

## INTERVIEW

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### **The Editor of the France-Armenie (Laurent L.)**

For our readers, could you tell us in a nutshell what are the Dersimis specific features when compared to Kurds and Turks?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

The identity of Dersim (-li), the Kızılbash/Alevi culture and the Dimilki language (also called Kırmancki or Zazaki) are the most distinctive features of the Dersimis in comparison with the Kurds and Turks.

Dersimis' close relationship with the Armenians and their extended hand of friendship to them at the times of the massacres can also be mentioned.

Dersimis are Kızılbash. They are not Muslim while Turks and Kurds are.

Dersimis have been under the siege of Islam for centuries since the Çaldıran War, which is the starting point of the Dersim Question. They had been massacred time and again until 1938 simply because they were not Muslim. Almost all the Muslim peoples around them have to a degree been involved in these massacres alongside the Ottoman and Turkish states. This is one of the reasons for which Dersimis consider themselves as a separate people from the rest. They had to for centuries close their doors to the neighbouring communities and live an isolated life from them. There is no need to mention that along this centuries long way they have established variety of institutions of their own. In terms of their ethnical composition Dersimis are not of course pure. There are a variety of ethnical elements in their midst, of which the Dimilki speaking component comes first. Dimilki is not a dialect of Kurdish as alleged by the Kurdish nationalists. It is a language on its own. This is also the main language of the Dersimis' oral tradition. Dersimis' national traditions on their origins differs from that of Turks and Kurds.

Briefly speaking the historical, religious, linguistic and cultural differences between Dersimis and the Kurds or Turks are great.

The Dersimi are the people who are usually called "Kurdish Alevis" by outsiders.

It is a mistake which must be corrected.

The term "Kurdish Alevis" neither corresponds with the historical facts nor with the oral tradition or the self-definition of the people of Dersim.

### **Editor**

What are the social (religious and/or political) structures of the Dersim people?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

If we limit ourselves with the Inner Dersim, where the facts can be seen more clearly, the social history of the country from the Çaldıran War (1514) to 1938 can be considered under two headings.

These are the tribal and class stages.

The Inner Dersim under the siege of its Muslim neighbours had for centuries until 1938 been an autonomous society based upon the tribe and the ocak (the Kızılbash churches). The main social units of the society during this period were the tribes and the extended families called "Çe" in the native language, i.e. Kırmancki/Dimilki. It was a communal type of society within the tribal borders, much more tolerant than İslam. It was a commune with the humanitarian and egalitarian values.

The main Dersimi values, which are inseparably connected with the identities of Dersim and Kızılbash, are inherited from this autonomous period.

The year 1938 is a turning point in recent history of Dersim.

The then Turkish government executed a program in order to settle "The Dersim Question" once and for all by using military force.

This was a genocide planned in advance.

Dersim has become an internal colony of the Turkish state and remained as such ever since. Dersim has thus been integrated into Turkish market economy and has been a target of an intensive turkification and İslamisation policy.

The authentic Dersimi society was eventually destroyed and a class society has begun to evolve in the inner parts of the country too. The Dersimi people have been differentiated into modern social classes in the past 50 years.

In spite of all this the culture of the earlier period are still very much alive.

The centrality of human beings in this culture are expressed in the following Kızılbash sayings:

-“We view the 72 nations through the same eyes”

-“Whatever it is you desire, look for it within yourself, not in Mecca, nor in Jerusalem”

-“Our Kible is the human being”

-“The greatest book one can read is a human being”

It is a criticism of the established world more than a religion. It stands against oppression and carries egalitarian elements under religious guise.

The position of women in Dersim society is different and freer than in neighbouring communities.

**The Dersimis who are also called Kızılbash:**

-Do not practice “namaz”,

-Do not go to mosques,

-Do not undertake the “hajj” pilgrimage to Mecca,

-Do not fast in the month of Ramadan,

-Do not believe in “Kuran”.

It is on this basis that after 1960's the Dersimis both joined the Turkish left and Kurdish movement in mass. This was a period when the newly emerging small intellectual strata was very much alienated from its own people, culture, language and history first by the state, later by the Turkish and Kurdish nationalisms hidden under the socialist and revolutionary rhetoric. It took more than twenty years before some Dersimi intellectuals in exile became aware of Dersim's distinct identity and the distinctiveness of Dersim question. Thus a Dersimi movement began to take shape in 1991 with the publication of a journal called “Desmala Sure”, whose views laid down the basis for PSD, “the Freedom Party of Dersim”, founded in 1997. Desmala Sure (PSD), is the mainstream Dersimi movement, which has continued to gain more and more ground ever since.

### **Editor**

Is there any Dersimis Diaspora as for the Armenians? What are the most commonly admitted figures for Dersimis in Dersim, in Turkey and abroad?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

There is a significant Dersimi diaspora in almost every largest cities of Turkey, as well as all over Europe, consantrated mainly in Germany. These diasporas have their own associations, gathered together under the Dersimi federations, such as TUDEF (The Federation of Tunceli Communities) in Turkey and FDG (The European Federation of Dersim Communities) in Europe.

There are of course some figures of Dersimis both in Dersim and Turkey, widely admitted in their fields, such as in politics, art, musik and so on.

The leaders of the 1937 Dersim resistance, Seyit Rıza and Alişer, are still the most admired Dersimi figures among the Dersimis.

### **Editor**

You told us that many Armenians took refuge in Dersim in the genocide time. What is the present memory of the Armenians for Dersimis? Is there any remnant presence of Armenians or traces there?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

There are some people of Armenian origins in the Dersimi make up. Part of them belong to the Early inhabitants of Dersim. Some Dersimi sub-tribes remember their Armenian origins. The rest of the Armenians are the ones that took refuge in Dersim between 1890's and 1915. A group of place names in Dersim are Armenian. The ruins of the Armenian churches in Dersim are still visited and revered. Some religious and cultural elements, such as the New Year event called Gağan(d), is believed to be Armenian. There are some striking similarities between certain practices among Dersim Alevis and that of Christians, such as Baptism, God-Brotherhood (Müsahiplik or Gülbang) and God's portion

(Hak Lokması).

Paulicians, who were accused of being related to Manicheanism and Mazdakism are closely related to Dersimis. As is known the Paulicians were known as a heretical Christian movement. They were the predecessors of the Babais of 13<sup>th</sup> century. And the Babais are a part of the Late Dersimis.

I think there is no need to mention the rest.

### **Editor**

Turkey's knowledge and experience brutally stopped after 1915 for Armenians. What occurred exactly then after for the Dersimis? And for the other minorities?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

After the 1915 Armenian Genocide a self rule had been established in the inner part of Dersim with the help and recognition of the Armenians and Russians. This self-rule didn't last long. The Russian withdrawal from the war and the Armenian defeat in the neighbouring areas like Erzincan and Erzurum left behind Dersimis alone, whose self-rule came to an end soon afterwards in 1918.

The First World War ended with the defeat of the Ottoman Empire. The leaders of the Unionists, the then Turkish rulers and predecessors of the Kemalists, left the country. The Mondros Armistice was signed. The conditions after the Armistice offered a new opportunity for the minorities to free themselves from the yoke of the Turks. The Dersimis alongside the Armenians and Greeks did their best to this end. The very reason for the emergence of the Kemalist Movement, that replaced the Unionists, was to prevent these minorities from the right to self determination.

The power vacuum in the East filled by the Kemalists in July 1919.

They have waged a bloody campaign ever since against the non-Turkish and non-Muslim elements, the Armenians, the Greeks and the Dersimis/Kızılbash. It was a deliberate and sustain war, in the course of which the resistance of the Dersimis/Kızılbash in 1920 (Kochgiri), 1926 (Koçan), 1930 (Pülümür) and 1937-1938, alongside the Zaza resistance of 1925 (Shaikh Sait) and Kurdish resistance of Zilan in 1926-1930 were ruthlessly suppressed one after another.

In each of the above mentioned events tens of thousands were massacred and thousands were forced into exile.

That's how the previously independent inner part of the Dersim has also been subdued and colonised by Turks.

In the 1937-38 Dersim Genocide which took place at a time when world attention was focused on the Second World War approximately 70.000 people were killed.

Thus the year 1938 became one of the most important dates in the Dersimis' calendar commemorated every year.

Hence the people of Dersim speak of "before and after the year 1938" whenever the recent history is concerned. What happened back then has been handed down to the later generations by their parents and grand-parents, who witnessed the onslaught, and of whom some are still alive. Furthermore the sites of the mass graves all over Dersim are well known and can easily be located if and when need be. The ruins of the country's cultural heritage including churches belonged to the people's Christian or Armenian component are still visible.

A search for justice has already began.

By launching "the Initiative of Dersim 38" in March 2005, the Dersimis aim to take the Genocide issue to the international forums.

People wish to see the justice served.

### **Editor**

Today, what is surviving from your original culture? How far Dersimis are assimilated?

### **Seyfi Cengiz**

I think in the 2<sup>nd</sup> question I have partly answered this by saying "In spite of all this the culture of the earlier period are still very much alive".

Although the assimilation is deepening, the resistance against it are getting stronger too. But by this

time Dersimis are under a dual threat.  
We are witnessing a kurdification policy by the hands of PKK beside the turkification.  
There is no doubt that the PKK is an occupying force in Dersim.  
The Turkish Army and PKK have close relations with one another.  
Both of them are acting together against the Dersimi cause.  
Dersimis are being assimilated both by Turkish state and Kurdish nationalists.

**Editor**

How far are you considering that your political struggle is common with the Kurdish one? And the Armenian one?

**Seyfi Cengiz**

Dersimis, Armenians and Kurds are all fighting for almost the same rights. It is a just struggle. They are demanding their rights from the same state. This is the common ground for cooperation. But this common ground in itself does not unfortunately bring them closer to one another. For example, we the Dersimis have always supported the Armenian and Kurdish national rights. This is still the case. But we take this stand while our very existence and equal rights are not yet even recognised by the Armenians and Kurds. It is simply unfair. As long as this is the case no one can expect the better relation and close cooperation.

**Editor**

Do you currently see some ground for hope with regard to the relative liberalisation of Turkey? If yes, what is your assessment about the final outcome for your People and its socio-political rights?

**Seyfi Cengiz**

The AKP, the ruling party of Turkey has almost lost its motivation for the EU membership. It does no longer mention reforms or a new constitution. It has stopped resisting the army. There seems to be an alliance now between AKP and Turkish Armed Forces at least on minority issues. Even the Turkish liberals who very much relied upon AKP for liberalisation and democratisation has now turned against it. The effects of the global economic crises on Turkish economy must be taken into consideration too.

I am therefore not too hopfull for further liberalisation.  
Turkey's future direction is difficult to guess in advance.  
Despite all of these I am not pessimist about the final outcome.  
We will survive and overcome the difficulties to achieve our aims.

**Editor**

Is the EU accession a matter of hope for you as regard to human rights or rather a matter of concern as regard to the definitive consecration of Turkey?

**Seyfi Cengiz**

I am and have always been in favour of Turkey's EU accession though it hasn't been seen to me as a probability. Whatever the liklihood of Turkey's EU membership may be the outcome of Turkey's closer relation with the EU would certainly be in the interests of human rights, minority rights and democracy in Turkey.

**Editor**

Do you want to deliver a message to the Armenians and specifically to the Armenian Diaspora?

**Seyfi Cengiz**

I like to say this to the Armenian brothers:  
There are reasons more than enough to re-establish close relations between Armenians and Dersimis.  
Armenians and Dersimis have a long common history.  
Part of Early Dersimis are known as "Armenians".

There are ties of kinship between the two.

Both Armenians and Dersimis are the victims of the genocides.

At the time of the Armenian genocide Dersimis were the only people who stood with the Armenians.

Dersimis are the first people who named the 1915 as "Genocide" ("Tertele" in their own language).

The 1915 and the 1938 are the first genocides of the 20th century in Dersimis' view point.

There were Armenians too among the victims of the 1937-1938 Dersim genocide.

From 1860's until 1918 Dersimis' national demands had been supported by the Armenians.

There was a close relation between the Dersimi and Armenian national movements and their leaders.

Dersimis, who have for centuries been sieged by Muslim world, have always seen themselves much closer to Christianity than Islam.

To sum up, it is the Dersimis if our Armenian brothers looking for a strategic ally in the region.

The facts mentioned above are the reasons more than enough to revive the historical ties between the two.

I hope we will see more significant steps to be taken in that direction by our Armenian brothers in the immediate future.