, *Türkiye'nin toplumsal yapısı ve temel sorunları* (Türkiye ve Orta Doğu Amme İdaresi Enstitüsü Yayınları, 1970); Behice Boran, *Toplumsal yapı araştırmaları, iki köy çeşidinin mukayeseli tetkiki. Yazan: ... Behice Sadık Boran ...* (Türk tarih kurumu basımevi, 1945).

<sup>52</sup> Asım Karaömerlioğlu, *Orada bir köy var uzakta: erken Cumhuriyet döneminde köycü söylem* (İletişim, 2006).

Turkish society. In his landmark work *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*, Meeker traces the persistence of local notables, kinship networks, and regional structures in shaping both Ottoman and Republican governance.<sup>53</sup> His long-term research in northeastern Turkey challenged the top-down narratives of transformation by highlighting continuities in social formations and informal power. Meeker's ethnographic approach complements Mardin's sociological lens, offering tools to understand the complex interplay between modern state formation and local social realities.

Büşra Ersanlı has examined the role of historiography and education in shaping national consciousness during the early Republican period. In *İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye'de "Resmi Tarih" Tezinin Oluşumu*, she analyzes how official history writing and school curricula were used to promote a unified, secular, and Turkish nationalist identity.<sup>54</sup> Her work sheds light on the formation of state-sanctioned historical narratives and the pedagogical tools through which Republican ideology was disseminated. Ersanlı's contributions are especially relevant for understanding how memory, knowledge production, and civic education functioned as instruments of political consolidation. Metin Heper's formulation of the "strong state tradition" thesis attempted to explain why the Turkish state remained dominant in political and societal affairs.<sup>55</sup> Drawing on Weberian categories, Heper contributed to the idea that the Turkish bureaucracy developed a paternalistic, tutelary attitude toward society, inherited from the Ottoman state.

Another important strand in the literature has sought to reframe the early Republican period by interrogating its legal, ideological, and coercive underpinnings. Mete Tuncay's research into the single-party era, particularly his work on the Law on the Maintenance of Order, remains an essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the mechanisms

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<sup>53</sup> Meeker, *A Nation of Empire*.

<sup>54</sup> Ersanlı, *İktidar ve Tarih*.

<sup>55</sup> Metin Heper, "The Ottoman Legacy and Turkish Politics," *Journal of International Affairs* 54, no. 1 (2000): 63–82.

of political consolidation.<sup>56</sup> His scholarship opened the field to critical questions about pluralism, dissent, and the boundaries of legitimate politics. Similarly, the volume *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, edited by Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba, brought together a wide range of scholars who pushed the field toward a more interdisciplinary and comparative lens.<sup>57</sup> Their focus on architecture, urban planning, and intellectual life provided new ways of thinking about nation-building as both an aesthetic and institutional project. The volume remains a cornerstone in the literature, even as subsequent scholarship has sought to further foreground the roles of ethnicity, gender, and regional differentiation in shaping the early Republic. Levent Köker's interventions on constitutionalism and democratic theory offer a valuable normative critique of the early Republican project.<sup>58</sup> His analysis of the positivist roots of Turkish political thought has illuminated the tensions between revolutionary reform and liberal pluralism. Köker's reflections serve as a powerful reminder of the aspirations, as well as the constraints, embedded in Turkey's founding moment.

Taha Parla's careful studies of Ziya Gökalp and the ideological foundations of Kemalism have likewise been deeply influential.<sup>59</sup> His ability to trace intellectual genealogies and to map the internal tensions within Kemalist thought has enriched our understanding of how ideas travel, mutate, and become institutionalized. While some later works have expanded the focus to include the racialized and exclusionary aspects of early nationalism, Parla's contributions remain foundational for grasping the ideological architecture of the Republican state. Cemil Koçak has produced a wide-ranging and meticulously researched body of work on the political practices of the early Republic, particularly during the single-

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<sup>56</sup> Mete Tunçay, *T.C.'nde tek-parti yönetimi'nin kurulması (1923-1931)* (Yurt Yayınları, 1981); Mete Tunçay, "Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nde tek-parti yönetimi'nin kurulması (1923-1931)," (*No Title*), n.d., accessed March 30, 2024, <https://cir.nii.ac.jp/crid/1130000796359701760>.

<sup>57</sup> Bozdoğan and Kasaba, *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*.

<sup>58</sup> Levent Köker, *Modernleşme, Kemalizm ve Demokrasi* (İletişim Yayınları, 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Taha Parla, *Ziya Gökalp, Kemalizm ve Türkiye'de korporatizm* (İletişim Yayınları, 1989); Taha Parla, *The Social and Political Thought of Ziya Gökalp: 1876-1924* (BRILL, 1985).

party period. His studies such as *Tek Parti Döneminde Siyasi Muhalefet* and *Türkiye'de Milli Şef Dönemi* draw extensively from Turkish state archives and focus on issues including censorship, surveillance, political trials, and the suppression of dissent.<sup>60</sup> Koçak avoids sweeping ideological arguments and instead reconstructs political life through a close reading of administrative documents and legal procedures. His work is particularly valuable for understanding the institutional mechanisms through which political conformity was managed and enforced in the 1930s and 1940s.

One of the most transformative developments in the historiography of modern Turkey has been the emergence of feminist and gender-focused scholarship on which this thesis also aims to build. These works have significantly deepened the understanding of the early Republic by foregrounding how gender was not merely a secondary social category, but a constitutive axis of state-building, citizenship, violence, and memory. Scholars such as Deniz Kandiyoti, Ayşegül Altınay, and Zeynep Türkyılmaz have been central to this intellectual shift, each offering critical frameworks that have helped deconstruct the patriarchal and militarized foundations of the Republican project.

Deniz Kandiyoti's work is foundational to the feminist analysis of modern Turkey. In her influential essay *End of Empire: Islam, Nationalism and Women in Turkey*, she argued that the early Republican reforms created a particular model of womanhood that was simultaneously modernized and domesticated. Through the figure of the "Republican woman," the state promoted visibility and limited forms of autonomy, but within a framework that maintained male authority and upheld nationalist priorities.<sup>61</sup> Kandiyoti's concept of the "patriarchal bargain" remains a critical analytical tool, helping to explain how women navigated, negotiated, and at times reinforced structures that ostensibly empowered them. Her work highlights the paradox of Republican gender politics: women were granted civil and educational rights as symbols of modernity, yet their

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<sup>60</sup> Cemil Koçak, *Umumi müfettişlikler: (1927-1952)* (İletişim, 2003).

<sup>61</sup> Kandiyoti, "End of Empire."

political agency was circumscribed by a larger statist project in which they were to be disciplined participants, not autonomous actors.

Building on and diversifying this feminist lens, Ayşe Gül Altınay's scholarship has interrogated the intersections of gender, nationalism, and militarism. In *The Myth of the Military-Nation: Militarism, Gender, and Education in Turkey*, Altınay offers a compelling critique of the pervasive militarization of Turkish civic life. She demonstrates how military service and militarist values became central to the formation of gendered national identities, where the male soldier was cast as the ideal citizen and the female figure, while symbolically vital, remained largely passive.<sup>62</sup> Through close analysis of school curricula, public discourse, and family narratives, Altınay shows that the early Republic cultivated a culture in which national belonging was tightly bound to martial ideals, thus marginalizing dissenting voices and foreclosing more pluralistic visions of citizenship. Her work has opened space for considering how emotional regimes, memory, and everyday practices contribute to the production of hegemonic masculinities and militarized femininities in the Republic and its aftermath.

Zeynep Türkyılmaz, meanwhile, brings a powerful postcolonial and racialized critique to the study of gender in Turkey, particularly in relation to Kurdish, Alevi, and other marginalized communities. In her article *Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Women's 'Civilizing Mission' in the Early Republican East*, she challenges the assumption that Turkish women were solely the passive subjects of state reform.<sup>63</sup> Rather, she argues that elite Turkish women played an active role in the Republican civilizing mission, particularly in the eastern provinces, where their educational and humanitarian work contributed to the racialized and gendered hierarchies of the new state. In Türkyılmaz's analysis, gender operates not only as a category of oppression but also as a vector of power, an avenue

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<sup>62</sup> Ayşe Gül Altınay, *The Myth of the Military-Nation: Militarism, Gender, and Education in Turkey* (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2006).

<sup>63</sup> Zeynep Türkyılmaz, "Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman's Burden in Dersim: Educating the 'Mountain Flowers' of Dersim," *Journal of Women's History* (Baltimore) 28, no. 3 (2016): 162–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2016.0029>.

through which national and colonial ideologies were extended. Her work insists on understanding how Turkish feminism itself, especially in its early Republican articulations, was deeply embedded in the politics of ethnic erasure, internal colonialism, and civilizational hierarchies.

By reading state reforms not only through institutional change but also through affect, embodiment, and intimate governance, these scholars challenge the dominant narratives of linear progress. They focus on how gender operated as a structuring logic in Republican ideology, visible in everything from dress codes to educational curricula, from population policies to legal reforms. Additionally, feminist and gender historians have complicated the binary of agency versus victimhood. Instead, they have mapped out complex terrains of negotiation, silence, complicity, and resistance. The letters of women petitioners, the memoirs of female teachers and nurses sent to the East, and oral histories with women who lived through the transition to Republican rule all reveal layered forms of political subjectivity.<sup>64</sup> These are not merely stories of top-down repression or heroic defiance but narratives of adaptation, moral dilemmas, and strategic ambiguity. This thesis seeks to highlight these ambiguities in forming new political subjectivities in the transition from empire to nation state in the diverse writings of the citizens. The formation of the Republic was not achieved through entirely democratic means; however, this does not imply that the masses involved in the project were entirely unaware of the political and social developments surrounding it.

Moreover, feminist historiography has helped illuminate the gendered dimensions of violence and trauma that accompanied the foundation of the Republic. From forced Turkification campaigns to the demographic engineering of eastern Anatolia, gender was integral to the construction of a homogenized national body. Women were not only targets of violence but also, at times, instruments of assimilation and control. The regulation of female sexuality, reproductive labor, and childrearing practices became key to securing the ideological and biological

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<sup>64</sup> Nazan Maksudyan, "Control over Life, Control over Body: Female Suicide in Early Republican Turkey," *Women's History Review* 24, no. 6 (2015): 861–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2014.994858>.

boundaries of the nation.<sup>65</sup> These insights, drawn from both textual archives and oral testimonies, demand a rethinking of the archive itself, not simply as a repository of state memory, but as a contested terrain shaped by silence, erasure, and affective traces. As a name from the following generations, Uğur Ümit Üngör, has addressed the violence underlying the making of the Turkish nation-state. In *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950*, Üngör maps the transformation of the region through systematic policies of population displacement, confiscation of property, and demographic homogenization.<sup>66</sup> Focusing on Eastern Anatolia, particularly Armenian, Kurdish, and Alevi populations, Üngör demonstrates how the Republican state inherited and expanded upon late Ottoman strategies of demographic engineering.

His approach combines rigorous archival research with sociological analysis, making a powerful case for viewing violence not as exceptional, but as constitutive of modern state formation. By revealing how bureaucratic tools, such as cadastral surveys, property laws, and internal deportation policies, were mobilized to reconfigure space and identity, Üngör disrupts the developmentalist and reformist tone of earlier works. He frames Republican history not as an upward trajectory of progress but as a complex, often brutal, process of social reordering. Üngör's work has significantly influenced fields beyond Turkish studies, contributing to comparative research on state violence, nationalism, and forced migration.

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<sup>65</sup> Dikmen Yakalı and Bora Ataman, "Selfless Subjectivities That (Re)Build the Nation: Remaking the 'Modern Turkish Woman' in the Early Republican Period in Türkiye," *Journal of Family History* 48, no. 4 (2023): 432–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/03631990231168541>; Kandıyoti, "End of Empire"; Arzu Öztürkmen, "The Women's Movement under Ottoman and Republican Rule: A Historical Reappraisal," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 255–64; Jenny B. White, "State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republican Woman," *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (2003): 145–59; Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, "Scholarship on the Armenian Genocide as a Gendered Event and Process," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 53 (November 2015): 185–90, <https://doi.org/10.1017/npt.2015.35>.

<sup>66</sup> Uğur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913–1950* (OUP Oxford, 2012).

Barış Ünlü pushes the critique even further by addressing the epistemological and affective structures of Turkish nationalism. In his concept of the “Türklük Sözleşmesi” (The Turkishness Contract), articulated most prominently in the book, Ünlü draws on critical theory to explain how Turkish identity has been constructed as a dominant and exclusionary norm.<sup>67</sup> This “contract” operates as an unspoken agreement across political ideologies, binding citizens into a shared imaginary that relies on the denial or erasure of ethnic, religious, and historical difference, particularly in relation to Armenians, Kurds, and Alevis. Ünlü’s analysis implicates not only the state but also everyday practices, education systems, historiography, and even leftist movements, showing how deeply embedded the logic of Turkishness is in public consciousness. His critique cuts across political spectrums, exposing how both liberal and conservative frameworks have upheld the basic premises of state ideology. Rather than focusing solely on state policies or elite actors, Ünlü interrogates the discursive and symbolic violence that underpins national belonging. His work challenges scholars to confront the limits of pluralism, the silences in official history, and the emotional labor of identification within Turkish modernity.

In Bilmez and Kayacan’s work as well, the authors explored the multiple truths of the republic through oral histories and memory work, the book foregrounds intergenerational transmission of trauma, everyday strategies of survival, and the social meanings attached to 1937–38.<sup>68</sup> Methodologically it introduced the use of oral history and memory studies in a field long dominated by state archives and modernization narratives, pushing scholars to treat “Dersim” not just as a security problem or a rebellion but as a sustained regime of violence with enduring social effects. This thesis’s final empirical chapter also benefits greatly from this work in deconstructing the dominant state narratives. In recent decades, scholarship on early Republican Turkey has increasingly moved toward exploring the everyday dynamics of governance, resistance, and

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<sup>67</sup> Barış Ünlü, *The Turkishness Contract* (Temple University Press, 2025).

<sup>68</sup> Bülent Bilmez et al., *Belleklerdeki Dersim ’38* (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2015).

negotiation between the state and its citizens. This strand of historiography departs from both modernization theory and top-down institutional analyses by focusing on social history, popular agency, and the practices through which citizens responded to state reforms. Murat Metinsoy's *'The Power of the People: Everyday Resistance and Dissent in the Making of Modern Turkey, 1923-38,'* builds on extensive archival research to explore how ordinary citizens engaged with and responded to the state's transformative reforms during the single-party period.<sup>69</sup> In this regard Metinsoy's book was inspiring for thesis as well, considering his general approach to the establishment of the Republic with a particular focus on the overall population of the new political formation. Using petitions, letters, inspection reports, and administrative records, Metinsoy reconstructs a complex picture of everyday dissent, negotiation, and complaint. Rather than framing the early Republic solely as a top-down project of authoritarian modernization, he emphasizes the presence of bottom-up pressures and localized forms of agency that shaped policy outcomes. His work illustrates that, while the state sought to discipline and regulate society, it also encountered significant constraints and adaptations in the field. This approach situates dissent not as open rebellion, but as part of the routine dynamics of political participation and resistance in a non-democratic context.

Hale Yilmaz's *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey*, investigates how state-led reforms in language, clothing, and public behavior were experienced and negotiated by citizens in various parts of Turkey.<sup>70</sup> Drawing on oral histories, archival records, and state publications, Yilmaz explores the cultural and symbolic dimensions of nation-building. She emphasizes that while the Kemalist state sought to engineer a new national identity, the success of these reforms depended on local implementation, social context, and individual interpretation. Her findings reveal a more contingent and negotiated process of cultural transformation, in which citizens

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<sup>69</sup> Metinsoy, *The Power of the People*, 1st ed.

<sup>70</sup> Yilmaz, *Becoming Turkish*.

sometimes complied with, resisted, or strategically engaged with official expectations. Yilmaz's focus on embodied practices and lived experience contributes to a deeper understanding of the everyday dimensions of Republican reform.

These studies collectively mark an important evolution in the historiography of Early Republican Turkey. Moving beyond structural and ideological accounts, they underscore the importance of regional variation, social negotiation, and everyday experience in shaping the outcomes of state reform. Whether focusing on economic policy, cultural transformation, wartime legacies, or popular dissent, this body of work enriches our understanding of the early Republic by showing it not as a monolithic project but as a dynamic and multifaceted process involving interaction, resistance, and adaptation at multiple levels of society.

In conclusion, the scholarly engagement with the early Republican period of Turkey has evolved into a rich and multifaceted field that no longer accepts simplistic binaries or teleological narratives. The foundational decades of the Republic have been re-examined through a variety of lenses that move beyond formal political histories, incorporating insights from social history, gender studies, memory studies, and critical legal theory. These interventions have revealed that the process of state formation was not a unidirectional imposition from above but rather a dynamic and often fraught negotiation that involved both coercion and consent, discipline and resistance, visibility and erasure.

Furthermore, the study of archival silences, legal petitions, oral testimonies, and unofficial records has widened the methodological horizons of the field. Such sources reveal how individuals and communities positioned themselves in relation to the new moral, legal, and symbolic order that the Republic sought to establish. These histories remind us that power does not merely manifest in monumental policies or ideological pronouncements but also in mundane decisions, private appeals, and local negotiations. They also call attention to the asymmetries of inclusion within the very project of citizenship, pointing to the racialized, gendered, and classed exclusions that were embedded in the Republican vision of modernity. In this regard, my thesis seeks to contribute to these

methodological conversations. By bringing together petitions, letters, and denunciations with para-archival materials such as the correspondence sent to Necmeddin Sahir Silan after the 1938 Dersim Tertele, the thesis aims to explore how individuals, particularly from marginalized communities, navigated, responded to, and at times adapted the moral, legal, and symbolic order promoted by the Republic. These sources offer a window into the everyday workings of citizenship and highlight the unevenness and exclusions that shaped the Republican vision of modernity.

Ultimately, the historiography of early Republican Turkey has matured into a field attentive to complexity, contradiction, and contingency. It invites an understanding of the Republic not just as a state, but as a lived experience shaped by desire, discipline, fear, and hope. The field continues to grow by asking more ethically and methodologically nuanced questions, about whose voices are preserved, whose experiences are validated, and how historical memory is constructed. This evolving body of literature offers not only a more critical view of the past but also a set of intellectual tools to better grasp the unfinished projects of democracy, identity, and justice in contemporary Turkey.

## Bargaining the Life: Petitions About Living Conditions, Employment, and Injustices

*That is the way of the world," he said. "The waters fill their ditch. People are born and die; the sun rises and sets. Trees grow and rot. The waters flow, and the clouds cry. You kill the Ağa, and a new one takes his place. You kill him again; he comes again.*

– Yaşar Kemal, *They Burn the Thistles*<sup>1</sup>

Ordinary people-penned documents reflect their concerns about family life, fiscal hardships, and land reclamation and offer an in-depth vision of historic solicitudes. In this chapter, petitions about everyday life concerns and social structure will be analyzed. I approach these petitions as social and political actions rather than as sources to be mined for truth. These documents will allow an analysis of language, Republican metanarrative, political discourses, and sites in which state ideology is reproduced to achieve the objective of the petitioners. In some petitions,

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<sup>1</sup> Yashar Kemal, *They Burn the Thistles* (New York Review Books, 2006).

a recognizable pattern emerges in which writers “require” or “demand” something through a formulaic or clichéd structure that speaks on behalf of the self. These standardized forms often convey intense emotions or dire conditions, suggesting that such expressions may represent more complex and layered constructions of meaning. In the first section, the material environment of the time these petitions were written is analyzed to provide the context. Following this, petitions and letters formulated by the citizens about job-searching, corruption, social justice, and individual opportunities are analyzed. In doing so, they not only disrupt established hierarchies and challenge the authority of literal interpretation, but also strategically appropriate the language of the state, adopting its discourse as a means of subversion. This act of mimicry and performance—what might be understood as a form of masquerade—serves as an analytical category in itself, revealing the ways in which marginalized actors engage with dominant structures not merely as passive recipients but as active participants. By inhabiting the state's vocabulary and moral grammar, they expose its contradictions, manipulate its symbolic order, and negotiate power from within the very frameworks designed to exclude them.<sup>2</sup>

## § 2.1 Material Environment of the Republic: Post-War Trauma and the 1929 Great Depression

The Republic was founded on the wounds and ruins of subsequent wars the First World War and the War of Independence. As Akin explores the multi-dimensional devastations of the First World War in his book, he addresses the already initiated process of military mobilization with the Balkan War, which involved thousands of Ottoman soldiers.<sup>3</sup> After the Balkan Wars, the empire started its second wave of mobilization for the

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<sup>2</sup> Patricia Ewick and Susan Silbey, “Narrating Social Structure: Stories of Resistance to Legal Authority,” *American Journal of Sociology* 108, no. 6 (May 2003): 1328–72, <https://doi.org/10.1086/378035>.

<sup>3</sup> Yiğit Akin, *When the War Came Home: The Ottomans’ Great War and the Devastation of an Empire* (Stanford University Press, 2018), 53–55.

First World War. About 200,000 Ottoman soldiers were already on duty by the time the mobilization was ordered. "By late October 1914, [...], the Ottoman state had managed to put a total of more than 800,000 men under arms [...]"<sup>4</sup> With the War of Liberation against the Greek Forces, a set of extensive taxation regulations was passed to increase the army's resources – Orders of National Task and Their Practice (Tekâlif-i Milliye) – along with the Independence Tribunals punishing deserters. In the First World War and the War of Liberation, 1,048,000 people lost their lives.<sup>5</sup>

After a decade of near-constant warfare, another hardship was awaiting on the horizon: the 1929 Great Depression. The main effect of the crisis on the Turkish economy was a sharp decline in the prices of agricultural commodities. Between 1928/29 and 1932/33, the prices of staple crops such as wheat and other cereals dropped by over 60%, while the prices of key export crops like tobacco, raisins, hazelnuts, and cotton decreased by 50%. Following that, Turkey's foreign trade deficit surged to 21%.<sup>6</sup>

The start of the twentieth century was a traumatic one for the people of the Republic. Each generation faced new and different threats to life and livelihood. The Balkan Wars, the War of Liberation, and the Great Depression brought devastation, starvation, and death in the first quarter of the twentieth century. In his memoirs of Anatolia, author Reşat Nuri Güntekin vividly captures an observation of rural life in 1938, offering a window into the Anatolian peasantry as follows:

At one point, I heard a voice calling, "Uncle, uncle! When I looked down through the bars beside me, among the musical instruments and dried mud, I saw a half-naked girl. Her hair and face gleamed white under the harsh light. Her eyes dazzled as she reached out to me: "Uncle, give me some bread..." Upon closer look, I noticed

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<sup>4</sup> Akin, *When the War Came Home*, 56.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Fleet, Suraiya N. Faruqi, and Reşat Kasaba, *The Cambridge History of Turkey* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 113.

<sup>6</sup> Şevket Pamuk, *Türkiye'nin 200 yıllık iktisadi tarihi: büyüme, kurumlar ve bölüşüm* (Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2014), 186.

more children, even adults, dressed similarly ahead. Begging for the leftover bread from the owner of the restaurant.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the vast majority of Anatolia living in considerable poverty with limited resources, certain individuals in society were enriched by the aftermath of the wars that devastated the region. The burden of financing the Republican state and its modernization was put on the shoulders of the peasants, who shared the costs in various ways. In particular, fertile land was controlled by local factions and distributed unequally.<sup>8</sup> The majority of Anatolian peasants did not own land, and those who did lacked the equipment necessary to cultivate it. In a petition sent to the RPP center in 1934, farmer Nurullah’s son from a village in Konya describes the agricultural obstacles they face:

The sorrow and anguish that our Konya has been experiencing for years are profound. The people are suffering from drought. Our dear president, Ismet Pasha, who honored our province and made us happy, addressed these troubles and initiated the opening of a factory in Ereğli. He also promised to solve the longstanding issue of water in our town. However, there is still no end in sight to our joy.”<sup>9</sup>

In this document, the petitioner is referring to a longstanding natural problem that has been ongoing. He does not describe the pain and suffering as a new phenomenon. While acknowledging the significance of being visited by the prime minister and mentioning the attempt to open a factory, the primary request is to alleviate the drought. The petitioner's narration entails a consciousness of being less powerful in an asymmetrical relationship. There is a specific understanding of the self as dependent on the “other” powerful, yet not in full agreement with the actions. Therefore, the citizen, the son of Nurullah, presents a consciousness of

<sup>7</sup> Reşat Nuri Güntekin, *Anadolu notlari* (Inkilâp Kitabevi, 1958), 221–22.

<sup>8</sup> Murat Metinsoy, *The Power of the People* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 21.

<sup>9</sup> BCA 490.01/532.2134.1, November 21, 1934.

opportunity, an attempt at the situation through which one might intervene and turn the case to one's advantage. In the storytelling of the song, a factory that can be opened is not the end of the issues. His story underlines that the sorrow and suffering of the peasants are not over in the town. Unemployment is not the case in the region. Rather, the drought that has been present for years is the obstacle to sustaining lives. In the farmer's framework, channeling and distractions of the government with the promise of a factory are not the solution desired.

The water scarcity issues in Konya have been highlighted in the national press several times over the years as well.<sup>10</sup> In 1935, during budget discussions in the parliament, the problems faced by the people were discussed under a separate heading, focusing on the region's demands. Based on the drought agenda, a decision was made to increase the budget.<sup>11</sup> In Yakup Kadri's novel *Stepmother Earth* (*Yaban*), being a peasant from Anatolia is a low thing:

To be like them, to dress like them, to eat and drink like them, to sit and get up like them, to speak their language... I can do all these things. But how can I think like them? How can I feel like them?"<sup>12</sup>

Being a peasant was sometimes equal to being the "enemy," as İsmet İnönü mentioned.<sup>13</sup> The people of Anatolia—peasants and ordinary citizens—were not passive subjects but real, everyday actors who resisted, negotiated, and sought to improve their lives amid the poverty, hardship, and deep inequalities that followed the war. In this context, historical sources such as petitions offer a window into the aspirations and hopes they held for more just and dignified living conditions.

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<sup>10</sup> See "Konya'da Susuzluk," *Zaman*, 25 November 1935; "Konya'da Buğday Mubayaatı," *Vakit*, 14 September 1932

<sup>11</sup> T.B.M.M *Zabıt Ceridesi* [Turkish Grand National Assembly Minutes], Vol. 3, Meeting 24 (6 May 1935), 89.

<sup>12</sup> Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Yaban* (İletişim Yayınları, 2019), 14.

<sup>13</sup> "İsmet İnönü Hatırat," *Ulus*, 17 May 1968.

## § 2.2 Bread & Roses: Petitions About Unemployment and Poverty

In petitioning, ordinary people conveyed their grievances about economic conditions that included basic equality of opportunity and that carried the expectation of effective government response. This chapter will examine petitions and letters concerning the livelihood struggles of citizens due to the effects of war and economic crises. Instead of making a regional distinction in categorizing these petitions, a classification based on the content of the requests was employed. Certain thematic patterns stand out in all these petitions. The most common theme in this category is the call of former soldiers who have served multiple times for the nation without “running away from sacrifices” to be compensated by the state with employment or financial support. The petitioners also emphasize the responsibility of caring for their families and providing an education for their children.

These documents, individualizing the source of hardship to the state officials, ask the government to appease the conditions caused by its former actions. The demands of the people in the petitions record and reframe the anxieties, concerns, and methods of people trying to address them, worthy of attention. People transform their economic hardship and poverty into text that is both powerful and provides a dictionary of how certain pains are articulated to achieve opportunities.

Dear Sir, you know me very well. I was a sergeant major in the 37th Caucasian Division during the First World War. I served in the army until the end of the War of Independence. [...] I am unemployed for two to six months in a year. Unfortunately, I have a son who is ready for education, and I will not be able to afford his education. [...] I must care for a family of six, so please lend me a hand or appoint me as a regional manager in one of the construction companies. I guarantee that I will be a good manager for the Republic. [...] By appointing a dedicated manager to the Republic,

you would make the Republic win and help a soldier who has served in the army for eleven years.<sup>14</sup>

This petition was written by Hüseyin in 1931 from İzmir. The name addressed at the beginning of the document is not direct; however, in the same section of the archive, the documents with a direct official name refer to Recep Peker, who was the General Secretary of the RPP between 1924 and 1946. Petitioner Hüseyin implements a tactical strategy as someone who has limited access to resources and underlines a shared and personal past between the power holder and himself. As a citizen, he knows that openly challenging or contesting the newly established Republic cannot bring any good, and he portrays himself as a potential “servant” of the Republic once again.

On the other hand, there is a specific highlight on military service in the petition, but it remains clandestine about its devastation to follow the national narrative of “heroism.” In this vein, this specific narration of Hüseyin should be examined in the light of the formulation of the Turkish History Thesis, which represents a significant phase in establishing the dominant Turkish triumphalist and military-nation myth.

1931 was also the year that the fourth volume of the Turkish History Thesis was published, which was mainly formulated according to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's historical vision and was the national curriculum's textbook until 1941.<sup>15</sup> In the book, the section titled “Turkish Military and National Defense” argues that Turks are the best soldiers because they carry all the cultural elements.<sup>16</sup> Also, it was added that Turks “love military service” and never back up, even in the threat of powerful enemies. As a simple reflection of this metanarrative in the petition, despite all of the difficulties of the war, the petitioner prefers a hidden, intentionally designed approach to the past as part of the contract between

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<sup>14</sup> BCA 490.01/527.2112.1, March 30, 1931.

<sup>15</sup> *Tarih: Kemalist Eğitimin Tarih Dersleri (1931-1941) : Yeni Ve Yakın Zamanlar. Tarih III* (Kaynak Yayınları, 1932), 331-335.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 331.

the state. He only mentions his service and reminds the Republic's debt to him.

Lastly, the specific emphasis on the education of Hüseyin's son is another important point. The war on the fronts of new Turkey was articulated through military and education fields; for this reason, the "father of the Turks," Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, had two grand titles –Commander in Chief and Teacher in Chief – the latter received after education reforms. Mustafa Kemal's speeches reflect the significance he attributed to both notions and the institutions they represent, a sentiment frequently cited in textbooks, public records, and intellectual literature.<sup>17</sup> There is coherent and tactical logic in the semantics, discourse, and framing of Hüseyin's narrative; the story is aware of the pillars and cores that the Republic aims to settle, so it prefers to plot in line with them by instrumentalizing the Republic's own tools and objectives.

In another petition penned by Karabet from İstanbul to the RPP provincial presidency in 1936, he tells this story:

First of all, I request your forgiveness for my audacity in approaching your esteemed office, but I write this because of my humble status as a well-served citizen. [...] I have been residing in Büyükdere since my childhood, and all the people in this district know me well. I have experienced both the vast and free days of my homeland and the painful days when it groaned and suffered under occupation forces, with a heart full of sorrow. In those bitter days, while serving as the port constable of Anadolu Kavağı, I, who now lives in a very miserable state, was one of the most vibrant and self-sacrificing members of the Istanbul branch of the National Forces. From the very beginning of our great leader's struggle for the independence of our homeland in Anatolia, almost all the ammunition, provisions, and supplies sent from Istanbul to join this noble force passed through my hands. I am proud to

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<sup>17</sup> Parla, *Türkiye'de siyasal kültürün resmî kaynakları*, 171,172; Mustafa Kemal ATATÜRK, *Nutuk* (İz Bırakan Kalemler Yayınevi, n.d.), 438.

mention this fact in your presence as a citizen who is strong and brave enough to remember it. [...] I, your fellow citizen, who has fulfilled his duty in this free and independent homeland like every other citizen, now find myself in a state where I can barely sell three to five cups of coffee a day in a narrow and gloomy coffee shop, hungry but with a proud soul[...] I have the obligation of taking care of an elderly mother with an orphaned nephew with no income from anywhere. I humbly request assistance from your office.<sup>18</sup>

This document contains multiple themes, such as “right,” “servicing the state,” and “testimony.” Karabet's narration has an empirical description beyond the normative justification for the events that occurred. To be clearer, he is aware that almost half of society somehow participated in and was impacted by the wars in multiple ways. However, there is a particular spot on the War of Independence and his contribution to it in the petition. In his perspective, a bipartite and a causal relationship are hidden but directed to the state. He currently finds himself in a miserable position because of his contributions, which are indeed portrayed as bravery and time's necessity. Just like the previous petitioner, Karabet also assigned a considerable space for his services during the war in detail.

Although a narrative can share characteristics with other stories –plot structure or framing, for example- each stands as a distinctive and unique story. Approaching the narrative, the petitions of both Karabet and Hüseyin, as a dialogic production, will allow us to understand how individual acts of resistance and opposing can be consequential when converted and told as stories of resistance. The narration of the event is not the same as the act demonstrated, and telling the story is more than just reminding the events. During the events, these feelings and frameworks are not in action or attributed as they are constructed in the stories. Therefore, our understanding of narrative must encompass a

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<sup>18</sup> BCA 490.01/539.2158.2, December 10, 1936.

perspective that narratives are not sets of events but processes. Ali, from a village in Niğde, narrates his demand in 1934 as follows:

I was wounded in Kuvay-i Milliye in Adana, sacrificing both my legs for the sake of my homeland. After losing my most important limb, which would enable me to work and earn a living, I fell into destitution. I have no means or hope of sustenance from anywhere. With just a wife and six children, I find ourselves destitute in the streets. Relying on your high conscience and considering patriotic service, I request at least a pair of oxen to be provided for the welfare of my family, to protect them from misery."<sup>19</sup>

When Ali's narrative is analyzed from a relational perspective, it can be claimed that narratives exist and have meanings only within networks of storytellers and audiences.<sup>20</sup> According to this view, the practices of telling and writing are not solely incidental features of a preexisting narrative. Evaluating narratives as dynamic processes rather than entities challenges the static concept of a "story." In this contextual and dynamic perspective, no specific narrative is isolated from narratives told previously or from the ones yet to be told. They are produced retrospectively and prospectively at the same time. Therefore, Ali's story offers a constructed moral evaluation and definition of the past. Previous soldiers and contributors to the war produced an approach, style, and tale within a shared vocabulary. In this way, these petitions change during interaction and practice in order to reflect the experiences and interpretations of others. In the case of veterans or former-served soldiers, it is a collective experience, the trauma of the nation, and the metanarrative that shapes the standpoints. Stories thus change during interaction to reflect the experiences and interpretations of others.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> BCA 490.01/529.2122.1, June 3, 1934.

<sup>20</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer, "Manifesto for a Relational Sociology," *American Journal of Sociology* 103, no. 2 (1997): 281–317, <https://doi.org/10.1086/231209>.

<sup>21</sup> Ewick and Silbey, "Narrating Social Structure."

Narrating personal yet structural events transcends the subjective and particular. Even the most unique and personal draw from and hold public schemes –linguistic symbols, words of motivations– in which the narrations are entangled. The petitions from ex-soldiers present a picture that subjective experiences must be translated into a shared collective and culturally reasonable interpretation. In doing so, these petitioners also externalize the consciousness and issues of the time, addressing reasoning, knowledge, and memory as the sites of social organizing and power relations.

Despite the intense press censorship of the period, it is possible to find different forms of narration in the newspapers that published public reflections on different aspects of the hardships of daily life under the titles "Halkın Sesi" (The Voice of the People), "Karilerimizden Mektuplar" (Letters from our readers). In 1935, a street interview with Ali, who lived in Fatih, Istanbul, was conducted, and he articulated his opinion on coal and wood prices as follows:

Before the prices of wood and coal, the degree of cold weather dropped. Now your question is like announcing to people who are full that food prices have fallen. I read in the newspapers the other day that there is no trace of the wood and coal crisis that was felt in Istanbul a few months ago. Now, Istanbulites have cheap and abundant firewood. However, the wretched woodcutters and charcoal sellers are hunting flies. [...] What it means is that it is up to God to fix some things. Some people will not be able to laugh without some people crying, so some of us will have happy hours at the expense of others.<sup>22</sup>

Reporting daily life problems and broader problems tells something about social reactions to politics. Their vision of politics, understanding, and positioning is more than anti-some reforms or projects; on the contrary, they show a relational perspective on daily life and structure-

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<sup>22</sup> "Halkın Sesi: Odunun Ve Kömürün Ucuzlamasına Ne Dersiniz?," *Son Posta*, 7 February 1936.

related politics. In this asymmetrical authority, a citizen invites a higher political position to improvement rather than to offer deference. In another public interview, a pharmacy worker is asked how he makes a living, and the answer is as follows:

Is this a question for civil servants in our standards? Of course, we live on whatever we can get our hands on. Ask this question to the big merchants and contractors who earn hundreds of thousands in a snap. Then you will hear that they spend in a day what we earn in a year, and your mind will be blown.<sup>23</sup>

The resistance acts impose costs by requiring those who would likely exercise greater power to use additional resources to reform living conditions and the gap among social groups. Like other forms of politics, these newspaper interviews with ordinary people permitted claims of equality to reach those in the ruling. In both discourses made by citizens, it is observable that the “classless society” claim of the state is not quite internalized.<sup>24</sup> On the other hand, there is a direct dissident tone against the living expenses and unequal stratification of society, which is revealed on the surface due to coal prices and other daily issues. These different interviews suggest that mundane narratives and demands of life hold resistance and opposition, which describe the distinctive historical trajectories of the Republic rather than its elite-constructed essence. The notion of a “classless society” is actually one of the principles of Kemalism, categorized under “populism.” Rejection of the class conflict was articulated during RPP’s Ordinary Convention in 1934 by Recep Peker:

Our populism is not just a cliché. [...] Turkey has no classes, genders, or privileges. A mindset that eradicates class struggle, domination, and privilege will complete this country.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> “Halkın Sesi: Nasıl Geçiniyorsunuz Ne Dersiniz?,” *Son Posta*, July 3 1934.

<sup>24</sup> Parla, *Türkiye’de siyasal kültürün resmî kaynakları*, 107.

<sup>25</sup> CHP IV. Büyük Kurultayı Görüşmeler Tutulgası, *Ulus Basımevi*, Ankara, 1935. P. 44-45.

The narrative of nation-building in Turkey portrayed the country as a unified nation with no class distinctions, all sharing common roots, which was one of the most reproduced narratives of the Republic. However, it would be mistaken to evaluate that populism understood by the Republic carries a class that is antagonistic, socialist, or Narodnik in theory and practice. Since the Young Turks, populism has not been apart from the policies to create a national bourgeoisie and a repetition of the moral solidarity perspective and moral norm of rejection of class.<sup>26</sup> Although the definition and members of the class became quite vague in the 1935 RPP party program with the 1929 Economic Crisis, this distinction still existed.<sup>27</sup> The notion of populism did not emerge with the establishment of the Republic. In many of Ziya Gökalp's articles, where he analyzes the principles of "Turkishness" and its social structure, he introduces the definition of populism. In his essay "Government and Domination," written in 1922, Ziya Gökalp defines populism as follows:

In Turkey, one cannot confine the title of the people to only one class. Whether rich or poor, everyone is part of the nation. Even former sultans are now counted among the citizens. There are no class privileges among the people. Although they may have existed as remnants of the past, they will not remain. There are no privileged classes within the people.<sup>28</sup>

Even one of the main principles of the Republic and the RPP is directly related to the CUP ideology and political vision can be observed through Ziya Gökalp's writings. Therefore, the continuity thesis, in fact, is more than an abstract phenomenon; it can be found in my aspects and founding pillars of the Republic. Since the concept of society is not a fixed entity that has a defined input and output mechanism, it does not easily adopt the myth-establishing efforts of political elites.

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<sup>26</sup> Parla, *Türkiye'de siyasal kültürün resmî kaynakları*, 107.

<sup>27</sup> Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi 1935 Programı, *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi Yayınları*, 1935, P. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Ziya Gökalp, "Hükümet Ve Tahakküm," *Küçük Mecmua* 25 (December 4, 1922), P. 9-12.

Scholars have generally overestimated the scope of secularizing reforms and interventions in daily life; therefore, a great gap between state and society is produced in multiple layers. However, when it comes to ordinary life, it is traceable that state-initiated reforms were not welcomed as it was constructed and represented by the superstructure, not because of the intellectual capacity of the citizens but because of the asymmetry between the state discourse and material realities. Even though state leaders and single-party governance often used populist discourse, such as "the peasant is the master of the nation," ordinary citizens started to doubt this rhetoric when they struggled to afford basic needs like coal while seeing wealthy merchants live lavishly.

Penning a petition, letter, or complaint to a political authority is an engendered practice. During the 1920s, literacy rates were quite low, falling below 10 percent. By 1950, adult literacy (among those aged 15 and above) had increased to 28 percent, with 47 percent for men and 13 percent for women.<sup>29</sup> The fact that women lacked educational opportunities because of their gender, class, and race has prevented them from bringing their structural problems to the attention of political authorities. During the archival research, it was observed that almost all petitions were written by men; the problems of women that were documented in the archives were again by men's agency. This phenomenon reflects deep-rooted gender inequalities and power dynamics within the society. Facing multiple layers of discrimination, women were marginalized not only in terms of access to education but also in their access to advocate for their own rights and needs. The dominance of male voices in shaping narratives on women's issues perpetuates a cycle of silencing and invisibility of subjectivities. The portrayal of female subjectivity through the voice of a man once again highlights the fallacy of the claimed "emancipation" in the context of women's rights of that early Republic era.

Examined petitions and newspaper interviews provide insight into understanding the evolving and dynamic ecosystem of individual

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<sup>29</sup> Tamer Çetin, *Understanding the Process of Economic Change in Turkey: An Institutional Approach* (Nova Science Publisher's, 2010), chap. Economic Growth and Institutional Change in Turkey before 1980.

participation and economic concerns across the early Republic era beyond the state and society dichotomy. Shifting away from triumphalist, emancipatory, and revolutionary narratives of Turkey's evolution to democracy, personal stories describe different circumstances. In defining the "appropriate political subject/citizen," the Republic was trying to draw the boundaries of citizenship; on the other hand, citizens selectively adopted certain discourses of the state to negotiate their fiscal hardship. Petitions written by ex-soldiers and contributors to the war are inherent in a duality; they are at once a formal format and regulated by the natural process of bureaucratic dialogue. They are also informal and unfixed and deeply related to practices that can alter into more subversive forms of activity. This dual character of petitions shows that they were inherently ambiguous, dynamic, and unstable ways of interacting with ordinary people and authority. Petitions, public opinion columns in newspapers, and citizen letters complicate and qualify current collective action and resistant theories. Popular claim-making and showing opposition had another channel through petitions. On the other hand, citizen-penned documents are not solely weapons of the weak; they are also instruments of popular politics and political agency from ordinary people with the power of individual narrating that offers a subversing challenge to the constructed discourses. Of course, not all petitioners were equal or had the resources and advantages to appeal to the authority, the point evident in the low numbers of women who were able to address their own concerns with their subjectivities.

### § 2.3 Individual Opportunities and Othering Practices in the Petitions

Personal stories are narrative transactions. They are interactive rather than particular fictions or productions; personal stories are social norms addressing rules of participation and inclusion. The structure, the performance, and the language of the petitions and letters are defined and regulated within certain socio-political settings and often reproduce

existing ideologies and hegemonic power asymmetries and inequalities.<sup>30</sup> Narratives are not only the carriers or reflections of the hegemonic power and existing ideologies; through their expression, the stories constitute the hegemony, shape, and conduct it. In other words, the dominant norms and social hierarchies get produced and unfold within particular instances, seemingly unique. Indeed, the manifestations of official ideologies, discourses, and hegemony derive from the formulation of individual narrations. This section of the thesis will focus on individual grievances and efforts to increase personal advantages. In doing so, a specific emphasis will be placed on the petitioners' hegemonic, counter-hegemonic, and "othering" discourses. By locating these semantic preferences in the context of the early Republic, forming the Turkish identity will be revisited through self-written historical documents.

Dear gentleman, I have been striving to learn the art of enameling for the past year by working at a jeweler's shop. Currently, in our country, this craft can only be found in its pure form in the hands of an Armenian master, who is nearing the end of his life and is reluctant to pass on his knowledge to only a few young Armenian people. I am reaching out to your esteemed office to ensure that, like myself, you also desire for this art to be learned by Turkish youth to produce society badges, rings, and earrings within our borders without having to send our money abroad. The birthplace of this art is Vienna. My aspiration is to work there for a year, fully mastering this craft, and return to my homeland to teach it to fellow young citizens. [...] I believe that you will not hesitate to extend your assistance in supporting a motivated young Turkish man like myself in learning and passing on art that is not present in our country. With infinite respect and kindest regards.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ewick And Silbey, "Narrating Social Structure."

<sup>31</sup> BCA 490.01/532.2134.1, November 24, 1934.

This petition was written in 1934 by Tacettin Mecdi from Ankara. At the very first glance, this document seems like a request from a keen young person to learn a craft for his personal career. However, the text has certain and very careful framings about the sacred-citizen codes and identities, along with a particular emphasis on Turkishness. Tacettin mentions the Armenian jewelry master on purpose. He then expands the story to the climax by saying that the master only teaches this craft to young Armenian people. So, let us refresh our memories of the start of this pejorative usage invoked by an Armenian identity and its continuity in the early Republic era. This historicization will help us better identify Mr. Mecdi's context and selective discourse.

The rise of Turkish supremacist ideology, with the terrible refugee crisis resulting from the Balkan wars, deepened a profound distrust toward Greek and Armenian Christian minorities within this faction by the CUP elites.<sup>32</sup> This “distrust” and “anxiety” reached its most horrific levels during the chaos of the Great War.<sup>33</sup> With the establishment of the Republic, the concept of a unified and homogenous Turkish nation that marginalized ethnic and religious identities, the principle of secularism, which has an enlightenment-centered criticism of Islam, and a transformation in the portrayal of the Turks to erase the failures of the Ottoman past started to be formulated within diverse fields.<sup>34</sup> In the very heydays of the construction of the Kemalist ideology under the single-party regime, Mustafa Kemal signifies his position about the past events and claims of the Armenians:

In these fruitful lands, Armenians have no rights. Your homeland is yours; it belongs to the Turks. This land was Turkish in history, so it is Turkish and will live forever as Turkish. Indeed, this

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<sup>32</sup> Zürcher, *Turkey*, 196-197.

<sup>33</sup> James Ryan, “Politics And Ideology,” In *The Routledge Handbook On Contemporary Turkey*, Edt. Joos Jongerden (Taylor & Francis Group, 2023), 14.

<sup>34</sup> Edhem Eldem, “The Ottoman Empire And Orientalism: An Awkward Relationship,” In *After Orientalism* (Brill, 2015), 89–102, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004282537\\_008](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004282537_008).

beautiful land has suffered many foreign invasions since ancient times.<sup>35</sup>

Mustafa Kemal's call out to Armenian citizens in 1923, specifically aimed at dispelling any claims of rights they may have had in the lands they had inhabited for decades, is significant. This concern is also evident in a considerable portion of Republican-era historiography. As Üngör points out, this interest and efforts in historiography were archeology of "proving" not the contemporary but the historical existence of "Turks" in Anatolia to bring political legitimacy to the region.<sup>36</sup> Mustafa Kemal established a line for constructing the narrative of the Turkish nation, tracing its origins from Genghis Khan through the Seljuks and culminating with the final Ottoman Sultan in his speech in 1923. In this speech, Mustafa Kemal symbolized the triumph of national sovereignty over monarchical sovereignty, emphasizing the nation as the sole legitimate entity for ensuring state identity and political authority. This laid the groundwork for the enduring myths and memories of the Turkish nation for years to come.<sup>37</sup>

Returning to Tacettin's petition about Turkification and saving a craft from the hands of an Armenian master, it can be seen that the content fits the historical phenomenon that the Armenians were the first "other" during the formulation of the Turkish nation. He fundamentally reproduces one of the deepest "anxieties" and "nationalist concerns" of the newly established state by re-addressing the "actual" danger in order to gain a personal advantage out of it. His relationality and narration validate and bear the marks of ideological effects on the role of Armenians during the construction of citizenship codes of the Turkish nation. By drawing attention to the "non-national" character of the craft along with its future, which is in danger due to belonging to "threatening powers," his story contributes to hegemony by channeling consciousness with well-chosen but implicit accounts of socio-political constructions. On the

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<sup>35</sup> *Hakimiyeti Milliye*, 21 March 1923.

<sup>36</sup> Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 228.

<sup>37</sup> Nimet Arsan (Ed.), *Atatürk'ün Söylev Ve Demeçleri I-III* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1989), P. 158.

other hand, the petitioner refers to Mustafa Kemal's speech that was made in Adana with shopowners of the district in 1923:

The Armenians have occupied our craft centers and taken on a stance as if they are the owners of this country. Surely, there can be no greater injustice and audacity than this.<sup>38</sup>

The petition shows a correlation regarding the portrayal of the "problem" of Armenian crafters' dominance over the sector. This selective adaptation of a certain discourse by the petitioner, either consciously or unconsciously – once again – demonstrates that stories are always told within specific historical, political, institutional, and interactional settings that form their meanings and tellings.

The making of Turkish identity was so fragile and delicate that a particular criminal act was passed to protect its "honor." Article 159 of the Turkish Penal Code passed on 1 March 1926 stipulated that "insulting and denigrating" the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, the government officials, the army, the navy, or Turkishness was punishable by imprisonment for not less than three years, while "blaspheming the laws of the Republic of Turkey" was punishable by imprisonment for not more than six months and a fine from thirty to one hundred liras.<sup>39</sup> In Cemil Koçak's article, he provides extensive archival research on the forceful Turkification policies implemented on the non-Muslim and non-Turk communities in order to accelerate the homogenization process via law. The 159th Article was one of the coercive methods used to expedite Turkification. The accusation of insulting Turkishness was particularly applied on the minorities. In 1936, an Armenian citizen in Tokat, Koper, went to the police station to start legal action against his tenant in order to have his unpaid payments. The police officer told Koper and his wife, Vartanoş, that this unit was not the responsible agent for the executive transactions and led them to court. Koper responded to this guidance as follows: "Armenians

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<sup>38</sup> Parla, *Türkiye'de siyasal kültürün resmî kaynakları*, 200.

<sup>39</sup> Cemil Koçak, "Ayın Karanlık Yüzü," *Tarih Ve Toplum: Yeni Yaklaşımlar* (İletişim Yayınları, 2005), P. 147-208.

would not starve wherever they go; however, dishonest Turks would." Followingly, Koper and his wife Vartanoş got arrested under Article 159 of the Penal Code, namely "insulting Turkishness."<sup>40</sup>

Armenian and Greek Christians were not the only targets of the Turkification policies. The Jewish population of the Republic also wanted to be blended in terms of the Turkification codes. In 1924, a letter directly engaging in a dialogue with Mustafa Kemal was sent by Karakaşzade Mehmet Rüştü – a converted Jewish "dönme" – complaining about the "traitors" within the Jewish communities.<sup>41</sup> In this letter addressed to Mustafa Kemal, a secret society pretending to be "Muslims on the outside and Jews on the inside" was mentioned. The letter called on them to abandon their old superstitious beliefs and customs as soon as possible and to act in accordance with the definition of citizenship stipulated in the constitution of the new Turkey.

Mehmet Karakaşzade Rüştü emphasized a nationalist and racist perspective, contending that the "*Dönme*," whom he perceived as racially and religiously Jewish and foreign, rather than Muslim and Turkish, were pivotal in the public discourse regarding the community's history, religion, identity, and their potential "integration" into the nation.<sup>42</sup> In the following years, with the climax of the "History Thesis" and language "purifying" efforts, the "Citizen Speak Turkish" campaign gained momentum again after its start in 1928.<sup>43</sup> In 1931-32, the campaign began with a push from the Jews of Izmir. Following the departure of the Greeks and Armenians, the Jews had become Izmir's largest non-Muslim community. They made up more than ten percent of the city's population. In this vein, the RPP assigned a committee to Izmir to monitor Jewish people and their daily usage of Turkish in 1933, the report describes the situation as follows:

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<sup>40</sup> BCA 490.01/607.103.1, March 13, 1936.

<sup>41</sup> "Ankara'da Karakaşzade Mehmet Rüştü Bey'den Bilimum Selanik Dönmelerine Açık Mektup," *Vakit*, January 7 1924.

<sup>42</sup> Marc Baer, *The Dönme: Jewish Converts, Muslim Revolutionaries, And Secular Turks* (Stanford University Press, 2010), Preface, Xvii.

<sup>43</sup> "Türkiyede Türkçe," *Vakit*, February 15 1930.

It is understood that the committee formed in Izmir for the purpose of ensuring that Turkish is spoken among the Jewish citizens has been working hard for a year. Every week, Turkish lectures are given in synagogues, schools, and synagogue schools by lawyers, doctors, and the Chief Rabbi, and they inform the Jewish citizens in order to achieve the goal as soon as possible.<sup>44</sup>

In this highly surveillance-focused Turkification efforts of the state, Jewish communities across the country were feeling diverse pressures. Almost every move that was demonstrated by the people who were excluded from the “persona grata” citizenship codes was gaining attention from the state officials. The portrayal of the Jewish people in the national press was quite anti-semitic and was mostly associated with “money lending,” along with other “conspiracy” theories.<sup>45</sup> In a magazine of the time, “Akbaba,” the cartoon representing a taverna chooses a quite anti-semitic illustration of the Jewish people referring to their “wealthy” and “money-obsessed” nature.<sup>46</sup>

In the political and social atmosphere of Turkish-supremacist propaganda created by such campaigns and policies of the Republic and its media propaganda, a Jew who converted to Islam expresses the injustice that befell him in 1938 as follows:

Three days ago, payrolls were distributed. The names of the translators were removed from the list because their salaries were being deducted. My name was also removed from the payroll. However, I am a chief editor. I thought that I had been recruited to the Ministry as the chief of publications [...] Which language am I translating? In fact, I was shown as a French translator in their registry book, but this is not true. During the four years of my activity, I translated from five languages when necessary, but French was not among them. This last measure is the latest in a series of

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<sup>44</sup> BCA 490.01/540.40.1, June 14, 1933.

<sup>45</sup> Baer, *The Dönme*, 164–67.

<sup>46</sup> “Mesirelerin Hali,” Akbaba, July 6, 1935

actions taken against me by the General Clerk and the undersecretary of the Ministry for the last four years. They hope it is the last fatal blow. [...] It was never in my mind to enter the Foreign Office. However, the deputy foreign minister thought that since I knew several foreign languages and had been the editor-in-chief of a local French-language newspaper for two years, I would be of use to the Foreign Office, which gave me a position in seventh rank. The directors of the Ministry objected to this appointment; the opposition lasted 4 months. The reason was not a secret: racial issues. Finally, İsmet İnönü, the former chief deputy, approved the appointment, saying that racial conflicts could not be found in state principles.[...] Afterwards, they did not give me my salary because my appointment was “illegal”, they objected. [...] Why am I not allowed to work? [...] I have taken multiple responsibilities in diverse positions within the Ottoman bureaucracy. Now, there is only one person in the deputy who passed the vocational exam successfully but was not transferred to the vocational section: I. All the reasons they give are invalid; the only real explanation is race. The leaders of the race issue are Numan Menencioğlu and his son Agah Aksel. These people consider contact with Jews to be unpleasant or harmful. I have no objection to them. Of course, it is confined to the sphere of personal relations. [...] My ancestors have been Turks for 400 years. My education was in Turkish schools. When I studied at Selanik High School, in a city where half of the population was Jewish, there was only one Jew in the school, and that was me. I graduated from the Istanbul University Law School [...] I became a Muslim in 1914. [...] At various stages of my life, have I ever been seen in any way that might cast doubt on my loyalty to my homeland? [...] I do not ask for forgiveness for my sin of being a Jew. I feel no guilt for being born a Jew. It is not a stain.

I do not feel any honor for being a Muslim. This is the courage of civilization. [...] I want to be given my duty now.<sup>47</sup>

In the context of the described discriminative, oppressive, and ethnoreligious policies, a converted Jew exposes discrimination, a form of “othering” coming from the state bureaucracy. We witness a logic and method of resisting injustice by intervening in the metadiscourse of the state and history. Are personal narratives, then, always hegemonic? To argue such a point would be to reject the socially and politically organized variability this thesis aims to set. In this petition, the petitioner reminds the past in ways that are subversive of authority and validate his position. His material presence serves as a tangible reminder, narrating the continuum between the Republic and the empire. He exposes the treatment meted out to him in contemporary actions, deftly intertwining his own narrative with the broader societal axes of discrimination. Confronted with the enduring specter of anti-Semitism, tracing its lineage back to the late years of the Ottoman era, the petitioner finds himself compelled to assert the exigency and import of his conversion to Islam. Yet, an awareness that his identity remains unaccepted by the margins of citizenship is still valid for him. He questions the intentions of high-ranking state officials. Why, he asks, would they punish a loyal servant who's given his all to the state in various roles and responsibilities? In this narrative, he paints a picture of struggle, identity, and belonging within the complex landscape of the state, inviting readers to ponder the deeper questions of justice and acceptance.

In the petition, he breaks the silence that had been imposed on the community and claims/reminds his identity as a citizen who holds rights: a respectable state official, a 400-year-old Turk-ancestor-related, and not giving up on his Jewishness as well. What distinguishes this petition as subversive? This petition, a subversive story, recounts the particular experiences as rooted in and historical, reminding us that there are

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<sup>47</sup> BCA 490.01/539.2159.12, February 23, 1938.

multiple realities and histories of the Republic, including cultural, material, and political realms that extend beyond the local. If stories hold power to the degree that they dictate silence and manage consciousness, subversive personal narratives are the ones that break the silence and claim over realities. In this regard, this petition suggests the dynamics that can generate the counterhegemonic, inclusive, and non-discriminatory narrative.

Knowing the “othering” practices and myths and having a covered agenda enable the possibilities of intervention and resistance. In the petition, there is a well-aware citizen who enters a negotiation and criticism, acting tactically to promote his own agenda and goals by reminding that he had followed all of the necessary steps to be considered as “persona grata” and further questions the exclusion of his presence that exposes the racialized power hierarchies and citizenry codes. Then, how did ordinary people who did not fit the codes of acceptable citizenship articulate their problems? In 1929, an Armenian family was deported from Balıkesir to Konya in 1929, and *Cumhuriyet* newspaper had the widow’s demand on the column:

My husband Samoel and I were deported to Konya during the First World War. Samoel died there, and I converted to Islam. I married a man named Kasım Çavuş. One year later, he passed away. I went to Balıkesir. They did not give me my house in the Karaoğlan neighborhood. Muhajirs were settled there under the name of property. My applications are not taken care of. I am languishing in the corners of mosques and madrasahs. I call the attention of the state.<sup>48</sup>

This petition is another example of the voice of the “othered” and discriminated self-demanding justice by providing a particular but general account of the events. Petitioner Hediye, as a woman who lost her spouse and found herself in a miserable state – resettled and dispossessed –

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<sup>48</sup> “Hakka Riayet Edilmeli,” *Cumhuriyet*, June 6, 1929.

questions the states on why her natural rights are not implemented and disregarded. Hediye exemplifies the marginalized, "other" woman's voice, advocating for justice within the socio-political framework by elucidating a particular yet paradigmatic narrative –justice and equal treatment. Situating her experience within the broader state-sponsored and constructed discourse of "justice" and "populism," the petition furnishes a nuanced exposition, combining the personal with the general. Yet again, there is a similar effort to include herself within the general citizenship framework by highlighting that she converted. Through Hediye's lived experience, the petition unveils the dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, interrogating the hegemonic structures that perpetuate marginalization and attempts to bargain the spheres of justice by referring to the core values as Islam.

In essence, Hediye's demand offers a prism through which to analyze the interstices of "othering, power, identity, and resistance. It is, indeed, not an example of conventional methods of resisting, yet, it is a tactical, informed, and compatible method of gaining self-advantage as being "others" themselves. Therefore, such personal narratives, demands, and complaints written by ordinary citizens enrich our understanding of the perennial struggle for justice within the socio-political milieu for diverse communities, considering internal power dynamics and their relation to authority.

As Recep Peker stated in 1934 while teaching Turkish history, "Gazi - referring to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk - has found the capital of this honorable state, which he brought out from the realm of poverty, in the blood of the Turkish nation." This section analyzes the instrumentalization of Turkish national identity and tactics against it by ordinary citizens, considering the power relations and hierarchies within society. While an Armenian body is described as a "*perpetual threat*" and an element to be purged from all areas – just as in many statements and practices promoted by the state throughout its establishment – this situation itself has been instrumentalized for personal gain. It has been observed that ordinary citizens, in line with assimilation and Turkification policies, reproduce and develop hegemonic narratives and stories in their discourses to

extract certain assets. On the other hand, when similar ethnic-centered discourses are produced by non-Muslims, they are faced with punishment through certain acts.

In the self-narrations of the “other” citizens of the Republic, resistance and negotiation against the supra-Turkish political projects appeared as the historicization of their own subjectivities and bodies through decades. For the persona grata of the Republic, “other” became the bargaining tool to develop an advantage and represent a more essentialist identity-based instrumentalization. On the other hand, excluded citizens of the regime responded to this pressure and hegemony by implying conversions to Islam and their attachment to the socio-cultural setting for decades. In the letters and petitions, it is evident that the ontology of otherness was the necessary basis of social imagination and construction.<sup>49</sup> National identity and its founding pillars were discussed, transformed, and challenged in the stories of ordinary people in line with their subjectivities and histories. While certain communities were excluded from the fundamental rights and resources, their resistance appeared as contesting the official discourses, addressing alternative histories and realities.

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<sup>49</sup> Ayla Göl, “Imagining the Turkish Nation through ‘Othering’ Armenians\*,” *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 1 (2005): 121–39, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00195.x>.

## Ordinary People's Engagement in Local Politics Through Letters of Denunciation Prior to the 1939 General Elections

*Nothing can ever be as shocking as life. Except writing.*

– Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book*<sup>1</sup>

**T**roughout the making of modern Turkey, the single-party regime had five different elections took place in 1923, 1927, 1931, 1935, 1939, and 1943.<sup>2</sup> With the exception of the 1943 General Election, the electoral law applied during the Second Constitutional Era remained with some modifications in other elections as well.<sup>3</sup> During this period, a two-tiered

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<sup>1</sup> Orhan Pamuk, *The Black Book* (Faber & Faber, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Kadri Unat, "TEK PARTİ DÖNEMİNİN SON GENEL SEÇİMİ: 1943 SEÇİMLERİ VE CUMHURİYET HALK PARTİSİ'NİN SEÇİM PROPAGANDALARI," *Atatürk Yolu Dergisi* 14, no. 56 (March 28, 2015): 209–48, [https://doi.org/10.1501/Tite\\_0000000427](https://doi.org/10.1501/Tite_0000000427).

<sup>3</sup> Cemil Koçak, "Parliament Membership during the Single-Party System in Turkey (1925-1945),"

electoral system was adopted, with second voter elections first and then parliamentary elections.

This chapter will focus on local politics, self-interpretations, and political participation of ordinary people through the channels of advice and denunciation letters to the RPP bodies before the 1939 General Elections. In the absence of direct and diverse tools for participating in politics and roles in the government, the citizen letters on the subject of the 1939 General Election mediated between the state and society. According to the argument of this chapter, a single-party regime did not govern the country in isolation from society and totally neglected public opinion. On the contrary, its political hegemony and political authoritarianism needed constant consolidation and validation.<sup>4</sup> The archival research of this chapter explored how the RPP encouraged and opened the channels for sending letters to the party bodies on the particular agenda of the elections. Based on the findings, this chapter proposes that the early Republican state depended on the local information networks, local politics, and “subjective” knowledge of the citizens who were based in the country's peripheries to govern the electoral process.

While the letters sent to the RPP bodies provide surveillance and local information to the party decision-makers, they also help us understand making sense of the times' political repertoires, problems, and tools of the political bargaining by the people. The letters of advice and denunciation about the deputy candidacy election process are highly ambiguous documents. Language reflects these ambiguities and complexities in the context in which they were written. The database for this chapter consists of one hundred sixty-four letters located in the RPP archive under the title of Public Complaint Letters about the Parliamentary Candidates of the 1939 Elections.

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*European Journal of Turkish Studies*, no. 3 (December 31, 2005),  
<https://doi.org/10.4000/ejts.497>.

<sup>4</sup> Murat Metinsoy, “FRAGILE HEGEMONY, FLEXIBLE AUTHORITARIANISM, AND GOVERNING FROM BELOW: POLITICIANS' REPORTS IN EARLY REPUBLICAN TURKEY,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 4 (2011): 699–719, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743811000912>.

There is no way of making a genuine and authentic sample of letters since today's documents constitute only a tiny portion of the body. My selection represents "denunciation" contented letters from the citizens about the local politicians and candidates for the National Assembly. The definition of denunciation is borrowed from Sheila Fitzpatrick's approach, as it is a voluntarily offered written communication to the authorities that provides damaging information about another person.<sup>5</sup> Following Fitzpatrick's categorization, the denunciation letters will be analyzed in three major titles: the ones concerning "loyalty," abuse of power, corruption, illiteracy, and nepotism.

There are multiple ways to think of the function and place of the denunciations. One is to ask what the early Republic regime gained from collecting denunciations from citizens. Seeking an answer to this question and making it the central inquiry would cause the regime and state to be located at the core of the unit analysis. Therefore, another question is what citizens achieve from sending these denunciation letters. In light of this question, my argument has no intention of reproducing the assumption that denunciation letters essentially are an outcome of totalitarianism and a direct product of the state. The mentioned intellectual tendency contains ideological orthodoxy and the exclusion of mass agency from politics. Instead of approaching the letters according to their surveillance functions, this chapter looks for ways to explore the citizens' political imaginations and personal articulations, engaging with local politics to achieve advantages. In the letters of denunciation, citizens aim to protect and advance their interests within the given context and use the channel as a function of justice, correcting unjust incidents.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most striking characteristics of these letters is the claim of justice. In this vein, denunciation letters – sent for the general elections agenda and pointing out concerns – are a method by which the ordinary people can negotiate power. In James Scott's phrase in "The Weapons of

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<sup>5</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," *The Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (December 1996): 831–66, <https://doi.org/10.1086/245396>.

<sup>6</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 78–105, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2500979>.

the Weak,” denunciations are the letters to authority and authority in a context with its own codes, ideology, discourse, and political vision.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, ordinary citizens adopt a discourse and semantic tactic of letters they believe are likely to be heard and taken into consideration. As a result, writing to RPP bodies and headquarters also reflects the social hierarchies and settings since they adopt a tone and relatability that authority condemns and punishes.

Focusing on the very daily and routine practice, we now come to realize just how limited and fragile the authority of even “absolute” regimes was. When analyzing local politics and its dynamics, the scope of this chapter will not be the local powerholders or elites. To move beyond the victims of larger historical processes, I aim to provide more fragmented histories of popular political action repertoires and social stratifications within them by analyzing the language and bargaining argumentations. To fulfill a social history of politics, intellectual inquiry, it is essential to define “politics” in broad and inclusive terms as an ongoing bargaining process between those who claim governmental power and those who engage with it in multiple ways.<sup>8</sup> For this reason, it is vital to revisit the essentially romanticized concept of popular “resistance” literature and analyze it with a much less colorful but more inclusive and extensible concept of “ordinary people’s political practices.”

### § 3.1 In the Context of 1939 General Elections and Its Provincialized Echoes

We left the year of Atatürk’s death last night. With great enthusiasm, we were saying goodbye to 1938. The Republic would turn 15 years old. We had envisioned the great festive night of our lives in the fall of the new year. It turned out that we were going to cry. What shall we say? Is it

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<sup>7</sup> Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Ph Te Brake, *Shaping History: Ordinary People in European Politics, 1500-1700* (University of California Press, 1998), chap. Breaking and Entering, 6.

not a lesson in the laws of nature? Nevertheless, national life does not end even with Atatürk's lifetime.<sup>9</sup>

This article was published one month before the general elections and, to some extent, reflects the political climate and conditions of the period. The 1939 General elections were the first elections that took place in the nation after the death of Atatürk; because of his incident, RPP went to an extraordinary meeting where İsmet İnönü, the new president of the party, established a political route for the party.

After İnönü was elected as the President of the Republic, he declared the elections for March 1939. The presidential change in RPP also brought reforms to the party structure, vision, and electoral system. İnönü felt pressure to consolidate his leadership across the country and within the party. Therefore, he changed the aggressive political liquidation attitude of the party and wanted to allow more space in terms of representation in the parliament. After he was elected president, İsmet İnönü first made a series of moves to reconcile with the former opponents of the regime. Through this approach, he aimed to increase his power and influence within the RPP while signaling a more peaceful administration. In doing so, he also aimed to prevent any possible opposition movement. Immediately after İnönü's election as President, all the names that Mustafa Kemal had violently attacked in Nutuk, such as Ali Fuat Cebesoy, Kazım Karabekir, Cafer Tayyar Eğilmez, and Hüseyin Avni Ulaş, each sent a congratulatory telegram to İnönü. Furthermore, Karabekir's diaries reveal that İnönü frequently met with Kazım Karabekir after his election as president on diverse political matters.

The 1939 elections were an essential opportunity for the regime to mend fences with former opponents and shape its internal balance policy. In fact, all those who had been on the political margins during the National Struggle and Atatürk's era became MPs with these elections. It can be observed in the notes in his diary that İnönü developed projects for determining the parliamentary candidates shortly before the

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<sup>9</sup> Falih Rıtkı Atay, "1939," *Ulus*, 1 January 1939.

elections and thought about it. Accordingly, his diary entries include the idea of asking the public and the party grassroots about the nomination of candidates. In this respect, on March 4, a tea party was organized by the president in Dolmabahçe, and the first action towards candidate selection was taken.

On December 26, 1938, İsmet İnönü's speech at the Extraordinary Congress of the Republican People's Party held in Ankara is important in determining the political climate that marked the 1939 General Elections and in revisiting the authoritarian and hegemonic state discourses prevalent in the literature.

[...] Each of you has listened to the complaints and wishes of our nation from the villages to the provinces. Considering that the main basis for the activities of the Grand Assembly and the government of the Republic is to honor the complaints and wishes of our people. [...] Trying to find solutions to the narrowest neighborhoods and the smallest needs of our nation will be a new hallmark in the work of the coming years. [...] It is our cherished ambition that nations can live as members of a family, understanding each other's problems and living as brothers and sisters in the lap of this small globe.<sup>10</sup>

As another implication of the mentioned approach, President İnönü started his nationwide trip to get closer ties with the Republic's citizens.<sup>11</sup> İsmet İnönü first traveled to the Western Black Sea region after he was elected President. During this trip, which included Zonguldak, Kastamonu, and its surrounding districts, İnönü made a speech at the Kastamonu RPP Provincial Congress in his capacity as the chairman of the RPP and addressed that party membership should not be used for personal purposes and that the RPP should be an organization covering all citizens.<sup>12</sup> İnönü's speech at Istanbul University on March 6 is also

<sup>10</sup> İsmet İnönü, "*Üsnomal Büyük Kurultayda Söylenen Nutuk*," December 26 1938.

<sup>11</sup> "Reisicumhurumuz Şehrimizi Şereflendirdiler," *Son Telgraf*, 2 March 1939.

<sup>12</sup> "İsmet İnönü Sarayona Zonguldağa Hareket Etti," *Akşam*, 11 December 1938.

essential. Addressing the students, İnönü stated that a democratic regime could be established in Turkey shortly as follows:

All stages of a populist administration will develop continuously in our political life, and the nation's control should be effective on the regime for an actual populist administration.<sup>13</sup>

Before the 1939 elections, Turkish MPs were selected in the headquarters of the party in Ankara without any pre-election qualitative research or elections, and lists of candidates were sent to the voters. After the Fifth Grand National Assembly of Turkey decided to hold new elections on January 27, 1939, it was announced on February 10 that the RPP would nominate candidates from all provinces but leave some spots for independent candidates in a few provinces.<sup>14</sup> By mid-February, the number of applicants who wanted to be parliamentary candidates by applying to the party had reached several thousand.<sup>15</sup> It was stated that after the second voters were determined between March 15-21, the lists of parliamentary candidates would be announced after consultations (*istişare*) between the RPP officials and the second voters.<sup>16</sup> The method of asking for the opinions of the second voters was being implemented for the first time in single-party era elections. Apparently, İnönü thought that this would be an essential step towards the integration of the party and the people, or, as he put it, towards a "populist administration."

İnönü's speeches and travels from his presidency until the 1939 election period, alongside the introduction of the new electoral system, reveal that the single-party regime was not simply a political setting as commonly portrayed but rather a mindset reliant on public approval and fraught with political apprehension. In addition to the newly introduced

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<sup>13</sup> "Kurultay Bu Sabah Açılıyor," *Tan*, 29 March 1939.

<sup>14</sup> Alexandros Lamprou, "Political Petitioning, Denunciation, and State-Society Relations during the Single-Party Period in Turkey," *Turkish Studies* 18, no. 3 (July 3, 2017): 514-41, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2017.1300535>.

<sup>15</sup> İsmet İnönü and Ahmet Demirel, *Defterler, 1919-1973: cilt. 1919-1955* (YKY, 2001), 286.

<sup>16</sup> "Yeni Mebus Namzetleri İlan Edildi," *Tan*, 25 March 1939.

electoral system, the importance placed on the public's opinions regarding existing candidates showed itself in the encouragement of political petition writing – denunciation letters. İnönü's descriptions of a new order focusing on the people's issues revealed themselves in the discourse of "moral," "selfless," and "educated" party, which subsequently became the thematic dictionaries and translation materials of the submitted denunciation letters. By inviting people to apply for political positions, allowing the channel of consulting second electors, and publicly acknowledging the grievances of the people, the regime showed an intention to establish a mediation between the selection of the candidates and governance.

In examining the practice of political letter writing, the thesis complicates linear accounts that reproduce the image generated by the Kemalist elite of the society as backward, detached from politics, and avoidant of politics. Petitions submitted to the RPP centered on local politics and elections reveal that citizens were engaged in politics from very different angles and could demonstrate their grievances in a set repertoire that the political elites could hear. The repertoire and positioning of the ordinary people in denunciation letters also show the very fragmented and hierarchical fabric of society.

Focusing on the local politics-engaged petitions, this chapter seeks to bring the newly-elected president İnönü's vision and local reflections on it into a dialogue. In the light of a cross-reading of the transforming context of the politics of the time along with its local interpretations, worlds of social subjects will be analyzed in the denunciating documents of the new identities and new forms of subjectivity. Having a closer step to local grievances and their unique, but structural and relatable articulations will enable realizing state-society relations in interaction rather than silence.

### § 3.2 Denunciation Letters on Lacking Loyalty to the State<sup>17</sup>

Local politics, networks, peasants, ordinary people, and their place and significance for state-society relations did not attract academic and political attention much. In this sense, this section on analyzing denunciation letters aims to provide a case study of local politics and self-engagements in line with the regional-national dialect. As İnönü introduced the new political horizon of the RPP and the state in selecting candidates, the regime encouraged and sought local opinions. This was a method of widespread monitoring of party officials and a form of citizen participation in politics. Party headquarters received many denunciation letters on abuses of power in the local settings. Denunciation letters will be unfolded in three sections concerning loyalty to the state and the party, abuse of power, and nepotism by politicians. At the Extraordinary Congress of the Republican People's Party in 1938, loyalty to the party and the notion that working for the party meant working for the people was emphasized not only by İsmet İnönü but also by Prime Minister Celal Bayar:

The desires of our leader, your noble aspirations, mean the political program of our great party is surrounded by the wishes of the nation. I consider it an honor-bound duty to work with all my loyalty.<sup>18</sup>

In his 1938 speech to a regional party meeting in Kastamonu, İnönü emphasized that maintaining stability depended on responsibility and loyalty to the state. He asserted that a secular, Republican, and nationalist government is based on the principles that every citizen will reap the benefits of their sincere efforts, leading to national prosperity and the enhancement of both material and spiritual well-being in a stable and

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<sup>17</sup> This theme of “denunciation letters on lacking loyalty to the state (devlete karşı hainlik içinde olanlar, devlete sadık olmayanlar)” emerges from the letter materials examined, in which local politicians are frequently portrayed as disloyal to the state.

<sup>18</sup> “Parti Büyük Kurultayının Toplantısı,” *Akşam*, 27 December, 1938.

fear-free environment.<sup>19</sup> One of the most significant lines that defined the new era, from the Extraordinary Congress of the RPP to the speeches made at the local level, was “loyalty” (sadaikat) to the state and the party. İnönü not only underlined this at the level of rhetoric but also demonstrated it through reconciling with opponents of the National Struggle and single-party regime immediately after being elected president, in a move aimed at increasing loyalty and preventing opposition. Therefore, loyalty to the party and the state was also one of the fundamental issues addressed in denunciation petitions against MP candidates.

This is the paradigmatic form of a loyal citizen-against-loyal servants denunciation document. The most evident and common accusation in the letters was that the related candidate for the parliamentary election had a suspicious and disloyal history, usually supporting the regime's opponents. For instance, in his denunciation petition of Şahin Bozkurt from Örtülü of Erzurum, he denounces candidate Hüseyin Köycü with these words:

His ancestors had committed treason against the nation, and his family members were in the hands of regime opponents. Hüseyin Köycü's uncle Bilal is a traitor, and such people should not be made MPs.<sup>20</sup>

Other allegations ranged from making coalitions with “external powers” (dış güçler) during wartime to contacts of any kind with non-Muslim “dangerous” identities. İbrahim Sami Kayım from Balıkesir describes one of the candidates as follows:

Following the occupation of İzmir, he tried to prevent the ideas and initiatives of the first defense organization at the very first

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<sup>19</sup> Kadri Kemal Kop, “Milli Şef’in Söylev, Demeç ve Mesajları,” (Akay Kitapevi: Ankara, 1945), p. 272. 16.

<sup>20</sup> BCA 490.01/344.1440.4. March 1, 1939.

meeting and tried to lead the Greeks to the future and successes and only joined the Party later in return for a fee.<sup>21</sup>

In loyalty concerning denunciations, authors use the formulaic phrase, "I see it as my duty to inform my state." In this vein, a novel rising citizenry perspective was apparent in the letters, feeling the responsibility for the government regarding the disloyal agents and evaluating the relationship between it as dynamic and relatively open to dialogue. The single-party regime and aggressive marginalization of the opponents of the regime, following the new path introduced by İnönü during the interwar period, stimulated many denunciations about conspiracies and "sinister signs." Such illuminations were sometimes conveyed in exalted tones by addressing the "natural enemies of the regime" (rejimin hakiki düşmanları) and exposing the new citizenship codes of the Republic:

Raşit Usum had two wives, one of whom was a Greek convert and the other a Circassian; he was the closest comrade-in-arms of Anzavur, who worked in the interests of the caliphate and the British. When they expelled the national forces from Biga with cruelty, they entered the city with Anzavur and weapons. He was an enemy of Turks and a protector of Circassians; he did not even have a secondary school education.<sup>22</sup>

And sometimes, there was a note of urgency about the fact that an enemy of the people had entered the party.

[...] The people were astonished at the election of a man who chanted "Down with İsmet Pasha" to hundreds of thousands. This person might lead the country to anarchy..."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4. March 17, 1939.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, March 4, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, February 2, 1939.

Through the circulation of the regime's propaganda with various tools like audio channels, the People's House (Halkevi), and newspapers, a description emphasizing less personal and more broad socio-political analyses seems to be more sensible. Local political settings, conditions, and interpretations of politics refer to a broader interpretative framework. The denunciation letters concerning the loyalty of the MP candidates for the elections prove that the vocabulary used by the authors was in parallel with the regime's discourse about its "greatest enemy," "traitors of the nation." Within the narration of denunciations, it is possible to trace and situate the process of political transformation, the beginning of new leadership – İnönü taking over the office- and change at the local scope within spaces where truths and fiction meet. These letters sent by ordinary people also enable us to highlight how social actors made sense and used the products and discourses of the state. During the years of the negotiations, Dr Cemal played an active role in the founding of the society to establish an independent Lazistan government. He is a very dangerous man, and with some of his complaints, he aims to create a gap between the people and the government.<sup>24</sup>

In this unsigned petition from Artvin, the relationship of loyalty between the people and the state is, again, instrumentalized. By presenting the possible threat of the regime, the author benefits from the state's anxieties by intervening in politics during the process. In cases of limited access to political participation, citizens apply more direct and solution-oriented methods to be heard by the authorities.

Considering the narration preferences and argumentation of the denunciation letters, analyses of resistance and subalternity should be revisited in a more nuanced way. The bipolar nature of the strategies generated and the weapons of the "weak" hold their own, substantiating dilemmas. The tactics and methods used as acts of resistance are not essentially free from the domination dynamics. It is historically a better positionality to evaluate the concept of "weapons of the weak" as an analytical tool to understand consumption and productivity. In this regard,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, March 3, 1939.

the boundary between powerful/weak or dominated/subordinated is more fleeting and contextual. Depending on their positions and advantages, historical actors, such as the petitioners, can be considered weak or strong according to diverse socio-political contexts. There is no prior subaltern subjectivity without conceptualization. Analyzing the unloyalty-themed denunciation petitions, ubiquitous power dynamics, and hierarchies – ethnoreligious definition of citizenship and historical denialism – prevent us from assigning an overall subaltern character to the groups. From a simplistic perspective, ordinary citizens who penned all of these letters seem to resist the oppressive political elites by meticulously using the possible channels. However, when the narration preferences and discourses of the petitions are analyzed more closely, it is evident that internal power dynamics and exclusionary practices are at play. In addressing the unloyal agents of the state, authors mostly preferred non-Muslim identities as pejorative adjectives, as was demonstrated before as well. It was a very common practice to use Armenian and Ottoman-Greek identities as the “dangerous” or “suspicious” ones. There is no surprise here to such an assessment of the Turkish-Muslim citizens, considering the metanarrative of the Republic.<sup>25</sup> In another unsigned denunciation petition, the content of the denunciation against the candidate Salih Cevdet Cever was formulated as follows:

He was insane, married three times, had one Armenian, one Greek, one German wife, and had nothing to do with Turkishness.<sup>26</sup>

The mono-culturalist concept of the nation, which was employed in the early days of the Turkish Republic, can be explicitly seen in the letters of the ordinary people. In many of the letters, there was a pattern of portraying and using the Armenian identity under the themes of being “cunning,” “backstabbing,” and “enemies.” Phrases like “There are rumors that

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<sup>25</sup> Helin Anahit, “‘He Is Armenian but He Was Born That Way; There Isn’t Much He Can Do about It’: Exploring Identity and Cultural Assumptions in Turkey,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 48, no. 2 (March 15, 2014): 201–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0031322X.2014.914787>.

<sup>26</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4. March 18, 1939.

he is Armenian" and "It is said that he is Armenian" were frequently used to cast suspicion, delegitimize individuals, and frame them as inherently disloyal to the state. These documents typically relate to Armenian collaboration with Western enemies, Armenians profiting from the weakened Ottoman administration, the rise of Armenian nationalism, the killing of Turks by Armenians in Anatolia, and Armenians occupying others' property and becoming wealthy. As ultra-nationalist author Nihal Atsız frames it, "The Turk is a person who comes from Turkish lineage."<sup>27</sup> This reality encompasses all of us Turks as "positive" and all Armenians as "others and negative." In some letters, citizens consider even the mere fact of someone having an Armenian spouse as grounds for denunciation. From Malatya, Fezvi Ağbulut has made the following report about candidate Şevki Sözen: "Şevki Sözen's wife is Armenian."<sup>28</sup> The following expressions are included in another letter written about a candidate from Maraş:

He is lacking in education and ignorant; his wife is a despicable Syrian Armenian girl who works on stage, and his suspicious mother-in-law, who occasionally comes to Maraş, is being followed by the police..<sup>29</sup>

The discourse of these texts embodies several distinctive qualities attributed to Turkishness. They demonstrate loyalty, are decent citizens, and defend their nation and homeland as features associated with an ethnicity. As such, they reflect the proud, skilled, and talented Turks celebrated in the nationalist discourse of Atatürk's *Nutuk*. Moreover, these images are in keeping with the portrayal of the exemplary Turk, characterized by unwavering moral principles influenced by Islamic traditions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hüseyin Nihal Atsız, *Türk Tarihinde Meseleler*, (Ankara: Afşın Yayınları, 1966), p.60.

<sup>28</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4. March 11, 1939.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, February 13, 1939.

<sup>30</sup> Özlem Belçim Galip, "The Armenian Genocide and Armenian Identity in Modern Turkish

Denunciation letters, yet again, reveal truths about the social structure, provide a lens to “bottom politics” in understanding and approaching different identities within the republican hub, and give an overall idea about power hierarchies. These letters of complaint about the parliamentary candidates are limited by both rules of performance and norms of content, which basically refer to a specific style and tone to be heard by the decision-makers. Therefore, the content and preferences in denouncing style are governed by broader social norms and conventions embedded in the codes of the Republic. In this vein, using non-Muslim identities from a pejorative stance – as an insult – to describe possible threats to the unity of the nation or as the opposite of loyal subjects, in fact, operate within specific political, historical, and institutional settings, highlight what refers to what constitutes a successful and appropriate story. For this reason, the “weapons of the weak” analytical framework does not always allow us to see social stratifications and the heterogeneous and contextualized nature of power. Even the most personal narration tactics – as in the denunciation letters- depend on and summon collective metanarrative symbols and vocabularies in wide circulation and structures, since the conventionalized character of the narrative is close to expressing ideological and hegemonic assumptions.<sup>31</sup>

### § 3.3 “He is a Bully, an Enemy of the People!” Denunciations on the Subject of Abuse of Power

The letters on abuse of power have a dual nature, where denouncing and complaining share a common ground. Most writers of “abuse” letters were peasants, and the main themes contained many references to the dispossession, pelf, and cruelty of the individual (*müteğallibe, zorba*). Abuse letters penned in 1939 were mainly about ordinary peasants’ grievances against local political elites. The purpose of writing a

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Novels,” *Turkish Studies* 20, no. 1 (January 1, 2019): 92–119,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2018.1439383>.

<sup>31</sup> Ewick and Silbey, “Subversive Stories and Hegemonic Tales.”

denunciation letter was to get the RPP decision-makers to the point that they would dismiss the candidate for the elections. The main arguments revolve around the themes of “stealing” from the nation, not as regular theft but, instead, the kinds of dispossession, cheating peasants on payments, confiscating properties, drawing money out, and so on. The structure of this section aims to mirror the social history of denunciation, analyze the authors' motivations, and explore the rhetoric and peculiarities in narration.

The denunciation letters on the subject of abuse of power mainly come from rural localities or small towns where local political elites' activities, networks, and relationships were on public display constantly and where political and bureaucratic connections had a quite individualized nature and where the notion of being transparent and accountable is more prone to local customs. In the denunciation letters on abuse of power, it is possible to observe that most of them were written to achieve some personal advantage; however, it is not always the norm. Among the documents in question in this chapter are the denunciations that only made the desire to expose “the enemies of the regime and party” apparent. In these, the authors do not seek anything for themselves, at least not directly.

One of the most essential characteristics of the early Republican period was the acceleration of efforts to increase the rate of schooling. At the same time, there was a determined policy toward the restructuring of the curriculum and pedagogical aspect of education in line with the needs of the nation-state. One of the changes made in the curriculum is the renaming of the “Malumat-ı Medeniye” course, which held an essential place in the “transition from subject to citizen” project of the Constitutional Monarchy.<sup>32</sup> As Hasan Ali Yücel frames it, preparing the curriculum “in a way that will promote the benefits of the Republic regime.”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Füsün Üstel, “*Makbul vatandaş'ın peşinde: II. Meşrutiyet'ten bugüne Türkiye'de vatandaş eğitimi* (İletişim, 2004), 128.

<sup>33</sup> Hasan Ali Yücel, “Türkiye’de Ortaöğretim,” (TC Kültür Bakanlığı Milli Kütüphane Basımevi: Ankara, 1994), 209.

The purpose of adapting to the nation, as stated in the 1926 Primary School Curriculum Program, was to achieve the socialization goal expected by the Republican cadres from schools.<sup>34</sup> In other words, integrating into the new societal project aimed at constructing citizenship identities and thus internalizing the norms and values required by this project, including the political role of the elements of the nation. The 1930s emerged as a period where there was an acceleration towards the dissemination of a state-centric militant citizenship understanding through education. As per the changes made in middle schools in 1930, the History and Nation Knowledge courses have become primarily focused on "instilling national, patriotic, and heroic sentiments; helping to shape their characters, and educating them to become more active individuals in social and national life."<sup>35</sup>

Since the declaration of the Republic, systematic policies have been implemented toward the construction of new citizenship codes through education, history writing, and other circulating visual and written media tools. Accordingly, the paternalistic regime aimed to shape citizens loyal to the state, living their lives within the framework of national and heroic sentiments.<sup>36</sup> One of the vital emphases of Republican citizenship was the concept of "duty." Among the duties of the citizen were characteristics such as industriousness, morality, and loyalty to the state.<sup>37</sup>

The definition of citizenship encoded with moral values, usefulness to the state, and understanding the spirit of the regime is a frequently encountered element in denunciation letters. Arguments often revolve around the alleged individual not being a citizen in line with the requirements of the Republic, being authoritarian, or not having reached the level required by civilization. In this vein, in the newspapers of the period, the 1939 general elections are depicted as a "citizenship duty," constituting the "sole participation" in politics. In its issue dated March

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<sup>34</sup> Üstel, *Makbul vatandaş'ın peşinde*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 136.

<sup>36</sup> "B.Ş. Kaya çok mühim bir nutuk verdi," *Ulus*, February 21, 1938.

<sup>37</sup> "Vatandaş Vazife Başına!" *Milliyet*, December, 1929.

16, 1939, the *Uyanış* newspaper describes the upcoming general elections as follows:

Our noble nation – always striving towards the good, the right, and the beautiful – will demonstrate to the whole world and the family of humanity, in obedience to the eternal memory of our great Founder and the chief of our national leader İsmet İnönü, that the populist regime is a very pure source of strength. [...] The vigilant citizen, placing the sense of duty above all human emotions, knows that ensuring peace, security, and happiness for the Turkish homeland and Turkish future is the greatest aim and most sincere duty...<sup>38</sup>

Multiple layered dynamics contribute to a constituent sense of duty for citizens to participate in politics through letters. Firstly, since the establishment of the Republic, political elites have consistently constructed citizenship codes comprising elements such as heroism, responsibility, industriousness, and political participation to the extent permitted by the regime. However, the citizen profile established by the regime through civic education lessons, active propaganda, and other media outlets is not the sole reason for the scrutiny seen in denunciation letters. Such an assessment, while linear and reductionist, disregards both mass agency and subjectivity.

In the denunciation letters with no personalized request or motivation, the authors present much stronger political rhetoric: the abuse of power, degeneration of the regime, the politicians' betrayal of the principles of the Republic, and condemnation of power asymmetry. Just as ordinary people quickly adopted the term people's enemy (*halkın nefretini kazanmış birisi, zorba*) to discredit local politicians, they were also skillful in picking up the established rhetorical terms and vocabulary of an indictment of the early Republic era in line with the core subjects addressed in the national curriculum. In a denunciation letter written by

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<sup>38</sup> Mediha Muzaffer Baysal, "Seçimin Manası," *Uyanış*, March 16 1939.

Burhan Efe from Isparta, he states the following about the candidate İbrahim Demiralay:

He plundered the properties of the Greeks in Nazilli and Denizli, he was an enemy of honor, he deceived young children and took them to Ankara under the pretext of education and violated their honor, and through his friends in the Assembly, he thus promoted his position. He was a person who earned the hatred of the country."<sup>39</sup>

In another denunciation letter written by Kasım Erman from Adana, Seyhan, there is an allegation against the candidate Damar Arıkoğlu regarding the unjust confiscation of lands and the acquisition of properties belonging to national assets. It complained that he had wrongfully transferred properties under the ownership of national assets to his own possession.

One of the recurring themes in this archive section is the unjust transfer of properties from national assets to individual ownership, which is described as "infuriating behavior" (çileden çıkaran davranış). The involvement of "unclaimed" lands and other properties in the political economy agenda began with the 1915 deportations. Accordingly, the Ankara Government has enacted numerous laws on the matter.<sup>40</sup> The initial legislation, enacted by the Kemalists on April 20th, 1922, stipulated that unclaimed movable assets of people "escaped" areas and immovable properties, and agricultural products would be under the control of the

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<sup>39</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4. February 10, 1939.

<sup>40</sup> The state legalized the retention of non-Muslim properties sold before the population exchange by passing new laws. The changes in the treatment of abandoned properties followed the signing of the Treaty of Lausanne on 24 July 1923. As part of the treaty, a specific convention of 30 January 1923 recognized the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, which resulted in Greeks from Turkey moving to Greece and vice versa.<sup>40</sup> This exchange raised concerns about Greek property and led to modifications in the rules affecting those involved in the exchange. However, the property of non-Muslims sold before the population exchange was not returned, as allowed by the new legislation.

government.<sup>41</sup> Going back to Erman's letter, he states the daily reflection of the case as follows:

Damar Arıkoğlu, who has been stealing thousands of acres of national land in and around the village of Sakızlı for years without paying taxes himself and imposing this tax on others, can be verified from Vice President and Engineer Ragıp at the office of the Ministry of Agriculture.

As observed in these denunciation letters, the moral and personal characteristics that the Republican elites believe their citizens should possess determine the boundaries of their acceptability. When the people voice their local grievances, they use vocabulary such as – failing to fulfill one's duty to the homeland, not displaying moral behavior, not following the rules of civilization as required by the Republic, and not contributing to the public good – thus reporting local politicians who are nourished by structural problems. At this point, citizens make the meta-narratives of the rulers a strong element of their negotiations in order to be heard by those in power. On the other hand, issues such as dispossession, wealth transfer, and abuse of power are practices directly related to the historical context and foundational practices of the Republic. While conveying locally influential, at the same time structural, problems to the authorities through individuals, ordinary citizens refer to the set of definitions and acceptability outlined by the new regime. In another unsigned denunciation letter written from Eskişehir, the following is said about Emin Sazak:

Emin Sazak has a tainted past. He was friends with Kara Kemal and engaged in many schemes. He acquired the land in his possession by coercing the land registry officer and threatening the

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<sup>41</sup> Mehmet Polater, "Turkish state formation and the distribution of the Armenian abandoned properties from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey (1915-1930)," (Masters thesis, Koç University, 2009), 117, <https://tez.yok.gov.tr/UlusalTezMerkezi/tezSorguSonucYeni.jsp>.

owners with death. He forcibly entered the homes of Armenians, seized the abandoned property that was supposed to go to the government, and oppressed the villagers in Beylikahır with knives and sticks, for your information."<sup>42</sup>

Bekir Akgüneş and Hacı Mustafa from the village of Çaputçu in Seyhan, Adana, describe the abuse of power by the candidate Ömer Biçer with these words:

Ömer Biçer, taking advantage of his status as a member of parliament, has annexed the pastures, fields, and roads of three villages into his own garden." In another letter from Adana, a mother and her children report the following about Fahri Uğurlu: "He has encroached on the land of the ignorant people, thereby expanding his own fields. He himself is one of these poor people.

Citizen denunciations that do not seek a direct personal outcome or benefit can be analyzed within the framework of the regime's "citizenship duties" (vatandaşlık vazifesi), which are articulated across various aspects of life, including education, political discourse, and civic values. In the early Republican context and elsewhere, denunciation can also serve as a tool for justice. In all communities, some citizens apply public accusation to fix unjust practices or secure the greater interests of the community they belong to. The justice functions and motivations of the letters can be called a "subaltern" method in speaking the truth to the power holders in the context described as reporting dispossession, abuse of power, and violent actions. Into this category fell early Republican "whistleblowing" or reporting denunciations in which subordinates in political elites exposed wrongdoing, abuse by superiors, and "abuse of power" that ordinary people from the peripheries wrote against local politicians who mistreated them.

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<sup>42</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4., February 25, 1939.

The denunciation letters are never written free flowing from the time. First and most importantly, they are letters written to be sent to the political authority; therefore, each argumentation carries a symbol from its political climate and discourse. In the early Republican era, citizens denounced the politicians who gained the “hatred of the people” or “an enemy of the people” because power abusers of the nation had a recent social origin with the new era started by İnönü and his election propaganda. They denounced “names” (candidates) because candidates were responsible for dispossession, abuse of power, and approbation. These actions were also structurally condemned in line with İnönü’s first direction of a new era of politics.

### § 3.4 Denunciation Letters on Illiteracy and Nepotism

We know that election days are when a nation's political maturity is tested. Those who love the revolution protect it, and the party that protects it is the Republican People's Party. This revolution belongs to the cadre of the revolutionary party. And the RPP bears the responsibility for the revolution. The history of the RPP is filled with great national victories.<sup>43</sup>

During the RPP’s election campaign, numerous pieces of propaganda content were produced that emphasized the importance of participating in the elections, similar to the one above. In all of the contents, the RPP was described as the sole owner of the current regime and the force that would carry it forward, frequently mentioning how the newly formed cadre, a new era for RPP since Atatürk's death, would advance it with exceptional and revolutionary qualities. On the day the elections took place, Necmeddin Sadak highlighted the change in the profiles of the candidates and the new political climate it would bring in the *Akşam* newspaper:

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<sup>43</sup> *Türksözü*, March 23, 1939.

[...] In this era of crisis the world is experiencing, not only is there a valuable state program capable of bringing relief to hearts, but the candidate list as well, in terms of its selection, preparation, and nature, represents the first significant step towards the broad development of democracy and populist principles.[...] When we look at the candidate list, it is immediately apparent that we are facing a great change. One-quarter of the renewed assembly has been chosen from active elements within the party organization who have extensive contact with the public and have worked on public affairs. This holds great significance for the future. The Republic of Turkey is determined to live as a form of national sovereignty administration, far from political and social discord that would corrode the nation's structure, and free from the conflicts of democracies that prioritize opposing party interests over the country's peace and tranquility.<sup>44</sup>

When İnönü's speech in Kastamonu on December 6th is recalled, the educational profiles of the candidates and the relationship they are expected to establish with the party will be more clearly understood. İnönü made his first political speech during this trip after being elected president. In this speech, he emphasized that he would not allow party membership to be used for personal gain.<sup>45</sup> At that time, İnönü was concerned with sending a message that he would take significant measures against the rumors and allegations that party members were receiving special benefits.<sup>46</sup> Another of İnönü's influential speeches, delivered at Istanbul University, also highlighted that the mentality of viewing parliamentary membership as the highest step and rank of civil service would be changed, and genuinely skilled individuals who had been trained and served the party would be given opportunities.<sup>47</sup> Asım Us, one of the

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<sup>44</sup> "Türkiye'de Milli Hakimiyet Mefhumu," *Akşam*, March 26, 1939.

<sup>45</sup> Cemil Koçak, *Türkiye'de millî şef dönemi: 1938-1945 : dönemin iç ve dış politikası üzerine bir araştırma* (İletişim, 1996), 153.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Koçak, *Türkiye'de millî şef dönemi*, 153.

politicians of the era, noted the following in his diary towards the end of 1938:

During İsmet İnönü era:

- 1) The Parliament will be strengthened. From now on, debates will become livelier. There will be criticisms of ministers. Freedom of speech that does not disrupt public security and national unity will be ensured.
- 2) A fierce fight against theft and abuses will be initiated.
- 3) The rule of law will be ensured, and thuggery and bullying will be eliminated.”<sup>48</sup>

When comparing the educational levels of the members of the Grand Assembly across different terms, it is observed that the profile of deputies formed after the 1939 elections is significantly more educated.<sup>49</sup> Removing MPs with low educational profiles indicates that the new Republican leadership preferred to elect more educated MPs. These MPs were believed to be more competent for demanding legislative tasks in Parliament, such as drafting and debating laws, reviewing the state budget, and doing other work requiring expertise typically gained through higher education. This preference aligns with İnönü’s objective to improve Parliament’s functioning, which coincides with the formation of the “Independent Group” — a group of MPs tasked, at least in theory, with scrutinizing legislation and critiquing government decisions.

In the first elections held in Atatürk’s absence, it was crucial for İnönü to eliminate his political rivals in order to consolidate his power. However, continuing the aggressive purge practices from the previous era would now do more harm than good. Moreover, İnönü did not have enough supporters to undertake such a purge wave. Therefore, he aimed to initiate a period of reconciliation with Atatürk’s former opponents to garner mass support. In this regard, immediately after being elected president, he organized his entire election campaign around a political

<sup>48</sup> Asım Us, *Hatıra Notları (1930 dan 1950 yılına kadar, Atatürk ve İsmet İnönü devirlerine ait seçme fıkralar)*, (Vakit Matbası, 1966), 330.

<sup>49</sup> Cemil Koçak, *Türkiye’de milli şef dönemi* cilt II, 40.

line that promised a change in the party's approach, a closing of the distance from the public, and representation by moral and educated individuals. Taking all the above into account, this section's denunciation letters highlight that ordinary people from provincial spheres were able to take advantage of the leadership's agenda and priorities at the time – fighting against corruption and nepotism, eliminating rivals, and constructing a new era's legitimacy – in order to further their own benefits. A citizen from Kastamonu makes the following remarks about one of the candidates:

It is evident that neither are they concerned with the affairs of the country, nor do they approach people with the humility and dignity of a deputy. It is clear that the deputies work more for themselves. The only wish of himself and his fellow citizens is for candidates to be those who are genuinely interested in their electoral districts and have earned the party's approval in this regard.<sup>50</sup>

In this letter, we find a direct argument supporting the emphasis that İsmet İnönü placed immediately after being elected president, particularly on “serving for the nation” and preventing the party from being used as a steppingstone for personal ambitions. In another letter from Eskişehir, the reasons for Kamil Kaplanlı not being a good candidate are explained as follows:

Today, those who have a say on Eskişehir's fate have become wealthy due to the positions granted to them by the past and have gained their competence from these positions. Kamil Kaplanlı sometimes acts so boldly that he does not even recognize government authority. Besides not having any education at all, he is also very fond of alcohol.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4., February 12, 1939.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, March 17, 1939.

If candidates “lack” the necessary qualifications to perform a task, this situation is often accompanied by the issue of nepotism, where their current political positions are acquired through friendships with influential people and their support in the denunciation letters of the people. An example of this situation is provided by a letter written by A. Aksoy, a veteran of the War of Independence from Istanbul:

A drunkard and alcoholic named Naci Ali Moralı, who has no connection with our country other than being the brother-in-law of Salah Cimcoz, the husband of an Egyptian princess and a member of parliament from Istanbul, has, with one move, been appointed chairman of the RPP Kadıköy administrative committee. With a second move, a member of the Istanbul City Council. Now he is applying for parliament, and as someone who shed blood and lost an arm for this country in the War of Independence, it is impossible for people like me not to feel sorrow when we see and hear these things.<sup>52</sup>

Regarding Hayrettin Kara, a former deputy from Balıkesir who is running for re-election in the 6th term parliament, Nail Artık and Saadettin Uzgiden from the same province say:

He has no qualities, education, manners, or service. He is an enemy of the country who aided the enemy when the country was under enemy occupation. We wrote this letter encouraged by the speeches of the National Chief at the university. We request that those who will become deputies be genuinely asked to the public at least once. [...] The country must be saved from this man, and people like him should not be given parliamentary seats. We hope that our appeals will be conveyed to the National Chief through the conscientious effort of the General Secretary.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, February 10, 1939.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, March 7, 1939.

Regarding the same deputy, a decision on legislative immunity was made in the Official Gazette on June 14, 1935.<sup>54</sup> There is a lawsuit against Deputy Hayrettin Kara, and due to this lawsuit, there was a move to lift his legislative immunity. However, since the relevant accusations did not cause the loss of his deputy status, it was decided to postpone the trial until the end of his parliamentary term. Based on the available documents, it is not possible to claim that this deputy has good relations with the public. However, it is also quite difficult to determine the motivations of the authors fully. One of the most important analyses that can be made is that the complaints about deputies who were not satisfactory or whose change was requested for various reasons are constructed using arguments that the regime has carefully emphasized since the beginning of the general elections. In these letters, it is possible to observe the instrumentalization of the intended reforms, both those promoted by the regime and those condemned by it, aligning with the party's new understanding. In a letter written by a citizen named A. Selçuk from Izmir about a former deputy from Izmir and a possible candidate for the 6th term parliament, we see the following:

Armenian İhsan Onnik was once the most intimate servant and most loyal informant of Governor Rahmi Bey in Izmir, and with his help, he became the director of agriculture and then a deputy from Izmir. During the armistice, he fled to America like his master and stayed there for twenty years. Six months ago, this two-faced man returned to the country, somehow met with Bay Faik Kurtoglu, and immediately became a consultant with a high salary. This charlatan and failed deputy, who is actually a simple agriculturist, had his salary secretly increased to 400 liras within a few months, and it is said that he was also promised a deputy position and an

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<sup>54</sup> Official Gazette, *Balıkesir mebusu Hayrettin Karanın teşrii masuniyeti hakkında*, Number: 3039, Ankara, 27 June 1935, <https://www5.tbmm.gov.tr/tutanaklar/KANUNLAR/KARARLAR/kanuntbmmc015/karartbmmc015/karartbmmc0500893.pdf> (accessed 23.05.2024).

undersecretary position. [...] It is known that he claimed he would become a deputy and that this was told to him by Şükrü Kaya, and if he did not become a deputy, he would return to his family in America.<sup>55</sup>

The reappearance of Onnik in the archives through this letter is significant in itself. The important point here is that the personal narratives and storytelling preferences, as explained extensively in previous parts of the thesis, contain power hierarchies internally. This provides a crucial example of why it is misleading to evaluate the "subalterns" in a linear manner or to categorize them within "weapons of the weak" analyses, regardless of position and context. İhsan Onnik was an Armenian citizen who served as a deputy of İzmir in the Committee of Union and Progress government in 1914 and later requested permission for the transfer of his family and relatives to Istanbul. Although this permission was granted, his relatives were settled in [Deyr-i] Zor.<sup>56</sup> After his family and relatives were sent to Syria, they repeatedly demanded the amount of money due for their properties from the government.<sup>57</sup> Some of Onnik's near or distant relatives remaining within the country's borders were exiled to various cities.<sup>58</sup> One of these telegrams stated that the exiled Torosyan family from İzmir was not closely related to İhsan Efendi.<sup>59</sup> The narrative that his election as agriculture director was entirely due to personal relations is a distorted point. İhsan Onnik had significant works in the field of agriculture, which were published by the state.<sup>60</sup>

The concept that power flows through linguistic discourses that establish "regimes of truth" instead of solely existing within established

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<sup>55</sup> BCA.01/344.1140.4., February 18, 1939.

<sup>56</sup> Taner Akçam, *Killing Orders: Talat Pasha's Telegrams and the Armenian Genocide*, (Springer, 2018), 132.

<sup>57</sup> BOA. Dâhiliye Nezareti Emniyet-i Umumiye İkinci Şube Evrakı (DH.EUM.2.Şb); 11/64, 1333 H19.

<sup>58</sup> BOA. Dâhiliye Nezareti Şifre Kalemî Evrakı (DH. ŞFR); 301/56, 1333 H26.

<sup>59</sup> BOA. DH. EUM. 2. Şb; 74/60, 1335 H17.

<sup>60</sup> BOA. Dâhiliye Nezareti Mektubî Kalemî (DH. MKT); 1206/54, 1333 H 04.

social structures can offer new perspectives. The letter, written by a citizen about Onnik, illustrates how truth can be distorted in many ways. It is possible to observe that groups we traditionally categorize as powerless or subaltern create their own power relations using the codes of the dominant. If we only had this author's denunciation letter, İhsan Onnik would be recorded in the archives as a figure who "betrayed" his homeland and then "fled" to America. However, when we consider other historical documents and turning points, İhsan Onnik was not someone who fled his escape from his country but someone who was forced to leave. His work in the field of agricultural studies is not inadequate as reported, but, on the contrary, quite comprehensive. Considering this document, the only thing we can say about the truth is that many of the tactics used by ordinary people to gain advantage are not much beyond the narratives previously constructed by the dominant meta history.

Once again, it is important to state that the self is both the subject of and subject to power and hegemony through daily and discursive practices. The subjectivity, affection, and memory are all central to the notion that the personal one has a history and that history is interconnected to broader schemes. The capability of people in the past to resist, bargain, or negotiate with the dominant powers also constitutes their cultural, historical, and political world.<sup>61</sup> The period and context in which complaint letters were written are explained by Şevket Süreyya Aydemir as follows:

When İsmet İnönü took over the party presidency, the words he expressed in Kastamonu were pure idealism. The atmosphere of a party that, despite having some idealistic leaders, never became a people's organization always remained a superficial voting mechanism in elections, and at certain times, even İnönü himself had to fight against the vested interests of some members. These words do not reflect a reality that corresponds to any of İnönü's

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<sup>61</sup> Penny Summerfield, *Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice* (London ; New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2019), 9.

statements. However, this first party speech of İnönü after his presidency aroused some hopes among certain young and idealistic circles who were uneasy about the actual situation of the party described above, that İnönü would fundamentally direct the party affairs and try to bring a different atmosphere to it.”<sup>62</sup>

Immediately after the completion of the elections, İsmet İnönü evaluated the newly elected deputies as follows:

While presenting your high votes for the definite nominees, we believe that we have been able to gather the maximum appreciation and trust of our nation in the deputies who will govern the fate of the country for four years. [...] It will be a debt for us to openly account for our actions to you, which we have never lost sight of.<sup>63</sup>

None of the individuals targeted in the denunciation letters as parliamentary candidates in this section were elected in the 1939 General Elections held across 62 provinces.<sup>64</sup> It is quite difficult to determine whether the letters and complaints of the citizens or the political competition within the party were more effective in this regard. The most significant point to note is that several key themes emphasized by İnönü are clearly reflected in the denunciation letters. First, the political direction he outlined at the extraordinary congress following his election as president, which marked a shift toward a new era where the party would no longer serve personal interests, resonates strongly. Second, his emphasis on active participation in governance—particularly articulated in his speech at Istanbul University—finds echoes in the language and tone of many letters. Finally, core Republican ideals such as the importance of fulfilling citizenship duties and valuing education, both central constructs of citizenship

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<sup>62</sup> Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, “İkinci Adam (İsmet İnönü) İkinci Cilt 1938-1950,” (Remzi Kitapevi, 1993), p 36-36.

<sup>63</sup> Milli Şefin Beyannameşi, *Vakit*, March 25, 1939

<sup>64</sup> Şevket Süreyya Aydemir, *İkinci Adam*, p 46.

in the early Republic, are repeatedly invoked by the letter writers. They provide an in-depth and personalized insight into the citizens' perception of the RPP and the first era without the presence of Atatürk.

Fundamentally, the letters were part of the complex relations between local politics. Broader discourses of the regime and constructive pillars of the Republic. The archives address the notion of "citizen-duty-denunciations" and also occupy a significant place in line with the new citizenship curriculum articulated by the state for mass education and media circulations on the importance of engaging with politics through voting. A total of 464 letters of denunciation were written against candidates labeled as enemies of the people. An additional 30 letters targeted illiterate candidates and included accusations of nepotism, while the remainder denounced abuses of power. This volume of letters suggests that certain segments of society were not immune to the regime's newly propagated discourses of renewal, national unity, and anti-corruption.<sup>65</sup>

The discourses regarding the moral values expected from MP candidates suggest that the letters were written out of a genuine sense of identification or instrumentalization with the state's approach to politics. This thesis approaches denunciation letters as negotiated political crafts produced within specific historical and literary contexts and suggests that most of the letters were selected from an array of discursive sources – the RPP jargon they were mimicking, the moralistic discourse of newspapers and intellectuals, and certain speeches of the politicians. The authors were quick and talented enough to use the regime's catchwords to blame the MP candidates, as was the case in the Soviet Union, where accusations such as kulak and Trotskyist were extensively used.<sup>66</sup> On the other hand, evaluating these sources as the direct or alternative addresses of the truth can only lead to misinterpretation. Rather, it is wiser to approach them to understand the positionality of the ordinary people in a political event and their extent and way of participating in it.

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<sup>65</sup> Alexandros Lamprou, *Nation-Building in Modern Turkey: The "People's Houses", the State and the Citizen* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 150.

<sup>66</sup> Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below."

The letters of denunciation analyzed in this section likely reflect the ideological effects and hegemonic assumptions of the newly found Republic on particular topics of non-Muslim communities and loyalty to the state, as analyzed in some of the letters. Therefore, it is important to refrain from a lens that totalizes the “below of the society” as uniform and homogenous and assigns all social history to a subaltern character, better to explore power asymmetries within social stratifications – citizens.

The people who wrote these denunciation letters stood to gain a variety of benefits, both tangible and symbolic. On one level, they were seeking to influence the outcome of the 1939 elections by eliminating candidates they viewed as unfit for parliamentary office. In many cases, these efforts served personal or communal interests, particularly in rural or provincial areas where political rivalries were often local and intense. Denouncing a local elite or bureaucrat accused of corruption or abuse of power could help the writer secure better representation or remove an adversary from a position of influence. Beyond material gains, however, many letter-writers seemed motivated by a genuine sense of Republican morality. They expressed deep concern for values such as loyalty, education, and public service—values that were carefully promoted by the regime through education, media, and civic discourse. For some citizens, writing these letters was a way to perform their “citizenship duty,” a form of self-identification with the ideals of the Republic and a means of participating—however indirectly—in the political process.

Motivations behind the letters were complex and multifaceted. While some authors clearly sought to advance their own position or settle local disputes, others appeared sincerely committed to the ideals of the state. The rhetoric of the letters frequently mirrored the discourses of RPP propaganda, İnönü’s public speeches, and the broader moral vocabulary of the early Republican regime. This suggests a strategic use of the dominant language of power in order to be legible and persuasive to state authorities. Writers instrumentalized the anxieties of the regime—particularly around loyalty, national unity, and moral decay—to draw attention to their claims. At the same time, some letters presented no direct request or personal interest, instead advocating for justice in the name of

the people and the Republic. In this sense, the act of denunciation served both as a tool of political engagement and as a negotiated expression of civic identity.

As for whether these letters received responses, there is no evidence in the archive of systematic replies or formal acknowledgment addressed to the writers. However, indirect forms of responsiveness are observable. None of the individuals targeted in the denunciation letters appear to have been elected to parliament in the 1939 general elections held across 62 provinces. While it is difficult to determine the exact weight of these letters in candidate selection, their alignment with the regime's reformist and moralizing discourse—particularly İnönü's emphasis on education, anti-corruption, and national unity—suggests that they were at least taken into consideration by party decision-makers. The lack of direct correspondence, however, implies that the function of these letters was more about informing internal party mechanisms rather than initiating formal state actions or dialogues with citizens.



## Heterotopia of the Self: 1938 Dersim and the Letters of the Locals<sup>1</sup>

*In the state of siege, time becomes space  
Transfixed in its eternity  
In the state of siege, space becomes time  
That has missed its yesterday and its  
tomorrow*

– Mahmoud Darwish, *State of Siege*<sup>2</sup>

The term heterotopia was originally a medical one, referring to a particular tissue of the body that develops in a different place, not in a dangerous sense. It is solely misplaced. From its medical and Greek roots, Foucault reconstructs the term in explaining space and time as fundamentally “other,” a place lying outside of everything and still

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<sup>1</sup> The Alevi/Kurdish community from Dersim uses the word *Tertele*, a Kurdish word in Kurmanci. The word refers to depredation and physical destruction. In the political context, the word *Tertele* has become more common in recent years.

<sup>2</sup> Lucy A. Perry, “The Poetics of Dispossession in Mahmoud Darwish’s ‘Exile,’” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 49, no. 4 (2020): 91–108, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2020.49.4.91>.

recognizable.<sup>3</sup> From its medical and Greek roots, Foucault reconstructs the term in explaining space and time as fundamentally “other,” a place lying outside of everything and still recognizable.<sup>4</sup> The concept essentially reflects and addresses our complex relationship and perception of space and time, representing the time disruption and intervention. In this chapter of the thesis, letters from the exiled Dersim Community will be analyzed in the context of the Tertele to which they were exposed in 1938.<sup>5</sup> The community refers to these events as the Tertele, a term rooted in the local vernacular of Dersim, evoking meanings of “massacre,” “scattering,” or “annihilation.” Rather than adopting the official designation “Tunceli Operation,” Dersimlis use Tertele to name the profound rupture caused by the 1937–1938 military campaign. This naming serves as a form of counter-memory, expressing collective trauma and resisting the sanitized terminology of the official narrative. It encapsulates the forced displacements, and the violent dismantling of the community’s social and cultural fabric.

The “mixed experience” of the resettled individuals, marked by feelings of absence and dislocation, will be addressed through their self-narrations, letters, and grievances. The primary source for the analysis in this chapter is *Dersimlilerden Mektuplar*, a published volume of letters addressed to Necmeddin Sahir Silan, who served as the Tunceli Member of Parliament during the early post-Tertele years.<sup>6</sup> The book compiles petitions and personal appeals sent by members of the Dersim community between 1943 and 1948, as they sought to return to their confiscated lands, reclaim property, or simply make their suffering visible to state authorities. These letters are of particular importance because, despite

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<sup>5</sup> Bedriye Poyraz, “‘Cesaret Et Hatırla!’: Dersim 1938 Tertelesi,” *Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi* 68, no. 03 (2013): 03, [https://doi.org/10.1501/SBFder\\_0000002287](https://doi.org/10.1501/SBFder_0000002287).

<sup>6</sup> Tuba Akekmekçi and Muazzez Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)* (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2012).

thorough searches conducted in official Turkish state archives, no comparable collection of correspondence from Dersim exiles could be located, highlighting both the silences of the state archive and the para-archival status of this personal collection. In total, 150 letters were examined and systematically categorized into thematic clusters based on key concerns such as dispossession, return, administrative violence, and intergenerational loss.

The chapter unfolds by first introducing the historical and administrative context of the 1938 military operation and the resettlement regime that followed. It then moves into a close reading of selected letters across thematic sections, exploring how dispossession was articulated in legal and affective registers; how return was framed not only as a demand but as a reassertion of citizenship; and how community members navigated the ambiguous boundary between protest and pleading. The final section reflects on the broader significance of these letters as a repository of subaltern memory, counter-narration, and bureaucratic engagement, underscoring their value both as historical evidence and as political testimony.

There are many significant works on Dersim, analyzing it from diverse angles in sociology, anthropology, geography, and history. One of the earliest and most influential contributions comes from İsmail Beşikçi, whose study of the 1935 Tunceli Act offers a detailed dissection of the state's preparatory discourse. Beşikçi examines internal reports and legal frameworks to argue that the aim was not mere integration, but the physical and political liquidation of the Dersim population. Uğur Ümit Üngör similarly frames the events in Dersim within a broader trajectory of ethnic homogenization, stretching from the CUP era into the Republican period.

Taha Baran's analysis of newspaper discourse uncovers the contours of censorship and media framing around the Dersim events, while Cemil Koçak's research on the Inspectorates-General sheds light on the extraordinary legal-administrative apparatus created for governing Kurdish regions. Murat S. Devres's dissertation interprets the governance of Dersim between 1927 and 1952 as an internal colonial project, utilizing

the notion of a “mission civilisatrice” and engaging deeply with private archival material from Necmeddin Sahir Sılan. The oral history collections gathered by Bülent Bilmez, Şükrü Aslan, and Gülay Kayacan make vital contributions to understanding intergenerational memory and the affective legacies of the Tertele, as remembered by the descendants of survivors.<sup>7</sup>

Cevat Dargın’s recent work introduces a spatial and cartographic lens, focusing on what he calls “anticipatory geographies of violence.”<sup>8</sup> Dargın traces how Dersim was imagined as a “nonstate space” that needed to be flattened and incorporated into the homogeneous national territory. He explores how state actors employed mapping, military infrastructure, and aerial technologies to render the region legible and governable. His work powerfully situates the 1937–38 operations within a long-term process of territorial state-making that began with the Tanzimat reforms and continued through Ottoman and Republican regimes. Murat Yüksel’s doctoral research on internal displacement and social engineering focusing on Dersim offers further insight into the mechanics of forced mobility, emphasizing how these policies were instrumental in restructuring social and political life in Dersim.<sup>9</sup> Zeynep Türkyılmaz’s work on gender, surveillance, and civilizational discourse highlights the disciplinary technologies that accompanied physical violence, while Veli Yadırgı explores the economic dimensions of state policies, analyzing the political economy of underdevelopment and uneven infrastructural

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<sup>7</sup> Murat Devres, *Dersim as an Internal Colony: The Turkish Civilizing Mission (1927–1952)* (Lexington Books, 2024); Bülent Bilmez et al., *Belleklerdeki Dersim ’38* (Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> Cevat Dargın, “Anticipatory Historical Geographies of Violence: Imagining, Mapping, and Integrating Dersim into the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish State, 1866–1939,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 81 (July 2023): 162–78, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhg.2023.06.010>.

<sup>9</sup> Murat Yüksel, *Forced Migration and the Politics of Internal Displacement in the Making of Modern Turkey: The Case of Dersim, 1937–1947* (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2008), 263 pp.

(Yükseköğretim Kurulu Ulusal Tez Merkezi, Tez No. 400497) [sus-sex.figshare.com+6tez.yok.gov.tr+6scholar.google.com+6](https://tez.yok.gov.tr)

investment.<sup>10</sup> Each of these scholars has enriched the understanding of the logics that have historically defined Dersim as a space to be controlled, transformed, and assimilated.

Rather than portraying Dersim solely through narratives of rebellion or state necessity, this body of literature makes clear that civilizational discourse, environmental othering, and infrastructural intervention preceded and shaped the 1937–38 military operations. The perception of Dersim as an inaccessible, backward, and deviant space was not simply reactive to resistance, but part of a deeper political and symbolic project. The transformation of Dersim into “Tunceli” was as much about creating a legible and governable territorial order as it was about demographic control. Importantly, much of the scholarship underscores that the targeting of Dersim cannot be separated from its geographic, religious, and cultural distinctiveness, its mountainous terrain, Alevi belief system, and semi-autonomous tribal structures.

This thesis engages with and builds upon these contributions by shifting the lens to the voices of those directly affected by the post-1938 transformations. Drawing on a collection of 150 letters addressed to Necmeddin Sahir Silan, letters that are not available in official archives but preserved in a published volume, the project conducts a thematic analysis of the demands, grievances, and rhetorical strategies of the displaced Dersim community. These letters, written between 1943 and 1948, illuminate how individuals framed their dispossession, appealed for return, and navigated a complex landscape of bureaucratic and emotional negotiation. By focusing on self-narrated appeals that circulated through a para-archival channel, this work traces how displaced Dersimlis sought to make themselves legible to the very state that had uprooted them, utilizing the moral and legal idioms of republican citizenship, even as they remained marked as internal outsiders.

During the early Republican era, particularly from the late 1920s to the late 1940s, a wide array of reports, memoranda, and analyses were

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<sup>10</sup> Zeynep Turkeyilmaz, “Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman’s Burden in Dersim: Educating the ‘Mountain Flowers’ of Dersim,” *Journal of Women’s History* (Baltimore) 28, no. 3 (2016): 162–86, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jowh.2016.0029>.

produced by Turkish state officials and bureaucrats concerning Dersim. These texts frequently reproduced entrenched Orientalist and racialized imaginaries, portraying the region and its inhabitants as inherently rebellious, deviant, or resistant to modernity. While existing scholarship has examined these documents for the ways they legitimized large-scale military intervention, demographic engineering, and administrative exceptionalism, this thesis revisits them as sites of memory production. Rather than interpreting these reports as neutral instruments of state rationality, it approaches them as tools that actively constructed official memory, narrating Dersim and its population as disorderly, static, and unassimilable in order to justify policies of displacement and erasure.

It is important to note that the category of "resistance," as deployed in state discourse and in some early historiography, has often functioned to frame the disproportionate use of violence as a necessary response. The labeling of events in Dersim as a "rebellion" or "uprising" served not only to obscure the asymmetry between state and society, but also to preemptively mark the population as insurgent. Recent scholarly contributions have critically interrogated this framing, showing how the discourse of rebellion was a central ideological apparatus of Turkish statecraft, especially in relation to Kurdish and Alevi communities. Building on these insights, this thesis engages with such documents not as mere reflections of historical events but as performances of state power that shaped the very conditions of intelligibility for what could be remembered, recorded, or punished.

To widen the frame of analysis beyond internal state mechanisms, this thesis also incorporates contemporaneous newspaper accounts, both domestic and international, which contributed to the circulation and consolidation of state narratives about Dersim. These media sources are examined not only for what they reveal, but for how they reflect the mediated construction of Dersim as a problem-space in need of discipline. In addition, the letter attributed to Seyîd Rıza and addressed to the League of Nations is analyzed not simply as a historical appeal for justice, but as a meaningful act of transnational memory-making. It exemplifies

how figures associated with Dersim mobilized alternative channels to record, narrate, and globalize their experiences of injustice.

In this context, the return of history occupies an important place in providing “counter-memory” as a form of contestation. The return to history is not only a practice that people “re/find” historical “facts” and “truths” or new evidence to rethink the past for today’s reparations. It also includes historical memories – those that were silenced but never left the self – are engaged in non-hegemonic tellings and histories. Furthermore, the theoretical approach to the return of history, in this case, not only aims to provide an alternative and witness-based view of the past but also subvert it. In this regard, survivors’ letters will be used to illuminate a glimpse of the struggle; the memory attached to the return of history is a way of a counter non-hegemonic notion since it resists the official historiography and openly exposes the covered suffering of the individuals.

These authors’ letters evolved around certain requests and demands often expressed with urgency as a result of intense persecution, mass deportation, systemic attacks, and dispossession. Right after the violence and forced relocations, these letters provide a very direct response to the victims of oppression. Throughout these letters, the authors consistently describe themselves as peaceful, law-abiding citizens with no involvement in rebellion or unrest. They emphasize their loyalty to the state and their suffering as innocent victims of policies they did not provoke. The letters repeatedly underscore that they and their families were not part of any armed resistance and were targeted despite their non-involvement. This self-representation appears across different requests, whether for the return of confiscated land, permission to resettle in their home villages, or the correction of administrative records. In doing so, the authors not only recount the material consequences of violence but also assert their status as rightful members of the national polity who had been unjustly punished.

Far from being abstract or symbolic, these letters provide concrete details of loss and appeal to legal norms, moral principles, and humanitarian concerns. They constitute a crucial body of documentation

that reveals how survivors of the Dersim operations understood themselves and their experience, as non-rebellious, wronged citizens seeking redress. This body of correspondence thus stands as a vital historical record of the human consequences of displacement, as well as a collective expression of a community's effort to reestablish its connection to land, belonging, and recognition in the aftermath of violent rupture.

But how are the letters of Tertele victims different from other self-narrated forms of interaction with the government? Do they occupy any significant place compared to other forms that were discussed in this thesis? This chapter is both distinct and important in the sense that the authors of these letters were exposed to violence and displacement. Therefore, these letters allow us to recognize what can be described as a dual regime of citizenship within the Turkish Republic, one that, while legally extending citizenship to all, in practice differentiated between groups based on their ethnic and regional identities. The grievances articulated in these documents make visible how state policies, access to legal recourse, land rights, and protection from local abuse were applied unevenly. This differentiated treatment reveals that citizenship was not experienced uniformly across the population. In the case of Dersim, citizens were often subjected to surveillance, displacement, and administrative exclusion, conditions that sharply contrast with the privileges or protections extended to other segments of the population. In contrast to other narratives of "ordinary people" – who represent identities deemed acceptable by the regime – the authors of these letters were seen as "boil of the nation," reflecting the state's policies and practices first-hand.<sup>11</sup>

The persecuted were excluded from any political means, as well as from active participation and representation. As was the case with Dersim Tertele, the Community started to be marginalized several decades ago, though they had no tools to resort. This chapter also aims to locate the letter writing practice of the Tertele survivors embedded in the *longue durée* of petition practices in the Republican era to discover the

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<sup>11</sup> İzzettin Çalışlar and İzzeddin Çalışlar, *Dersim raporu* (İletişim, 2010), 231.

distinct features of this practice for the racialized and attacked communities.

#### § 4.1 The Set of Policies Leading to the 1938 Dersim Incidents and the Anatomy of the Regime

The operation that took place in Dersim did not happen all of a sudden. The provinces with a dense Kurdish population had been under the intense ethnographic and political interest of the CUP since the 1910s.<sup>12</sup> The establishment of the first General Directorate of Tribes and Immigrants (Aşair ve Muhacirîn Müdiriyyet-i Umumiyyesi) actually marks the initial period when this interest became institutionalized.<sup>13</sup> During the transition from the empire to the nation state and the consolidation of the new regime, practices of exclusion and violence against certain groups continued to exist alongside policies of displacement and assimilation.<sup>14</sup> Considering all of the aggressive, monoculturalist, and ethnoreligious policies implemented by the regime of the early Republic against the non-Sunni Muslim and non-Turkish populations as spontaneously developed and independently progressing practices prevents us from understanding the most structural reflexes and principles of the founding ideology. The homogenization policies that had been ongoing since the Committee of Union and Progress were inherited by the newly established young Republic and were developed and made an organic and integral part of the governmentality. In this section, the assessment of the region from the empire to the nation state up to the path leading to the Dersim violence and dispossession will be historicized by contextualizing the reports dominated by an Orientalist lens, the established institutions, the legal regulations implemented, and discourse of politicians

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<sup>12</sup> Fuat Dündar, *Modern Türkiye'nin Şifresi: İttihat ve Terakki'nin Etnisite Mühendisliği (1913-1918): İttihat Ve Terakki'nin Etnisite Mühendisliği (1913-1918)* (İletişim Yayınları, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Ugur Ümit Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey: Nation and State in Eastern Anatolia, 1913-1950* (OUP Oxford, 2012), 36.

<sup>14</sup> Hans-Lukas Kieser, *Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide* (Princeton University Press, 2020), sec. xii Prologue.

regarding the regions with a dense Kurdish population and their approaches specific to Dersim.

#### § 4.2 First Report on Dersim during the Republican Era: Civil Inspector Hamdi Bey's Report

The report written in 1926 by Hamdi Bey, an Inspector of Civil Administration, in accordance with the orders of the Ministry of the Interior, begins as follows: "Dersim is increasingly becoming Kurdish, becoming abandoned, the danger is growing."<sup>15</sup> This report is included in the edited volume "Dersim Raporları," compiled by Faik Bulut.<sup>16</sup> It is produced during a period of heightened concern over state control in the eastern provinces, reflects a particular bureaucratic perspective. The report was included in the classified documentation of the period and has since been cited in various historical and sociological works analyzing early Republican policies toward Kurdish-majority regions. Hamdi Bey continues the report as follows:

The Dersim is a tumor for the Republic. It is a sacred duty in the name of the country's welfare to perform a decisive operation on this tumor and to prevent its probable spread. [...] Opening schools, building roads, establishing factories to provide the means of prosperity, assisting them with various industrial and practical tasks to engage them; in short, working towards improvement through settlement and civilization is nothing but an impossible dream."<sup>17</sup>

Therefore, he proposes a state of definitive rupture and deportation:

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<sup>15</sup> Çalışlar and Çalışlar, *Dersim raporu*, 231.

<sup>16</sup> Faik Bulut, *Dersim raporları: inceleme : genişletilmiş basım* (Evrensel Basım Yayın, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.232.

It would be wise foresight to resolve the Dersim issue, which cannot tolerate further delay or postponement, as soon as possible. It is necessary to prevent the Dersim uprising, which I strongly believe will erupt sooner or later, in the following manner.<sup>18</sup>

While the language of the report is shaped by the security-oriented , it also contributes to the broader understanding of how internal assessments influenced state planning in the lead-up to the structural reforms and exceptional governance policies later applied to the region. Viewed within its historical context, the report serves as a primary source that helps scholars trace the evolution of state approaches to regional integration and public order in early Republican Turkey.

#### § 4.3 Governor Cemal Bardakçı's Report: Violence will not end anything!

While serving as the governor of Diyarbakır, Cemal Bardakçı also prepared a report on Dersim in 1926, which constitutes the second of the works written about the region. Cemal Bardakçı was one of the bureaucrats who approached the region more moderately, believing that a military operation would be both costly and unable to solve the “problems” fully. According to Bardakçı, the people of the region had already been subjected to continuous violence throughout history and did not deserve such treatment again. In his report, Governor Cemal made the following suggestions:

It is possible to isolate and reform Dersim without using armed force; for this, it is necessary to eliminate distrust and insecurity towards the government and convince them of the government's benevolent intentions and purposes.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.235.

The governor proposed resolving the “problems” related to Dersim through negotiation and dialogue and emphasized the importance of informing the other party about the process. Additionally, he aimed to absorb tension dynamics by relocating the particularly dangerous tribal leaders, including Seyid Rıza, whom the regime deemed particularly dangerous, to empty lands in Elaziz. He expresses this part in the report as follows: “Including Seyid Rıza, I persuaded many of the chiefs and notables to relocate to Elaziz.”<sup>20</sup>

#### § 4.4 Establishment of the Inspectorate-Generals

The General Inspectorates are one of the institutions that the state particularly refrained from sharing much information and details about their development. These inspectorates functioned almost as a parallel administration and surveillance tool in the regions in which they were established, existing at almost every phase of the single-party period and continually expanding in their extraordinary legal capacity. The first General Inspectorate during the single-party period was established on June 25, 1927, centered in Diyarbakır, covering cities with a high population of Kurds as a counter insurgency method to the Sheikh Said Rebellion. It managed the settlement of these areas, collected ethnographic information, and wrote reports, much like the French settler-colonial “*les bureaux Arabes*” or the “Arab Offices” in Algeria, to gather demographic information and create a knowledge base on modes of living. What makes the General Inspectorate system comparable to the French *bureaux Arabes* in Algeria is not only its exceptional administrative authority over specific regions, but also its ethnographic orientation. Like the “*bureaux Arabes*,” which were designed to gather detailed knowledge of tribal structures, land use, customs, and local power relations to better manage and discipline populations, the Turkish Inspectorates were tasked with producing comprehensive reports on the social, cultural, and demographic characteristics of Kurdish-majority areas. These reports were

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.236.

often used to inform securitization policies, including the redrawing of village boundaries, forced resettlement, and cultural regulation. Both systems relied on a fusion of civil and military power, maintained hierarchical oversight from the center.

After establishing the First Inspectorate-General, Dr. İbrahim Tali Öngören became its first head. He completed his education at the military medical academy and met Mustafa Kemal during the 1911 Turco-Italian War. According to British sources, Öngören had visited Bombay and studied the “Anglo-Indian administration.”<sup>21</sup> The Inspectors held relatively autonomous maneuverability in decision-making to implement the general vision laid out in the Reform Plan of the East. The Fourth Inspector-General was responsible for the regions, particularly Dersim, the institution established in 1936. Before the establishment of this institution Öngören also prepared reports on the region. In the 1930 report written by the First General Inspector İbrahim Tali, he stated that the reform of Dersim could only be achieved in two ways:

By cutting off all relations of Dersim with the outside, thus preventing their attacks and trade, forcing the starving people to surrender over time, and thereby saving Dersim from evildoers. After closing all sides thoroughly, gradually tightening the encirclement, immediately removing those caught for their misdeeds from Dersim and dispersing them.<sup>22</sup>

In another report written in 1931, the inspector listed the necessary actions to be taken in the event of a possible military operation, providing information about the number of forests, the condition of caves, and the terrain. He also listed the activities necessary for smoother infrastructure logistics.<sup>23</sup> Finally, he stated that maintaining the current situation in Dersim was dangerous and wrote:

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<sup>21</sup> Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Çalışlar and Çalışlar, *Dersim raporu*, 238–39.

<sup>23</sup> Bulut, *Dersim raporları*, 93.

Dersim cannot be won over by appeasement. The intervention of armed forces has a greater impact on the people of Dersim and constitutes the basis of reform. Dersim should initially be regarded as a colony, Kurdishness should be assimilated within the Turkish community, and only then gradually granted full Turkish rights.<sup>24</sup>

Inspectorate Öngören, later on, was assigned as the head of the Inspectorate-General Thrace.<sup>25</sup> Over the next month, his official cohort travelled through the provinces of Kırklareli, Tekirdağ, Çanakkale, and Edirne, visiting numerous villages and towns along the way before finally returning to Edirne, the center of the institution. In another report that İbrahim Talî submitted to Recep Peker, the secretary general of the ruling Republican People's Party, he outlined what he termed the "Jewish problem" in Thrace. Tali claimed that Jews dominated the economic life in the region by bribing local officials and deceiving villagers. He asserted that they showed no intention of learning Turkish or embracing Turkish culture and principles and were inclined to espionage on behalf of Bulgaria.<sup>26</sup> To address this situation, Tali recommended ending Jewish economic dominance. His report also highlighted the significant resentment the local population felt towards Jewish tradesmen and merchants.

It is important to address the political and action-based connections between institutions, politicians, pogroms, and collective violence practices. Jews who witnessed the 1934 Jewish Pogrom in Edirne claim that the position and role of İbrahim Tali were quite central as the initiator of the events. The American Embassy in Istanbul reported that the Inspector General was among those who took severe actions to resolve issues quickly. One such action included the compulsory deportation of Jews from Thrace.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 251.

<sup>25</sup> Stephan Astourian and Raymond Kévorkian, *Collective and State Violence in Turkey: The Construction of a National Identity from Empire to Nation-State* (Berghahn Books, 2020), 237.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 238.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 244.

Significantly, the Republic bureaucrats who carried out acts of violence in diverse communities were not only present in isolated incidents but also took active roles in planning and managing these actions like İbrahim Tali Öngören. These bureaucrats were not individuals with inherent propensity for violence. Instead, they were decision-makers with a political vision, believing that the state's survival depended on strict homogenization policies. Therefore, they were not individuals driven by personal feelings of violence towards the local populations and communities but rather executors of a structural ideology. Consequently, it would be more accurate to interpret the meticulous "measures" taken against all the dissidents and non-Turk and non-Muslim citizens from Diyarbakır to Edirne, through the foundational lens of the state.

#### § 4.5 Reports of Minister of the Interior Şükrü Kaya and Prime Minister İsmet İnönü

More direct and intensive demographic engineering and homogenization policies coincided with the careers of their organizers coming from the late Ottoman period. To detect this continuity, one can cross-examine the social engineers from the CUP with those from the RPP major political elites and highlight the overlapping political elites who directed and implemented community-targeted violent actions and Turkification policies. It is not accidental that figures such as Mustafa Abdülhalik Renda, Mahmud Celâl Bayar, Kâzım Özalp, İbrahim Tali Öngören, Ali Cenani, and particularly Şükrü Kaya, are frequently mentioned in reports and operative documents related to demographic engineering politics from 1913 to 1950.<sup>28</sup>

Mustafa Kemal directly approved establishing a special council to create an extensive report on reforming Eastern Anatolia. This "Reform Council for the East" was led by İsmet İnönü and included prominent military officers and government bureaucrats. The individuals tasked with drafting the policy directives were experienced Young Turk officials,

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<sup>28</sup> Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 167.

including former CUP member Şükrü Kaya. The newly formulated Republican regime heavily relied on the service, experience, vision, and efforts of the entire cohort of Unionists.<sup>29</sup>

Returning to Dersim, Kaya detailed the complaints related to Dersim and the conflicts among the tribes, stating that the urgent reformation of Dersim was necessary and that any delay would be detrimental to the state in his report written in 1931. Among the matters Kaya briefly presented to the state were the collection of weapons, the removal of tribal chiefs and potential tribal chiefs from the province, and the settlement of landless peasants either locally or through forced relocation. Kaya noted that the proposed measures would require a military operation, emphasizing that this operation should not weaken the country's defense system or place a heavy burden on the state treasury. He suggested that preparations could begin in 1932 and that further details regarding the implementation would be provided separately.<sup>30</sup> Kaya also belongs to the group of politicians who think having a military operation in the region is an infinite "solution" compared to other alternatives.

In the summer of 1935, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk instructed Prime Minister İsmet İnönü to conduct an inspection tour of the eastern provinces to assess the progress of nation-building efforts.<sup>31</sup> İnönü traveled extensively across the eastern and southeastern regions, evaluating the impact of the government's population policies. He reported that these policies were slowly starting to bear fruit. His insights and suggestions were subsequently integrated into local administration for practical application. Specifically, regarding Dersim, İnönü's observations were as follows:

The Turkish villages that once acted as barriers against the Kurds in Dersim have weakened and dispersed, while the Armenians have completely withdrawn, leaving the field open to the invasion

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<sup>29</sup> Ümit Kurt, "1923 and the Legacies of Genocide," *History Compass* 22, no. 4 (2024): e12800, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hic3.12800>.

<sup>30</sup> Çalışlar and Çalışlar, *Dersim raporu*, 259–66.

<sup>31</sup> Üngör, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, 160.

of the Dersim people. We will organize the province of Dersim in a new manner. A serving corps commander will be appointed as governor, and active-duty officers in uniform will serve as district governors. None of the district officials will be locals, and as vacancies arise, officers from active-duty positions will be appointed to secondary posts.<sup>32</sup>

Almost all of the points İnönü mentioned in his report regarding the reformation of Dersim were included in Law No. 2884, enacted in 1936, concerning the administration of the province of the newly named Tunceli. Even this legal-political lineage demonstrates how these documents reflected the policies and violence dictated to diverse communities; the reports and observation work on the region were not abstract materials to be kept in the archives. While presenting the construction of demographic and geographical knowledge, it is evident that there was a constant effort to write, and certain politicians-officials had not only kept in-depth records of modes of living but also produced a record of different local groups, leaders, and their attachment to the land. Drafting governmental reports on the specific case of Dersim emerged as a crucial governance strategy in the region, contributing to the formulation of local legal customs and the categorization of unique traditions into various groups.

#### § 4.6 1935 Tunceli Law

Since 1876, 11 military operations have been conducted on Dersim at various times. The people are uneducated, and due to the poverty of the land, the people are poor. They are also armed, so there will be no shortage of incidents in such a place. Such places can be found in every civilized country.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> BCA 030.10/111.743.11.

<sup>33</sup> TBMM ZC, vol. 21, period V, session 7, Appendix no. 175, “Munzur vildyeti teskilatı ve idaresi Hakkında kanun layihasi ve Dahiliye, Milli Müdafaa, Adliye ve Bütçe encümenleri mazbataları (1/304)” (25 December 1935).

"Such places can be found in every civilized country." The Minister of Interior, Şükrü Kaya, began the discussions on the 1935 Tunceli Law, which planned the political and social liquidation of Dersim, with these words. Such places can be found in every civilized country "the savage, uneducated, and ignorant people of Dersim." The minister continued his speech as follows:

The motto of the Republican era is to address the essential needs of the country fundamentally and to treat the real disease. Therefore, a civilized measure was considered here, and this program will ensure that these areas benefit from the blessings of the Republic as everywhere else in the country. [...] There is nothing abnormal in the province.<sup>34</sup>

The Minister of Interior was trying to reassure the deputies that this law was not proposed due to extraordinary circumstances. However, the relevant article of the law first envisages that the region would be governed by a military governor and commander assigned by the state.<sup>35</sup> This approach to governing Dersim by a high-ranking military officer-governor indicates the *raison d'état* of the Republic in constructing a new governmentality, framed as a colony in İbrahim Tali's report on Dersim, also the first General Inspector to implement the nation forming in the Eastern provinces. The assigned governor-military officer was given enormous authority over the region, including reshaping the borders and centers of the province. In any judicial case, it was determined by this law that the indictment would not be served to the defendant and that there would be no appeal against the decisions taken. Another excessive authority clause is the power of the governor and commander to relocate families and individuals to any place they see appropriate. While this power alone is a decision that only the Council of Ministers can make when it comes to the people of Dersim, even the governor becomes authorized to implement this "security measure." Although the Minister of

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Resmi Gazete, no. 3195, 2 January 1934,

Interior Şükrü Kaya stated that there was nothing abnormal when he started voting on the law, in the subsequent voting of the law articles, Trabzon deputy Raif Karadeniz took the floor and stated the following:

We are making a special law for a certain region. The citizens living there will only enter into relations with the state through this law. This means extraordinariness. The Minister of Interior said there is no extraordinariness. This should be understood as follows: Yes, there is no war there, and we do not hear the sounds of cannons. However, there is a group that does not recognize the government and only recognizes the tribal chiefs. In a civilized country, the greatest power is the government, the state. Instead, in the region, it means the greatest power is the tribal chief or an agha. This is an abnormal situation in the legal sense.

Deputy Raif Karadeniz expressed more frankly than the Minister of Interior that there were abnormal incidents in Dersim. The point to be noted here is that the existence of tribes and tribal leaders is seen as contrary to the level of civilization and development, drawing a discourse into the field of barbarism versus civilization.<sup>36</sup> Although the Republican elites tried to legitimize the acts of violence against Dersim through tribal structures and social organization, the Kurds were not the only group with widespread tribal structures and aghas at that time in the country. As mentioned in the memoirs of Sabiha Sertel, a close journalist to the regime:

Mustafa Kemal wants to make many reforms. He held talks with aghas here, especially Kurdish aghas, and Kurdish deputies such as Feyzi Bey and others about land reform. This reform issue is very tough. It is impossible to explain land reform to the aghas.

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<sup>36</sup> İsmail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* (Belge Yayınları, 1990), 159.

Undertaking this reform means losing all the aghas and notables.  
For now, we have closed the land reform file.<sup>37</sup>

Therefore, it can be said that the regime's concern was not aghas and a more just order but an instrumentalized discourse to eliminate all self-determinist organizations. By bringing a new sense of space and time to historic Dersim, the state aimed to enlarge its domains of governmental intervention. Its techniques of establishing new institutions of General-Inspector, passing certain laws, and demographic engineering plans and tactics gave rise to monoculturalism and ethnoreligious state forms and projects.

Returning to the articles of the 1935 Tunceli Law, the appointed governor and commander also had the authority to postpone the sentences of convicted persons at their discretion. When this law was being discussed in 1935 in the Assembly, no province was named Tunceli. The province of Tunceli was established by law number 2885, and it came into force in 1936.<sup>38</sup> This should be evaluated as part of the government's plans on Dersim. Although the renaming of Dersim to Tunceli was initially seen as a simple bureaucratic process, it means more than that. Geographic names are meant to refer to the histories, cultures, and heritages of the places. On the other hand, these are not just spatial references or clues; they are deeply related to power relations and struggles over land, resources, and community attachment.

#### § 4.7 Reframing Dersim: Territorial Pacification and Erasure

The events of 1937–1938 in Dersim have long been described in official historiography as a “rebellion,” a term that has shaped public memory and justified the disproportionate violence employed by the Turkish state. However, recent critical approaches challenge this framing, emphasizing that the label “rebellion” reflects a state-centered

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<sup>37</sup> Sabiha Sertel, *Roman gibi: anı* (Can Yayınları, 2015), 75.

<sup>38</sup> Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi*, 20.

perspective that obscures the deeper historical processes of marginalization, surveillance, and coercive transformation that defined the Republican regime's relationship with Dersim. Rather than a coordinated insurrection, the response of the local population can be understood as a reactive and desperate defense of land, livelihood, and communal life in the face of escalating state pressure. What took place in Dersim was not a rebellion in the conventional sense, with organized leadership, military capacity, or a nationalist program, but rather a series of fragmented and localized responses to a comprehensive project of incorporation and control. These actions emerged in response to a sustained campaign of territorial reordering, legal exception, and infrastructural penetration, all aimed at dissolving unique character of the region.

Dersim had long been treated as a space apart, geographically rugged, culturally distinct, and administratively peripheral. It was increasingly portrayed in internal state reports as a threat to national unity, not only because of its Kurdish and Alevi identity, but because of its relative distance from centralized state mechanisms. This "problem" was met with a strategy of pacification: the extension of military roads, surveillance posts, administrative restructuring under the 1935 Tunceli Law, and the deployment of emergency laws and Inspectorates-General. These mechanisms sought to break down communal structures and impose the disciplinary logic of the nation-state. The events of 1937–1938 were thus less the result of rebellion than the culmination of a long-standing state effort to transform the region's political, social, and ecological landscape. By mobilizing the term "rebellion," the state narrative retroactively legitimized a campaign that included aerial bombardments, mass deportations, executions, and the destruction of entire villages. In contrast, the lived experience of the people of Dersim, many of whom left behind letters, petitions, and testimonies, reflects a collective sense of bewilderment, loss, and dispossession rather than militant intent. As part of the regime's project to accelerate the homogenization of the population and the construction of a nation-state, many infrastructure projects were

developed in Dersim. These projects included the construction of roads and bridges to facilitate the transportation of troops and ammunition.<sup>39</sup>

Detailed reports about the region's geography were prepared, meticulously calculating how the population could be controlled in a military operation and mapping out possible escape routes. Chart 1 demonstrates the scope of the state's preparation for the operation in Dersim in the year 1937. The historical nature and geographic conditions of Dersim were aimed to transform by the state to make the frontier more "connected" and to leverage an ultimate and more predictable knowledge of material conditions in an effort to anticipate and penetrate militaristic operational activities.

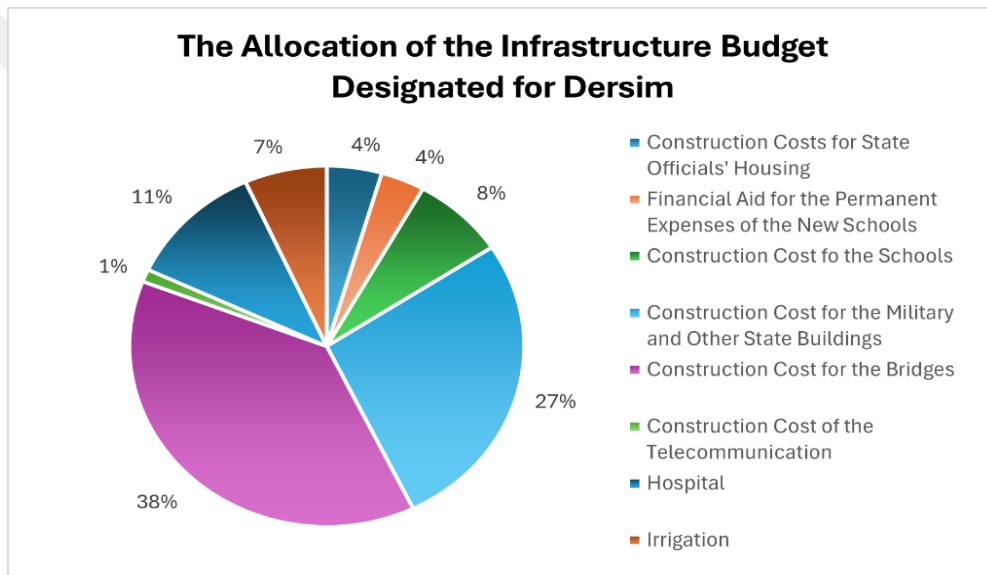


Figure 5.1 The detailed budget allocated to the 4th General Inspectorate for rapidly transforming Dersim's infrastructure in 1937. Source BCA.<sup>40</sup>

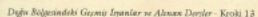
<sup>39</sup> Nikos Christofis, *The Kurds in Erdogan's 'New' Turkey: Domestic and International Implications*, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2021), chaps. 937–1938 Shifts and continuities in the state discourse and reasoning under Kemalism and Erdoğanism, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003143895>.

<sup>40</sup> BCA 71.469/5, May 21, 1937.

In the context of facilitating physical and military intervention in the region, local scale, small attacks were carried out on police stations in Pah and Sin in Eastern Dersim, which were newly built by the state. These attacks commenced on March 21, during Newroz, the Kurdish celebration of spring and the new year. Additionally, the wooden bridge connecting Tunceli and Erzincan was damaged. Immediately following these events, the army dispatched 50.000 troops to the region. The clashes continued throughout the spring and summer months.<sup>41</sup> The note dated March 21-22, 1937, located in the archive of Necmeddin Sahir Sılan, the Deputy of Tunceli, states the reason for the military operation to be carried out in the region. He explained the reasoning behind the operation as a result of the fire. Maps 5.1 and 5.2 from his archive represent the insurgent forces in the region, including tribes and the forces involved in the incident, and illustrate the route of the operational forces.

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<sup>41</sup> 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): 89.



...points in the light of  
previous actions of the locals. Source Necmeddin Sahir Silan  
Archive (1937)

the Cabinet decided for the Chief General Staff to launch attacks on Western and Central Dersim.<sup>43</sup>

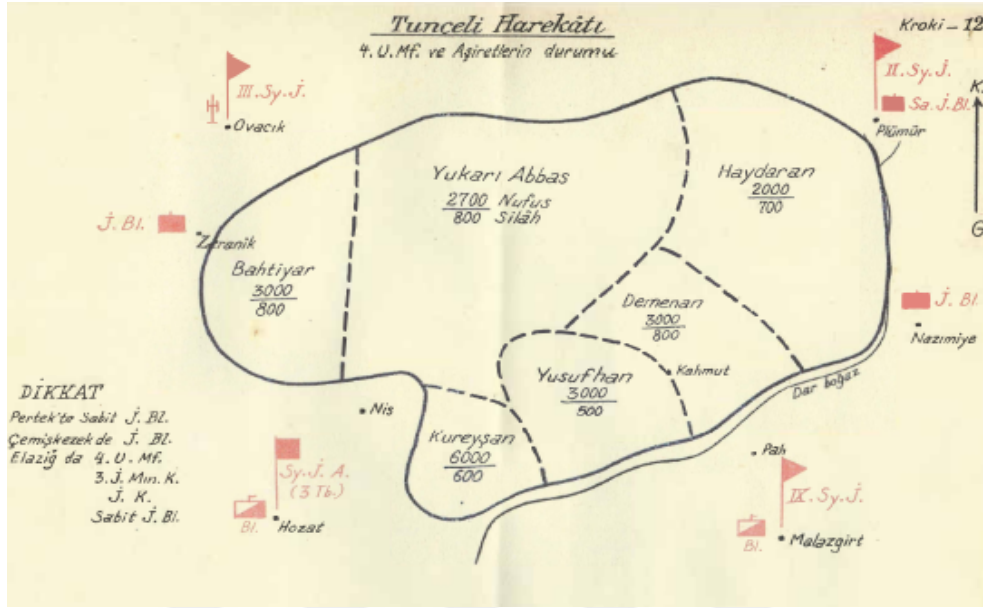


Figure 5.3 The points that indicate Genderme, General Inspector, and police stations in Dersim (1937) Source: Necmeddin Sahir Silan Archive

The objective of this attack was to evacuate and disarm the population in Nazimiye and Sin completely. Due to the absence of unity among group structures, it was relatively easier for the state to besiege these groups. In July 1937, Seyid Rıza, the major leader of the rebellion, sent a letter to the League of Nations in French, criticizing the state's escalating assimilationist and violent policies:

For years, the Turkish state has been striving to represent the Kurdish nation, and in doing so, it has been oppressing and tormenting this nation. It bans newspapers and publications in the Kurdish language, tortures those who speak their own language,

<sup>43</sup> "1937 Yılında Tunceli Tenkil Harekatına Dair Bakanlar Kurulu Kararı," Türkiye Cumhuriyeti tinde Ayaklanmalar (1924-1938), (GnKur Basımevi, 1972).

and forcefully and systematically organizes migrations from the fertile lands of the region to different places in Anatolia, resulting in the deaths of large masses of migrants. [...] For three months, a merciless war has been raging in our country.<sup>44</sup>

One of the most poignant documents from the period is a letter attributed to Seyid Rıza, the prominent elder of Dersim, in which he conveys a harrowing account of persecution to the international community. Addressed to the foreign ministries of the United Kingdom, France, and the United States, the letter, delivered through Nuri Dersimi, details the systematic repression of the population. It speaks of the prohibition of Kurdish-language publications, the punishment of individuals for speaking their native tongue, and the forced relocations of thousands from their ancestral lands to remote regions of Anatolia, displacements that often ended in mass death and despair. "For three months," the letter reads, "a merciless war has been raging in our country." The plea, however, received no reply.

The letter stands as both testimony and indictment, an appeal issued in the face of overwhelming force and international indifference. Shortly after sending it, Seyid Rıza surrendered to Turkish authorities in Erzincan on September 10, 1937. Despite his surrender, and with no formal judicial process that met even the minimal standards of legality, he was executed along with his son Resik Hüseyin, Seyid Haso, and several other local leaders. Their execution took place in Elazığ, just before a highly publicized visit by President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Interior Minister Şükrü Kaya and Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, who had also traveled to the region, sent congratulatory messages to General Inspector Abdullah Alpdoğan, the architect of the military campaign.

This episode is emblematic of the transformation of state power in Dersim during this period. Rather than de-escalating after a show of dominance, the state intensified its campaign, treating surrender not as the end of conflict, but as an opportunity to cement authority through

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<sup>44</sup> BCA 30.10.111/745.20, July 30, 1937.

demonstrative violence. The execution of surrendered figures without due process, framed by orchestrated political visits and official celebration, reflects a moment in which the state abandoned the restraint of bureaucratic rationality and embraced a logic of annihilation. The goal was not simply to restore order, but to erase resistance, sever kinship networks, and inscribe obedience through spectacle and fear. Seyid Rıza's final words, though unrecorded with certainty, are remembered in collective memory not only as a lament, but as a last assertion of dignity in the face of a state machinery that had gone beyond warfare into punitive destruction. The execution was hastily organized by İhsan Sabri Çağlayangil, who later became a foreign minister.<sup>45</sup> According to Bruinessen, operation in Dersim was a well-designed appropriation of Kurdish ethnic identity.<sup>46</sup> From the beginning of the events on March 20th until June 16th, there was nothing mentioned about Dersim in the press. In the 551 news pieces about Dersim from January 1937 to January 1938, no word is found; only rarely can neutral rhetoric be observed.<sup>47</sup>

This situation can be observed more clearly when examining the distribution according to the chart created from the data in Baran's study.

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<sup>45</sup> Nicole Watts, "Relocating Dersim: Turkish State-Building and Kurdish Resistance, 1931–1938," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 23 (October 2000): 5–30, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0896634600003368>.

<sup>46</sup> Martin van Bruinessen, "Genocide of the Kurds," in *The Widening Circle of Genocide* (Routledge, 1994).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, 38.

THE CONTESTED MAKING OF MODERN TURKEY IN PEOPLE'S  
WORDS

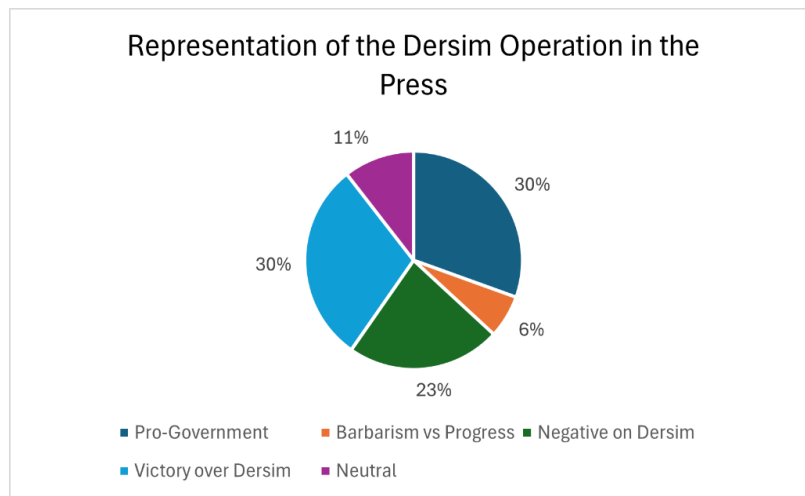


Figure 5.4 Source Taha Baran (2014)

When examining the press practices of the period, it is seen that the Dersimi people were considered as a homogenous group in a monolithic manner. Only "backward" and "non-human" traits are attributed to the Dersim people. When describing the Dersim people, non-human entities are often used for characterization – a flock of sheep, a herd of donkeys, or dogs.<sup>48</sup> This discourse and tactic, which has a long history, essentially dehumanizes the people of Dersim and legitimizes military intervention. This approach manifests itself very similarly in the reports, speeches, and newspapers of the period concerning Dersim. In the book authored by Bilmez, Kayacan, and Aslan, Dersim's memory and oral history was traced; an interviewee who listened to the massacre from their grandparents and was forcibly exiled describes the memories transferred to her as follows:

The rebellion that went down in history, but what kind of rebellion was this? No one killed, no one destroyed, for example, no one kidnapped, I don't know. Okay, maybe some were armed; they might have retaliated because they were shot at to save their lives, to save their children, to save their honor. But the majority of us

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid, 192.

just fled. We always fled and hid in caves and forests. We did nothing else. Those poor people, those helpless, truly defenseless people.<sup>49</sup>

As Said stated, the power to narrate and block the ways other realities can be revealed is essential to imperialism. Dehumanizing discourses about certain groups also go hand in hand with the dehistoricization of their trauma and victimhood. Following the implementation of stringent legal measures and supported by Decrees 2/6662 and 2/9409, announced on May 20, 1937, and August 6, 1938, specific regions of the province were designated as forbidden zones and mandated for

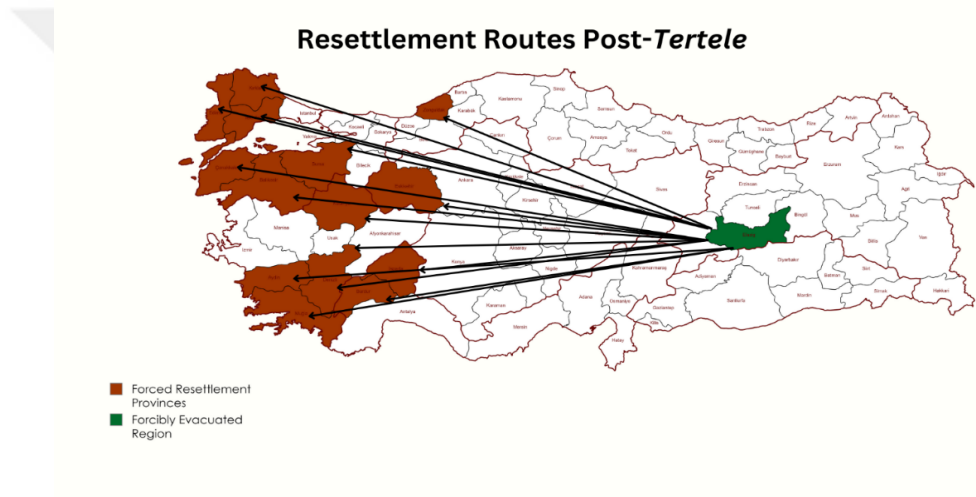


Figure 5.5 Source: Republican Archives

evacuation.<sup>50</sup> With the specific regulation for Elazığ, which was part of Dersim back then, 5.000 people were resettled to the West.<sup>51</sup> Map 3 shows the routes of the forcibly relocated people.

In the Republic Archives, there are four different decrees regulating the resettlement of people from Dersim; one targets 1,500 people, the

<sup>49</sup> fBilmez et al., *Belleklerdeki Dersim '38*, 66.

<sup>50</sup> Devres, Dersim as an Internal Colony.

<sup>51</sup> Hüseyin Aygün, *Dersim 1938 ve zorunlu iskan: telgraflar, dilekçeler, mektuplar* (Dipnot Yayınları, 2009), 169.

other is 5.000 people in total, the following 1.000, and the last one is for 2.000 residents. When only the statistics of the archives were taken into account, 14.500 people were displaced after the *Tertele*.<sup>52</sup> The exact resettlement routes for the immigrants of central and eastern Dersim were not specified in the archives; however, according to the letter, the locations of the exiles show exact parallels with the ones for Elazığ immigrants.

Those forcibly relocated to the western parts of the country could neither take any fiscal resources from their previous lives nor have time to sell their houses, and they couldn't receive compensation for the crops in their fields. They were resettled miles away from their own lands with only small suitcases. The return of those sent from Dersim to the western provinces after the military operations in 1938 was only possible in 1947. The people of Dersim lived in exile for ten full years.<sup>53</sup> The return to Dersim was made possible by enacting a new law amending Settlement Law No. 2510 and other relevant laws passed subsequently by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey.<sup>54</sup>

#### § 4.8 Reordering Life: Returnees to the Old Village and Post-Exile Life Practices

Marx's old dictum from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* states that people make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please.<sup>55</sup> The letters written by the exiled Dersimis will be analyzed in this last chapter of the thesis. Right after the amended Settlement Law in 1947, many displaced Dersimi wanted to return to their historic lands and homes. During the challenging transition of becoming the returnee, they have faced multiple hardships and bureaucratic

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<sup>52</sup> BCA 30.18.11.2/87.51.6, June 03, 1939; BCA 30.18.11.2/84.73.8, August 06, 1938; BCA 30.18.11.2/85.107.16, December 23, 1938. BCA 30.18.11.2/88.93.18, August 23, 1939.

<sup>53</sup> Murat Yuksel, "Forced migration and the politics of internal displacement in the making of modern Turkey: The case of Dersim, 1937–1947" (Ph.D., n.d.), accessed July 1, 2025, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304625774/abstract/C688267C2CAF4620PQ/1>.

<sup>54</sup> Amendment in 2510 Law. 5098, *Resmî Gazete*, no. 26301, June 18, 1947.

<sup>55</sup> Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Mondial, 2005), 39.

restrictions. In this section, we will have the chance to explore the related hardships and details of reordering a life as a returnee through the narrations of Dersimi's exiles.

On the other hand, this chapter occupies a significant place compared to other parts of the thesis. The primary reason for including this chapter in the thesis is to reveal the dual structure of the Republic's citizenship codes through the everyday life practices, sufferings, and negotiations of the citizens. It is important to highlight the state's policies and vision, which adopt different regimes of violence in the socio-legal sense between the West and East of the country, through the citizens' own lenses. Additionally, instead of making an episodic distinction, this chapter aims to draw attention to the changes in the grievances of people who resisted and negotiated due to their ethnic and religious identities in similar eras and the power asymmetries between them. To analytically present the category of race in a contextual and historical sense, the empirical encounter of the sufferings of two different categories of citizens, even if not dialogic, can provide us with analyses of the expressions of racialized policies that are not centered on the state.

This section will focus on the "returning home" transitions of exiles who were deported from the prohibited areas of Dersim, predominantly Pülümür, Çemişgezek, Hozat, Mazgirt, Ovacık, and Nazımiye, under the return regulation issued in 1947, through their own letters.

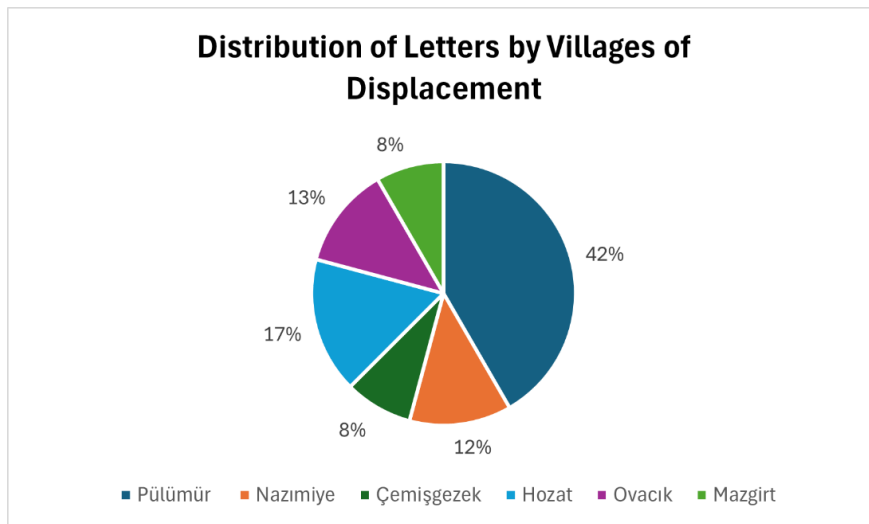


Figure 5.6

Source: Republican Archives

Chart 4 represents the numerical distribution of the demands in the examined letters by region. In the case of a return, the demands of returnees and claims over property and land should be understood in terms of the dynamic nature of negotiating the process, reconstruing the space, and efforts to locate transformed belonging. This section also seeks to revisit the "victimhood" narratives, which essentially only portray the poorly impacted ones as powerless. The lens of this chapter mainly aims to reveal the moral "grey zones" where Dersimi exiles fell somewhere between the margins of the innocent victim and active subjects bargaining certain aspects to reorganize their lives. In an attempt to free our consciousness and history writings from linear frontiers, the section is looking for the entangled and mutable one rather than discrete. Despite the violence and displacement dictated the Dersimi Community, their political posturing did not show itself as people had to comply with whatever consequences occurred or that all power was just exposed from above. The implementation of the laws became something of a battlefield.

The state-oriented analyses to explain the violence not only mirror its language and lens but exacerbate the image of the Dersimi people as being passive to their trauma. This problem is not unique to Dersim Tertele's case. The bias towards historical agents leads us into an inaccurate binary between oppression and resistance, implying those who got impacted drastically died, nonetheless. Such an approach also neglects those who collaborate and make alliances with the oppressor to stay alive or heal the condition since they do not suit the myth so well. In this part, the requests for return by the exiled Dersimis will be analyzed with an emphasis on their – unique but common – problems and the way they portray them to leverage their standards and achieve the "homeland" that they were displaced initially.

First, I want to de-attach the victim from its presupposed adjective and pair passive. Related perspective is highly problematic because it directly attributes an ontological status of passivity, disqualifying

victimization from acting purposely.<sup>56</sup> Being a victim does not mean being passive nor the passive and silent subject or actors, free individuals waiting for history to happen. Another aspect of the problem is that such categories create timeless and static states, as once a victim, always a victim dialect. In this regard, exploring self-narrated letters that demand returning home is crucial since it provides a lens for oppressed subjects to be heard in the time and future, along with subverting lofty paradigms. Ibrahim Sertel from Hasangazi Village of Pülümür expresses his request for return as follows:

Although I am not guilty of any crime committed by myself or my own will, we have been living in Balıkesir, where we relocated nine years ago, separated from my homeland along with my eight-member family. An eight-member family without any income, the suffering and deprivations we have endured here over the past nine years are indescribably tragic. [...] Two of my children are attending middle school, and in order to support their education and address other issues, I want to go to Pülümür to sell my properties located there. I know that this favor has been given to many other people, and I want to inform you that I am also a worthy citizen of this favor.<sup>57</sup>

Historical materials and self-narrations to demand certain things by the exile community provide critical insight into their experience and spectrum of acting. After the forbidden areas in Dersim were evacuated, resettlement was still forbidden in these areas under the return arrangements. The concept of returning home itself is not a linear experience to rewind life. As in this letter, the exile itself may seek to return in line with many different demands after displacement. In the studies on refugees and displacement, there is a strong tendency to assign a unique authenticity to the link between "homeland" territory and a sharp desire to

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<sup>56</sup> David A Chappell, "Active Agents versus Passive Victims: Decolonized Historiography or Problematic Paradigm?," *The Contemporary Pacific* 7, no. 2 (1995): 303–26.

<sup>57</sup> Akekmekçi and Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)*, 59.

return.<sup>58</sup> It does not have to be unfolded in this way; when it does not manifest in that way, it does not mean that exiles have lost their identities and concepts. When the notion of belonging is essentialized as an initial and historic identity attached to the land, the dynamic and contingent forms of self-help strategies of the displaced ones are likely to be missed.<sup>59</sup> It leads to an exercise in which history only creates typologies acting the same in the broken circles. In the case of İbrahim, he first clarifies that he was not involved with anything as the state discourse addresses as "rebels" and continues his words by stating that he also "deserves" to return to his village to sell his properties to alleviate his financial burden.

In İbrahim's following letter, he expresses his gratitude for making his return to the village possible to the deputy Silan. The complex dynamic between displacement, violence, and resettlement is a practice that reconstitutes notions, embodiments, and relations with space. "Returning home" as a concept after ethnic-nationalist policies gains shifting meanings. To make sense of the demand of İbrahim, we need to articulate a more nuanced approach to people who moved as "ordinary people" engaged in particular and distinct incidents, not as the sole representatives of the forms of "displacements" who only desire to return to the homeland. Another letter Süleyman Doğan wrote, originally from Nazimiye, shares a different reality about returning home. He narrates his story as follows:

The bandit Celal Bayar Government's administrative orders, reminiscent of the Celali period, have unjustly included exiled, oppressed, innocent Turkish farmers among bandits and transferred us to the West as if we were part of a group. For nine years, we have been homeless, landless, without sustenance, and begging in extreme poverty. [...] We have no connection or association with rebellion or bandits. We are the ones who suffered from the wrath

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<sup>58</sup> Stef Jansen and Staffan Löfving, *Struggles for Home: Violence, Hope and the Movement of People*, Dislocations, vol. 3 (Berghahn books, 2009), 6.

<sup>59</sup> Jansen and Löfving, *Struggles for Home*, 6.

of Celal Bayar's visit to Elazığ. [...] Mustafa Gümüşkkant, an Armenian who was transferred from Urfa to Simav under the administration of Mr. Şükrü Saraçoğlu and who was accused of very ugly charges, was released on the first list and returned to Urfa. [...] A Turkish child, no matter how bad, it is known by the state that we cannot be as harmful to the state as an Armenian.<sup>60</sup>

There is an important emphasis in the letter of Süleyman Doğan from Nazımiye, reminding us that the exiled people are not homogeneous and have identities beyond just being “exiles.” Firstly, author Doğan addresses Celal Bayar’s administration as an “illegitimate” and “bandit” since he was the particularly assigned prime minister to conduct the operational process in the region. Therefore, his reputation is quite disliked among the residents. Secondly, there is another attempt to clarify the author's position by stating that he and his family were not part of any criminal or banditry activities. This is a general and patterned repertoire of the authors to bring themselves to the “legitimate” space and try to detach themselves from the crimes and stigmatization assigned to them. In the historical and socio-political context of the Republic, the comparison of the citizenship status of diverse groups, particularly the ones from marginalized regions like Dersim, to that of Armenians carries significant weight. The people of Dersim, subjected to violence and political marginalization, might find themselves in a position of empathy with the Armenians, who also faced persecution and displacement. However, the author’s astonishment and frustration stems from the perception that, despite their loyalty and sacrifices, their status is deemed inferior to that of Armenians. This perceived hierarchy in citizenship becomes a tool for the author to highlight the injustices faced by the people of Dersim and to argue for their rights and recognition within the state. By drawing this comparison, the author seeks to underscore the irony and injustice in the state's treatment of its citizens, thereby attempting to leverage this perceived inequity to advocate for gaining the right to “return home.”

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<sup>60</sup> Akekmekçi and Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)*, 70.

Doğan's letter is significant because it reveals a dimension of how exiles perceived and responded to displacement. His letter also reminds us that displaced people are also social and cultural beings, and internalized power dynamics, excluding discourses along with social standings, remain valuable or apparent in their strategies. Contrary to the common perspective, exiled people are not homogenous groups that perceive displacement and cope with it similarly. As Sara Ahmed articulates, re-groundings of identity, culture, and nation can resist and reproduce hegemonic forms of belonging and attachments.<sup>61</sup> In another letter sent, Ekrem Uşaklıgil, one of the internal refugees, articulates his request as follows:

We are forever grateful and pray for your long life and happiness for the efforts and endeavors you have shown to enable refugees like us to return to our homelands. In compliance with the proposal given in the National Assembly and the approved regulations and laws, we have not received a positive response to our petitions to return from Uşak to our homeland. The frustration we have endured in exile has far exceeded the limits of our endurance. In fact, our entire wealth is gradually disappearing day by day.<sup>62</sup>

Ekrem and his family are among the group which seeks to return to their homelands. He starts his words by showing his gratitude to the deputy, Silan, who brought up the amendment to the Assembly. This was a very generic theme in almost all the letters discovered. Authors express their appreciation to Silan since he did not prefer going silent about the constant issues of the displaced. Given in Ekrem's letter, experiences of exile, loss, and displacement are perceived by the Dersimi people not only as a drastic separation from the homeland but also as brutal poverty. Personal yet shared genealogies expose the journeys of poor exiles in illustrating

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<sup>61</sup> Sara Ahmed, ed., *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, 1. publ (Berg, 2003), 2.

<sup>62</sup> Akekmekçi and Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)*, 67.

that these processes are complicated as part of the histories of dispossession and entangled with family histories of conflict over returning home.

In the letters examined of the exiled ones, demand for return was mostly a central feature of Dersimi collective life. As Ekrem's letter also demonstrates, former residents demanded to return not because of an abstract longing for home but because of a mixture of financial, regional, and social needs. While returning home was the most important achievement for the exiled ones, the letters written by already-returned ones reveal that it was not a back-to-normal feeling. A family of ten, who were relocated from Pülümür to Çanakkale, describes their return as follows:

In 1938, we were transferred to the West. [...] According to the authority granted by Law No. 5098, we were released, and thus, we set out to return to our old village. When we reached the vicinity of Sırnaz village in Erzincan, which is close to our village, we heard that our village was completely destroyed and in ruins. With my family of ten, we were left stranded halfway. We don't know what to do. [...] Feeling sorry for our children who are exposed to the sun during the day and the north wind at night, we request to be resettled in a suitable place.<sup>63</sup>

Returns also include crafting and bargaining new relationships and arrangements. This letter written by Cemal represents a high volume of letters on this subject written by others as well. The authors catalog a sharp dilemma and hardship regarding what home means and how it was transformed. Their accounts are vital in two aspects: first, they were exposed that a brutal attack on life and livelihood and left no sign of the previous life. Second, due to the mentioned attack on the region and the destruction of material conditions like homes, fields, etc., the sense of belonging and home shattered deeply. Returning home as a concept no longer feels like "home" for most authors who returned to the region. While returning home was a dream for many exiles, those who did

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 67.

manage to return found that home no longer felt like the place they had longed for. For this reason, displacement and returning are the phenomenon that should be examined through the affections and positionalities of the subjects who were exposed to them. That is, of course, not to say that these internal refugees embraced every hardship in a romantic way to reorganize life again and kept silent. On the contrary, the very practice of writing a letter was a method to make the conditions public and heard for a group whose political participation is marginalized. Another writer, Kasım Özkan, describes his story of returning to his village as follows:

I was relocated to the West. I returned to my homeland by order of the Council of Ministers. What did I find? My village is completely ruined, uninhabitable. Not a single stone is left standing. With 14 people, we are stranded under the sun and in the middle of the street. My house and mills are in ruins. There is no food. I have no materials to build a house. I respectfully request that the necessary assistance be provided to me.<sup>64</sup>

The displacement and its sequence impacts on the individuals were multifaceted. It was not only being away from modes of familiar living and coexistence; any possibility of decent conditions for return were blocked. Therefore, the notion of belonging was damaged through different means; on the other hand, people were co-opting with multiple layers of alienation in the process of reorganizing life. For the ones who returned home, it led to a realization moment that it was not what it used to be but it was also the space that must be kept even momentarily. Therefore, being both exile and returner has nonlinear and contingent entanglements. While much attention was paid to the concept of displacement, how people felt, responded, and articulated response strategies were not part of the analysis in the literature.

Response narrations in these “return” themed letters show that both the affections of the returners and still-exiled ones were woven into

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, 84.

the broader context of the state actions yet adopted diverse trajectories about the displacement itself. Those in exile who demanded to return home have made the decision due to their longing and economic difficulties. Therefore, "home" and "homeland" were moments and spaces reproduced through the past. On the other hand, the experience of those who return involves trying to reorganize life in a space that has been completely altered by violence. The search for "normal" itself was reshaped through the destruction of the place – villages, materiality, and cultural heritage– that constituted the exile's sense of belonging. Amidst all these intertwined dynamics and response mechanisms, the displaced individuals, each carrying different socializations and hegemonic reflexes, emerge as active individuals with their own connected yet unique strategies.<sup>65</sup>

The discussion of citizenship was constantly kept alive in the dialogic platforms of the letters. The surprise and complaint of an exile from Dersim about sharing the same fate with another displaced Armenian prompt us to reconsider the narratives of mere victimhood and homogenizing approaches and reflexes related to it. It demonstrates that exiled ones negotiated diverse movements by formulating complex and seemingly contradictory identities. Although the tendency to examine victimized groups as a whole and without layers after moments of great violence stems from a concern not to align with the oppressive's perspective, typologizing all victims and closing off their agency can lead us to simplified analyses. Moreover, the demand to return home, if accepted *de facto* for every exile, could lead to a fetishization of the place and the establishment of belonging solely through territorialized means. Approaching the concept of return as a complex and dynamic process enables us to observe larger processes regarding people's own way of exploring the impacts of larger forces in everyday lives and practices. On the other hand, in the return letters of the *Tertele* survivors, it was observed that the concept of homeland – as a core part of the return – does not mean that going home is always particularly desirable or natural due to economic and

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<sup>65</sup> Jansen and Löfving, *Struggles for Home*, 174.

social reasons. While potential returnees were dreaming of coming back, some others preferred cutting ties with the land by selling properties to reorganize a new life as a response to trauma.

#### § 4.9 Cruel Bureaucrats, Dispossession, and Struggle Against Local Power Holders

Edward Said states, "As any displaced and dispossessed person can testify, there is no such a thing as a genuine, uncomplicated return to one's home."<sup>66</sup> Whether imagined, temporary, or permanent, returns take place over time and space, generating their own trajectories and stories. Returnees and their communities often reclaim their rights, lands, and houses, which are generally contested due to shifted relations. Therefore, return is an important concept because each of it has vital political, social, and political consequences. The act of hoping and imagining a return is deeply related to the possibility of having back the "former and actual" life. Experiences of displacement and returning home cannot be examined into sharp and discrete analytical boxes. There are common experiences developed through bureaucratic and grinding administrative processes in which movement is regulated. With the amendment in the Settlement Law, people who were resettled in the Western part of the country gained the right to return after 9 years. However, this specific legal status was not neutral. Despite the articles considering the compensation of the properties enacted, they functioned in favor of the civil servants and local bureaucrats of the region located before the operation.<sup>67</sup> The exile of the Dersimi people and their return should not be seen in opposition but rather be evaluated in the broader context of nation-state building.

In this respect, to take our approach to a more nuanced stance on the relationship between experiences of displacement and return, it is more analytical to empirically explore individual experiences to observe

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<sup>66</sup> Edward W. Said, *Out of Place: A Memoir* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Devres, *Dersim as an Internal Colony*, 164.

the arbitrariness of placement regimes that create tensions between movement and unequal distributions. When Dersimi exiles had achieved legal grounds to return, it brought specific local struggles over the frontiers and meanings of citizenship codes. For the Dersimi people, their inclusion and exclusion from the protections of citizenship rights occurred in a context where legal rights as property have been mostly guaranteed according to ethnic principles. A significant number of letters sent by the returnees focused on the issue of dispossession. For example, some petitioners described being denied access to their ancestral homes or agricultural lands, which had been redistributed to newcomers or remained under state control. Others appealed against the confiscation of livestock and personal belongings left behind during their forced departure. In several cases, returnees reported that village mukhtars or local gendarmerie officers prevented them from reentering their former settlements or registering with local civil authorities, which in turn obstructed access to basic services, legal identity, and property deeds. These letters not only documented personal grievances but also reflected broader structural conditions in which returnees were treated as conditional or second-tier citizens—subject to discretionary local governance rather than consistent legal protections.

A certain group of people were lucky enough not to be displaced, and civil servants, along with the local bureaucracy, stayed in the region within those nine years. A certain segment of the population in Dersim was not displaced during or after the 1938 events, either due to strategic cooperation, administrative exemptions, or local circumstances that allowed them to remain. Likewise, various civil servants, military officers, and their families, as well as local mukhtars and village guards aligned with state interests, continued to reside in the region during the nine-year period of restricted access between 1938 and the late 1940s. During this time, state-led redistribution of land and homes took place, often favoring those who had remained or were newly settled in the area under official auspices. This dilemma between historic inhabitants migrating and recent settlers residing in the region has shifted property relations.

Through 1938 and 1947, the region became incorporated into the state officials and control, as many Dersimi went to Western parts of the country. At the same time, settled infrastructure and military officers did not protect the previous living conditions and nature. Moreover, old habitats, fields, and stables that people mainly relied on were completely destroyed.<sup>68</sup> Although Dersimi people had legal ground to return, their arrival was not simply a physical movement across spaces; it was also a transformation in how the community was attached to the place in economic, social, and spatial terms. Ali Akgün from Nazımiye village describes his dispossession as follows:

When we were released and joyful upon returning to our homeland under Law No. 5098, we found that some officials had taken over the properties and lands our ancestors had created with their own hands and which had been part of our agricultural domain for years. After we were sent from here to the West, these officials, seeking to secure their personal benefits, sold the titled properties at dead cheap prices to the remaining wealthy traders, servants, officials, and large landowners and gave the untitled properties for free. We saw with our own eyes that they settled these people in our homes, and we had to turn back from our own doors, seeking refuge in the stables and barns of some kind-hearted individuals. To this day, we remain homeless and without land. While every citizen lives happily and cheerfully, we are destitute and miserable in the corners of walls, constantly suffering great anguish and torment.<sup>69</sup>

Ali's letter starts with the word "to be released" from the exile. This expression sharply demonstrates how the exiles perceived being away from their homelands, just like in prison. The concept of return breaks away from a linear conception of leaving and arrival but rather turns into

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 161.

<sup>69</sup> Akekmekçi and Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)*, 150.

something to be built against the unstable migrating regimes. The property losses of the exiled community served as structural political, social, and spatial catastrophes that they had to deal with. One more crucial element in the author's narrative is the fact that the material entities historically built by his ancestors were taken over either by officials who were entirely foreign to the region or by others who had not been exiled. The bond Ali has with both the region and his property is not just a legal tie but a reflection of a heritage passed down through generations. Another notable point in the letter is the emphasis on inequality, highlighting that while some citizens in the same country live happy and undistorted lives, a certain group has to cope with very fundamental and profound pains. Hüseyin Uluşan from Pülümür and three other villagers suffering from the same problem wrote the following letter:

Although we were allowed to return to our original homes by Law No. 5098, with your generous assistance, after being relocated to the West in 1948, our belongings that were taken by the treasury during our relocation have now been further occupied. The failure to restore our possessions has worsened our suffering and increased our sense of injustice. We convey our complaint to the Presidency of the Assembly and the Prime Ministry, as well as to you, to prevent this plundering, which is not befitting the principles of the Republic's laws.<sup>70</sup>

These letters paint a vivid picture of dispossession's profound and multifaceted impact, affecting not just their material home. Following the authors' requests, Deputy Silan personally wrote a letter to the Settlement Director and conveyed the issue. After investigations, it was determined that the lands had been unlawfully occupied by others, and this situation was confirmed by the governorship as well. He stated that the necessary steps could henceforth be resolved with the Settlement Directorate. This bureaucratic process might seem simple or a routine part of daily life, but

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid, 183.

for the families who were exiled and found their lands occupied upon their return nine years later, it can also be seen as an "achievement." Therefore, considering the returning exiles as purposive actors embedded in social and political contexts rather than merely representatives of types of displacement would be a more empowering approach. In his letter, Mahmut Z from Ovacık expresses his experience of property loss as follows:

We, who have returned from the West, still suffer from the wounds of the settlement law. The lands distributed to us with a ten-year term have come under the control of others. Some of us have been left partially without land. Dear deputy, could you not bring justice to these unlawfully distributed lands through a new law or regulation?<sup>71</sup>

The loss of rural lands and access to them specifically devastated village-based social and economic relations, which mainly relied on small-scale cultivators. Their abandoned and then occupied lands not only meant the loss of their belongings and ties to the land but also significant capital and disconnection from economic tools. This rural community was basically lacking the material conditions for reorganizing their former living practices after the exile. While dispossession was a critical issue in the lives of returnees, the problem of landless peasants was also extremely pressing. The dominant majority of letters examined for this chapter were seeking land distribution from the deputy since their previous system of sharecropping (*ortakçılık*) drastically changed because it was mainly based on kinship, social relations, and moral economy. The returnees often complained about the hardship of engaging in agriculture in their new locations due to unfamiliar land, different climatic conditions, and lack of resources. Because the majority of lands were either confiscated or dispossessed by multiple individuals in the omnipresence

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid, 194.

of the former residents.<sup>72</sup> The lands were often redistributed to new settlers loyal to the government or converted into state property. The economic hardship faced by the returnees further diminished the possibility of sharecropping as it used to be since both landowners and potential tenants lacked the necessary resources and stability to continue the practice.

Certain zones were declared forbidden before the forced replacements began, and these zones were followingly emptied. However, zones like Ovacık, Pülümür, Hozat, and Çemişgezek were regions famous for natural wealth, with the emptying the regions, all of the unique localities perished.<sup>73</sup> On the other hand, returnees who arrived after nine years highly depended on the mentioned localities to sustain their lives. Aside from this, the hostile attitude of the bureaucrats and officials working in the region and their continuous efforts to punish the local people through power and violence over their economic livelihoods was another pattern observed in the letters. The villagers who managed to stay in the region or return there constantly struggled with different dimensions of economic violence. Kazım Yıldız, in his letter written in 1943, from the village of Dere in Pülümür, writes about the oppressive bureaucrats and interference in economic life as follows:

I want to inform you that I was subjected to unjust insults by the district governor, Ekrem Vardarlı. In 1942, when I delivered my wheat to the office warehouse, the municipal clerk Hüseyin Akyıldız, who was the district governor's man, assaulted my dignity and honor by beating me in the warehouse. I took the matter to court. The court sentenced him to three days in prison, and as a result, the district governor harbored resentment against me and subjected me to legal and unjust harm. [...] He destroyed our fields, rounded up our livestock, and burned our grass in front of everyone's eyes. He responded falsely to our appeals to the

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<sup>72</sup> Devres, *Dersim as an Internal Colony*, 164.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 166.

province and the Fourth General Inspectorate, causing the tears of our 300-person community to flow.<sup>74</sup> Another villager, Hüseyin Aslan, wrote the following in his letter:

I am one of the landless people living in Göbürge village. I have a family of 10. We have been doing agriculture for over twenty years with all my blood, suffering from hunger and thirst, and eating grassroots in the vicinity of Avzat Barracks, near the general road, and under the eyes of the police and all the patrols. District Governor Ekrem Vardarlı, due to his grudge against the rightful owners of this land, prevents people like me from approaching our crops; the gendarmes do not allow us to touch them. Our crops are being destroyed and wasted by birds and wild animals. If our agriculture is prohibited, why was it not banned after the discipline and relocations of the Dersim people in 1938, but now it is? <sup>75</sup>

When MP Silan contacted Governor Ekrem Vardarlı about these complaints, the governor denied the claim that the villagers had been cultivating these lands for many years. He stated that there could be at most 10 workers in the mentioned area and that there was no victimization as claimed. He acknowledged the destruction of crops as a necessary measure. He stated that in cases of exceptional treatment, the destruction was necessary to prevent people from entering prohibited and evacuated areas. He also mentioned that this burning was important to remind the authorities to accept that the crops were burned.<sup>76</sup> Complaints about Governor Ekrem Vardarlı formed a significant part of the examined letters, and another complaint letter by Mehmet Yıldız said the following about him:

We are people of Pülümür. Our village and homes were trampled under the feet of bandits, our houses were destroyed, our men

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<sup>74</sup> Akekmekçi and Pervan, *Dersimlilerden mektuplar, (1941-1953)*, 16–18.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid, 19.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 14-15.

were killed, and we are a docile people who took refuge in neighboring villages. We present to you a copy of our petition regarding the terrible struggle we faced under the district governor.<sup>77</sup>

In a letter sent to the MP by the RPP President of the town, Halis Güven, he spoke of the numerous complaints against Ekrem Vardarlı and how cruel he was.<sup>78</sup> It is not entirely possible to verify the complaints against the governor, yet it is not the primary duty of historians to conduct criminal investigations of the past. At this point, different perspectives can be considered. If the non-exiled population in the region continued to farm in the prohibited area, it could be seen as their way of surviving and sustaining their livelihoods. Rather than viewing their actions as breaking the law, we can interpret them as acts of resistance to protect their space and uphold a moral economy. Since there is no single type of resistance or a universalized form of struggle, letters written by the post-*Tertele* community should be recognized as a distinct site of resistance because organized and collective action practices were not possible, and so these kinds of “regular,” or “familiar” forms must be discovered. Exiled or non-exiled Dersim Community, which penned letters against their dispossession and local bureaucrats, demonstrated a sharp will and demand as a form of expression.

The letters of the returnees and those seeking to appease the impacts of dispossession are positioned in a different political and historical context compared to the petitions and letters examined in the previous chapters. Firstly, the authors of the previous contents were not exposed to violence and forced placements within their lifespan. Secondly, their living spaces and customs were not disrupted because of their language, identity, and modes of living. Although they were also engaged in resistance activities to leverage their standards against local politicians and social and political settings, the scope and context examined in this chapter were quite distinct. The regime and governance mentality of the state

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid, 11-12.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 65.

towards the citizens were not uniform. Therefore, it would not be so accurate to melt all of the resistance repertoires in the same pot. The fragmented political stances, identities, and asymmetrical power hierarchies should prevent us from making uniform, context-free analyses. The narratives of citizens regarding the problems they experience within the country provide important perspectives on governmentality, particularly in revealing the dual regimes employed by the state. For the returnees to Dersim, their experience was not quite like "homecoming," yet a grotesque confrontation and distortion. The oppressive local bureaucrats and state policies confiscated the remaining properties and land of the displaced ones, and it deeply impacted the linear and unitary portrayal of the return experience.

In the letters against dispossession and provincialized violence, the Dersimi people try to transform social relations and set economic ties rather than a reactive movement. As Bayat asserts, resistance should be evaluated through the very existence of power and counter-insurgency, not as binary concepts but in an ambivalent and decoupled manner. This approach, in fact, is based on Foucault's perspective that "wherever there is power, there is resistance." In this vein, the regular practice of writing a letter in the climate of post-exile undermines an existing power structure. Nevertheless, the approaches still should be attentive to the fact that the concept can easily be overextended. Therefore, it is important to frame the potential and limitations of the particular practice in undermining hegemonic power relations. In the cases of dispossession, these letters helped start an investigation into the related state institutions, having records and archives about the actions of those responsible. In some cases, they even received their occupied lands or confiscated homes. Applying the method of making official/unofficial complaints is a form of resistance and politics that embodies both hope and the possibility of escaping the oppressive and hegemonic settings of state policies.

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## Conclusion

This thesis offers a different angle in exploring the making of modern Turkey and Kemalist reforms by adopting a lens that refrains from dualisms as state/society or top/down. The main attempt of this research was to trace and locate the process of social change in the sources written by “ordinary people” in documents where “facts and fiction” are encountered. By exploring the self-narrations of people on diverse topics, such as social and political reforms or fiscal challenges, this thesis aimed to highlight how social actors and agents of history made sense of the meta-narrative of the Republic and benefited from the “official stories” generated by the state to leverage their opportunities. In this vein, letters, petitions, and particularly denunciation letters were used to address the ways people negotiated social and political changes, economic difficulties, and their intersection and interrelation with the broader power asymmetries and hegemonic settings.

Drawing on the state-in-society lens, the modes of interaction between discourses and practices centered on the state and the responses, accommodation, and consumption generated by the people are? argued

in a mutually constitutive stance. This study conceives that the state is not an abstract or isolated entity that operates independently or in contract with a society operating autonomously. By investigating diverse narratives articulated by ordinary people negotiating and deploying subversive and hegemonic discourses, the junctures of state and society were called out as a dialogic and dynamic space.

This research seeks to incorporate subjective, contextualized, and structural accounts of social life in the making of modern Turkey. Informed by the concept and perspective of social action in everyday practices, this thesis examines how early Republican actors in Turkey employed various strategies and tactics. It explores their (re/mis)use, resistance, appropriation, and adoption of the state's narratives, ideas, and visions for their individual gains. Through the narration analyses of the letters and petitions, a bridge is offered about how broader structures are internalized and negotiated across individual experiences. The object of analysis is to assert the instrumentalization and contestation of the state policies in the light of the personal narratives in the archives.

Narratives in the letters and petitions are socially and historically organized phenomena that reflect existing hegemonies and ideologies. Consequently, this thesis positions itself as distinct from the current literature on the social history of the Republic by not giving an essential(sized) subaltern status to society as a whole. Some actors adopt certain identity managements for the performance and negotiations of self-opportunities; it also informs us about the broader power sites. Society is not a notion that can be studied as a whole since it is not monolithic nor homogenous. In this vein, this thesis adopts analytical categories to explore the distinct violent and government regimes of the state in the making of modern Turkey and the responses of the related groups. By analyzing diverse communities and their different experiences and grievances compared to “acceptable” subjectivities and identities, this study aims to link the power hierarchies and hegemonic ideologies within social history studies on the early Republic era.

In the first chapter, the petitions written after the 1930s were analyzed to better observe the economic and social impacts of the Great

Depression on everyday life. The petitions written on job-seeking and individual opportunities are studied to observe how people coped with the devastating consequences of a series of wars and economic shattering by negotiating with the state. While analyzing the individual yet connected grievances of ordinary people on multiple issues, particular attention was given to the sites where people apply hegemonic and national myths to bargain standards. In the letters and petitions in this section, it is observed that the ontology of otherness was the necessary basis of social imagination and construction. National identity and its founding pillars are instrumentalized in the narratives of the ordinary people in line with their subjectivities and histories to be heard by the interlocutor.

In the second chapter, denunciation letters sent to RPP headquarters on the specific agenda of the 1939 local elections are the main primary source to highlight the engagement of ordinary people with local politics and a direct case study that unfolds how state and society – in the broadest and simplest sense – evolve together. The main argument of this chapter is that a single-party regime did not govern the country in isolation from society and totally neglected public opinion. On the contrary, its political hegemony and political authoritarianism required constant consolidation and validation. The letters providing subjective and local information about the MP candidates provide a window to make sense of the times' political repertoires, problems, and tools of the political bargaining by the people. The letters of advice and denunciation about the deputy candidates are highly ambiguous documents. The discourses used in these documents also reflect the ambiguities and complexities in the context in which they were written and how people adopted the widely circulated discourses of the government to advance their everyday, local advantages. To move beyond the victims of larger historical processes, this section seeks to provide a more fragmented history of popular political action practices.

The final empirical and analytical chapter of the thesis is about the letters of displaced people of Dersim. This section does not refer to an episodic change but rather seeks to expose the dual character of the regime in governmentality and implementation of violence against

different communities. In order to provide a more nuanced understanding of social history, racialized grievances, and exclusionary citizenship codes, the third empirical chapter (Chapter 5) benefited from the self-narrations – letters – of the displaced people. By comparing two different political and racialized structures through personal letters and petitions, the aim was to adopt analytical categories to explore the power asymmetries and racialized citizenship codes towards distinct communities. The displaced Dersimi community's letters are vital in highlighting the survivors' voices and insights rather than reflecting the dominant state tones. This chapter also refrains from reproducing the conventional “victimhood” analyses, approaching all of the survivors as single and static identities without any past and personalized trajectories. Through analyzing “gray zones” and response narratives of the exiled people, the study attempted to discover the margins of innocent victims and active subjects resisting dispossession and reordering lives by using letters to the authorities. Although the community in Dersim was exposed to brutal violence and displacement, it should not lead to the perspective that these people only complied with the consequences and did not articulate any response tactics.

Through this thesis, a renewed perspective and approach is articulated to explore the making of modern Turkey by investigating ordinary people's self-narrations. Apart from the social history studies presented on the early Republican era, this study claims that understanding the power asymmetries of society and its historicization cannot be done without conceptualizing these asymmetries. In other words, when society is viewed as a uniform whole, ignoring its power hierarchies and the ways dominant ideologies and discourses circulate, it is often assigned a “subaltern position.” This oversimplified view can obscure the Republic's superior citizenship codes and how people internalized them, leading to misunderstandings and a loss of historical context.

The self is both contextual and reflexive. Therefore, ordinary people's letters and petitions are both subjects of and subjects to power, and their history is interconnected with structural themes. Throughout this thesis, one of my main attempts was to indicate that letter writing is a social,

political, and cultural practice rather than a site of facts. This study aims to initiate a historical inquiry by analyzing the narrative formulaic repertoires used by diverse communities to negotiate their conditions and the use of epistolary models. The research shows how founding policies, ideologies, and discourses shaped individuals as they bargained with the state by examining self-narrations such as letters, petitions, and denunciation letters. Instead of examining how citizenship codes were constructed by ethnicity and religion through the discourses of political elites, legal texts, and media outlets closely intertwined with the state vision, this study seeks to reveal the exclusionary and supremacist dual regime by engaging with the documents crafted by the masses.



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