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Genocide in Kurdistan? The Suppression of the Dersim Rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the Chemical War Against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)¹

— *For Ismail Besikçi*

Even as these lines are being written, Kurdish leaders in Iraq are appealing to the United Nations to prevent the genocide of their people at the hands of Saddam Hussein's army. In the aftermath of the Iraqi defeat in the Gulf War ("Operation Desert Storm"), the Kurdish population of northern Iraq had risen in rebellion against Saddam Hussein's government, as had the Arab Shiite population of the south. The rebellion appears to have been a largely spontaneous reaction to the rout of the army and to George Bush's call upon the people of Iraq to overthrow their dictator. It even surprised the Kurdish political organizations, which were relatively late in attempting to provide leadership for the rebellion. The scope of the rising was unprecedented; the Kurds took control of all towns and cities in the north, and the central government infrastructure collapsed. The successes of the Kurds, and their hopes of helping establish another regime in Iraq, lasted only a few weeks. Although the army had been severely beaten in the battle for Kuwait, enough destructive power remained to suppress all internal unrest. After putting down rebellions in the south, troops and helicopter gunships moved in on Kurdistan. The lightly armed and ill-organized Kurds were no match for the well-equipped elite troops, who proceeded with the utmost brutality. The cities were reoccupied at the cost of enormous destruction and untold numbers of civilian casualties. Most of the population fled into the mountains further north and east, where there is no infrastructure to support them. They are being mercilessly pursued by the army and pounded by helicopter gunships. Hundreds of thousands are massed along the borders of Turkey and Iran, hoping to be let in, as yet in vain. If aid is not forthcoming immediately, large numbers of Kurds will die of exposure and hunger, if they are not killed by Saddam's troops.

The question whether the present atrocities against the Iraqi Shiites and the Kurds warrant the term "genocide" is painfully irrelevant to them; what difference does it make whether they are massacred "as such" or simply massacred?² Genocide or not, the

¹ [An early version of this article was presented at the conference "Genocide: the Theory — the Reality", held on 16 February 1991 at Yale Law School. It was rewritten for publication in March-April 1991; the Postscript was added in early 1993. I wish to thank George J. Andreopoulos and especially Diane F. Orentlicher for their comments on the first version.]

² The words "as such" refer to the definition of genocide according to the 1948 Convention: ". . . genocide means any of the following acts committed with the intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

international community has shown itself unwilling to actively intervene and stop the killing; the best that may be hoped for is an international relief effort on behalf of the survivors. We cannot evade the embarrassing question whether these massacres could have been prevented or stopped before they assumed these massive dimensions. The perpetrators, obviously, are Saddam Hussein and his regime, but responsibility lies also with the anti-Saddam alliance, which called for rebellion and then looked on passively while Saddam took his revenge. But even in the absence of direct involvement, does not the international community have a moral responsibility to prevent such wholesale slaughter? Can this responsibility possibly hinge on the legal nuance of a definition of genocide? As long as nonintervention in any country's "internal affairs" remains a sacrosanct principle without further qualification, attempts to revise the definition of the term genocide are, I am afraid, bound to remain a futile intellectual exercise.

It is too early now to give a balanced account of the catastrophe brought upon the Kurdish people in these recent days, the worst in its sorrowful history. In this chapter I shall discuss two earlier massacres in Kurdistan that have by some been called genocide. Both took place in the course of the suppression of Kurdish rebellions, the first in Turkey, more than half a century ago, the other more recently in Iraq, where Saddam Hussein bombed his disobedient Kurdish subjects with chemical warheads.

Both massacres are borderline cases. While there are those who argue that they constitute genocide by the terms of the 1948 Convention, others (including, hesitantly, myself) are reluctant to use that term. It will be hard, on the one hand, to prove that in these two cases the state intended "to destroy, in whole or in part, [the Kurds] as such." On the other hand, these were not simply punitive actions carried out against armed insurgents. In fact, these massacres were only the tip of the iceberg and have to be understood within the context of the two regimes' overall policies toward the Kurds. These policies amount to variant forms of *ethnocide* — in the case of Turkey, deliberate destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity by forced assimilation, and in Iraq destruction of Kurdish social structure and its socio-economic base. Both regimes presented these policies as fundamentally benevolent forms of engineered modernization, in the Turkish case even as a civilizing mission.

The Kurds: Geographical and Political Situation

After the Arabs, Turks, and Persians, the Kurds are the fourth most numerous people of the Middle East, numbering at present around twenty million. When after the First World War the map of the Middle East was redrawn, the Kurds ended up divided over four or five countries. About half of them now live in Turkey, some four million in Iraq, five million in Iran, and almost a million in Syria, while there are smaller Kurdish enclaves in the Soviet Union. Kurdistan, "the land of the Kurds," is not the name of a state but of the mountainous region where the Kurds have for centuries lived. It had long been a natural buffer zone between the two great Middle Eastern empires, the Persian and the Ottoman; after the collapse of the latter it was divided up among the successor states. Nationalism developed relatively late among the Kurds, which is one reason why they failed to establish a state of their own.³ Islamic sentiment prevailed in

³ With the exception of the short-lived Republic of Mahabad, which existed for less than a year in a part of Iranian Kurdistan in 1946.

and after the Great War, leading many of the Kurds to ally themselves with the Turks against the Christian powers, and resulting in the incorporation of a large part of Kurdistan into the new Turkey. Southern Kurdistan, occupied by the British, was added by them to newly created Iraq while Iran consolidated its control of the eastern part.

In each of these states, the Kurds were soon in conflict with the central governments. From the 1920s on, there were numerous Kurdish rebellions in Iran, Iraq, and Turkey, all of limited geographical scope. In many cases these were primarily reactions to the imposition of central government control or to concrete government policies, but the rebellions had clear Kurdish nationalist overtones. The governments, in turn, had recourse to increasingly repressive policies vis-à-vis the Kurds, aimed at destroying their potential for separatism. The conflicts were most serious in Turkey and in Republican Iraq, which were based on Turkish and Arab nationalism, respectively.

A general survey of the Kurdish movement and of the treatment of the Kurds by the governments of these countries is beyond the scope of this chapter.⁴ I shall restrict myself below to a discussion of only two cases of severe repression possibly constituting genocide. In both cases I shall begin with a description of the physical violence first, and then analyze the context of government policy and Kurdish activities in which it took place. This will, I hope, allow me to throw light on the complex nexus of motivation and intent to destroy.

An Almost Forgotten Massacre: Dersim, 1937-38

In 1990 a book was published in Turkey that by its very title accused Turkey's one-party regime of the 1930s of having committed genocide in the Kurdish district of Dersim.⁵ The book was immediately banned and did not generate the debate its author, the sociologist Ismail Beşikçi, had hoped for. Beşikçi was the first, and for a long time the only, Turkish intellectual to publicly criticize Turkey's official ideology and policies regarding the Kurds, beginning with his 1969 study of the socioeconomic conditions of eastern Turkey through a whole series of increasingly polemical works. He paid a heavy price for his moral and intellectual courage; all his books were banned, and he spent more than ten years in prison for writing them. Although my conclusions may be slightly different from his, I wish to acknowledge my indebtedness to his committed scholarship, and dedicate this chapter to him.

The massacres with which Beşikçi's book deals occurred in the course of Turkey's pacification of the rebellious Kurdish district of Dersim (presently called Tunceli) in 1937 and 1938. The events represent one of the blackest pages in the history of Republican Turkey, gracefully passed over in silence or deliberately misrepresented by

⁴ The best general historical surveys of the Kurdish national movement are: Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish Nationalist Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Ph.D. thesis, Syracuse University, 1960), Chris Kutschera, *Le mouvement national kurde* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), and David MacDowall, *A modern history of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris 1996). Lucien Rambout, *Les Kurdes et le droit: Des textes, des faits* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1947), though dated, is still useful on the 1920s and 1930s, as is Hassan Arfa, *The Kurds: An Historical and Political Study* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966). The author of the last-named work, a retired Iranian general, took himself part in a punitive campaign against Kurds.

⁵ Ismail Beşikçi, *Tunceli Kanunu (1935) ve Dersim Jenosidi* [The 1935 law concerning Tunceli and the genocide of Dersim] (Istanbul: Belge yayinlari, 1990).

most historians, foreign as well as Turkish.⁶ As the campaign against Dersim went on, the authorities made sure that little information about it reached the outside world. Diplomatic observers in Ankara were aware that large military operations were taking place, but had little idea of what was actually going on. After the events, however, the British consul at Trebizond, the diplomatic post closest to Dersim, spoke of brutal and indiscriminate violence and made an explicit comparison with the Armenian massacres of 1915. "Thousands of Kurds," he wrote, "including women and children, were slain; others, mostly children, were thrown into the Euphrates; while thousands of others in less hostile areas, who had first been deprived of their cattle and other belongings, were deported to vilayets (provinces) in Central Anatolia. It is now stated that the Kurdish question no longer exists in Turkey."⁷

I shall first, using the few available sources, attempt to give an impression of the situation in Dersim prior to the pacification campaign and sketch the events of 1937 and 1938. Then I shall attempt to show that what we are dealing with was not merely the brutal suppression of an internal rebellion but part of a wider policy directed against the Kurds as such.

Dersim is an inaccessible district of high, snowcapped mountains, narrow valleys, and deep ravines in central Eastern Turkey. It was inhabited by a large number of small tribes, eking out a marginal existence by animal husbandry, horticulture, and gathering forest products. Their total numbers were, by the mid-1930s, estimated at 65,000 to 70,000.⁸ Dersim was a culturally distinct part of Kurdistan, partly due to ecological-geographical factors, partly to a combination of linguistic and religious peculiarities. Some of the tribes spoke Kurdish proper, but most spoke another, related language known as Zaza. All adhered to the heterodox Alevi sect, which separated them socially from the Sunni Kurds living to the east and south (among whom there were both Zaza and Kurdish speakers). Although there are Alevis in many other parts of Turkey, those of Dersim constitute a distinct group, with different beliefs and practices.⁹

⁶ There is not a single word about the events in the two standard texts, Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), and Stanford J. Shaw and Ezel Kural Shaw, *History of the Ottoman Empire and of Modern Turkey*, vol. 2, *The Rise of Modern Turkey 1808-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). Turkish authors referring to the Dersim campaign prefer to gloss over the massacres. Thus, the retired general Muhsin Batur mentions in his memoirs that he took part, as a young lieutenant, in the 1938 Dersim campaign but refuses to speak out: "I beg my readers to be excused, I shall not write this page of my life" (Muhsin Batur, *Anılar ve görüşler: üç dönemin perde arkası* [Memoirs and views: behind the scene in three periods] (Istanbul: Milliyet, 1985), quoted in Musa Anter, *Anılarım* [My memoirs] (Istanbul: Doz, 1990), 44.

⁷ Report from the Consul in Trabzon, 27 September 1938 (Public Record Office, London, FO 371 files, document E5961/69/44).

⁸ This figure was given in December 1935 by then minister of the interior Sükrü Kaya (quoted in Beşikçi, *Tunceli kanunu* (1935), 10). It referred to the province of Tunceli. The historical district of Dersim was in fact larger than Tunceli, and included parts of neighboring Sivas, Erzincan, and Elazığ provinces. This may explain why another contemporary author gives the much higher population figure of 150,000, apparently referring to larger Dersim (Naşit Ulug, *Tunceli medeniyete açılıyor* [Tunceli is opened up for civilization] (Istanbul: Cumhuriyet Matbaası, 1939, 144). The military campaigns were mainly restricted to the province of Tunceli, and therefore I prefer the former figures.

⁹ Interestingly (and perhaps of some political significance), many of the Dersim Kurds are partly of Armenian descent — Dersim used to have a large Armenian population. Even well before the Armenian massacres, many local Armenians voluntarily assimilated, becoming Alevi Kurds (L.

Dersim was, by the mid-1930s, the last part of Turkey that had not been effectively brought under central government control. The tribes of Dersim had never been subdued by any previous government; the only law they recognized was traditional tribal law. Tribal chieftains and religious leaders wielded great authority over the commoners, whom they often exploited economically. They were not opposed to government as such, as long as it did not interfere too much in their affairs. Many chieftains, in fact, strengthened their position by establishing close relations with the military and police officers appointed to the region. There was a tradition of refusing to pay taxes — but then there was little that could be taxed, as the district was desperately poor. Young men evaded military service when they could, but by 1935 a considerable proportion of them did in fact serve in the Turkish army.

There were perpetual conflicts between the tribes, often taking the form of protracted feuds. Many of the tribesmen carried arms, and raids against neighboring tribes were not uncommon. The local military officials were often drawn into the tribal conflicts too, as some chieftains accused their enemies of conspiring against the state. At the same time there was Kurdish nationalist agitation among the tribes, carried out by the educated sons of leading families.¹⁰ In 1936 Dersim was placed under military government, with the express aim of pacifying and "civilizing" it. The tribes' response to the modernization brought by the state, consisting of roads, bridges, and police posts, was ambiguous. Some chieftains sought accommodation with the military authorities, others resented this interference in their former independence. By early 1937, the authorities believed, or had been led to believe, that a major rebellion was at hand, a show of resistance against the pacification program, instigated by nationalists. The person said to be the chief conspirator was a religious leader, Seyyit Riza. Five tribes (out of around one hundred) were said to be involved in the conspiracy.

The military campaign against Dersim was mounted in response to a relatively minor incident, and it would seem that the army had been waiting for a direct reason to punish the tribes. One day in March 1937, a strategic wooden bridge was burned down and telephone lines cut. Seyyit Riza and the tribes associated with him were suspected. The army may have believed this to be the beginning of the expected rebellion. One Turkish source mentions that there was around the same time another minor incident elsewhere in Kurdistan and suggests coordination by Kurdish nationalists.¹¹ The official history of the military campaign, however, considers the incident as of a local nature only.¹² It is hard, in retrospect, to separate intertribal violence from deliberate rebellion against the state. One pro-Turkish source in fact suggests that the suspicions against Seyyit Riza

Molyneux-Seel, "A Journey in Dersim," *The Geographical Journal* 44, no. 1 [1914]: 49-68). This has left traces both in the local Zaza dialects and in popular belief.

¹⁰ According to a detailed military study of the events, Dersim-born Armenians, who had survived the Armenian massacres and lived in Syria, returned to the area together with Kurdish nationalists and successfully incited the tribes to rebellion. Reşat Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar (1924-1938)* [Rebellions in the Republic of Turkey, 1924-1938] (Ankara: T. C. Genelkurmay Başkanlığı Harp Tarihi Dairesi, 1972), 377.

¹¹ Mahmut Gologlu, *Tek-partili Cumhuriyet, 1931-1938* [The one-party republic, 1931-1938] (Ankara, 1974), 243.

¹² Hallı, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 379.

were based on denunciations by his local enemies.¹³ In any case, the army had its warrant for intervention. The first troops, sent in to arrest the suspects, were stopped by armed tribesmen. The confrontations soon escalated. When the tribes kept refusing to surrender their leaders, a large campaign was mounted. Military operations to subdue the region lasted throughout the summer of 1937. In September, Seyyit Riza and his closest associates surrendered, but the next spring the operations were resumed with even greater force. They must have been of unprecedented violence and brutality.

The few existing accounts of the events are necessarily partisan. One important book was written by a local man, the veterinarian and nationalist activist Nuri Dersimi, who was involved in the early stages of the rebellion, and who lost many relatives in the military reprisals. The book he published fourteen years later in Syrian exile is obviously colored by his nationalist views and may contain certain cosmetic corrections, but seems on the whole reliable.¹⁴ The best I can do is to quote verbatim some passages.

When the Turkish troops began hunting down the rebellious tribes, the men gave battle, while the women and children hid in deep caves. "Thousands of these women and children perished," Dersimi writes, "because the army bricked up the entrances of the caves. These caves are marked with numbers on the military maps of the area. At the entrances of other caves, the military lit fires to cause those inside to suffocate. Those who tried to escape from the caves were finished off with bayonets. A large proportion of the women and girls of the Kureyshian and Bakhtiyar [two rebel tribes] threw themselves from high cliffs into the Munzur and Parchik ravines, in order not to fall into the Turks' hands."¹⁵

The Kirgan, a tribe that had opted for submission to the Turkish army and broken with the rebels, was not treated with greater clemency: "Because the Kirgan trusted the Turks they remained in their villages, while the rebel Bakhtiyar withdrew. As a result, they were destroyed. Their chieftains were tortured and then shot dead. All who tried to escape or sought refuge with the army were rounded up. The men were shot on the spot, the women and children were locked into haystacks, that were set fire to."¹⁶

When winter approached and the army could not continue its operations, it offered a cease-fire and a peaceful settlement with the rebels, while promising to leave the other tribes in peace and to give compensation for the damage done.¹⁷ These promises served to lure the chief rebel leader, Seyyit Riza, into the town of Erzincan (whose governor he

¹³ Hıdır Öztürk, *Tarihimizde Tunceli ve Ermeni mezalimi* [The place of Tunceli in our history and the atrocities by the Armenians] (Ankara: Türk Kültürünü Araştırma Enstitüsü, 1984), 31-36.

¹⁴ M. Nuri Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim* [Dersim in the history of Kurdistan] (Aleppo, 1952). Dersimi left the area when it had become clear that the new military governor of Dersim considered him to be the major instigator of the rebellion. This was before the military operations proper had begun. Dersimi was therefore not an eyewitness of the massacres; on the whole his account seems factually correct, although his figures may be somewhat exaggerated. Possible distortions in the book concern Dersimi's own role, and his desire to depict the Dersim population as more nationalist than it actually was. The Dersim rebellion shows more the signs of traditional tribal resistance to government interference than anything so modern as the wish for a separate state.

¹⁵ Translated from Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 285-86. Among the girls who thus committed suicide was the author's daughter Fato (ibid., 319).

¹⁶ Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 286-87.

¹⁷ According to Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 288, the army also pretended to acquiesce in the rebels' demands, but he does not explain what these demands were.

knew and trusted). He was arrested, together with his retinue of some fifty men. They were summarily tried and eleven of them, including Seyyit Riza, were immediately executed.¹⁸

In the spring of 1938 military operations resumed on an even larger scale. The Karabal, Ferhad and Pilvank tribes, which surrendered, were annihilated. Women and children of these tribes were locked into haysheds and burnt alive. Men and women of the Pilvank and Aşagi Abbas tribes, that had always remained loyal to the government, were lined up in the In and Inciga valleys and shot. The women and girls in Irgan village were rounded up, sprinkled with kerosine and set alight. Khech, the chief village of the Sheykh Mehmedan tribe, which had already surrendered, was attacked at night and all inhabitants were killed by machine gun and artillery fire. The inhabitants of Hozat town and the Karaca tribe, men, women and children, were brought near the military camp outside Hozat and killed by machine gun. (...) Thousands of women and girls threw themselves into the Munzur river. (...) The entire area was covered by a thick mist caused by the artillery fire and air bombardments with poisonous gas. (...) Even young men from Dersim who were doing their military service in the Turkish army were taken from their regiments and shot.¹⁹

Another Dersim-born Kurdish nationalist, Sait Kirmizitoprak, published in 1970 under the pseudonym of Dr. Sivan a history of the Kurdish movement, in which he devotes a few pages to the Dersim massacres.²⁰ Though clearly indebted to Dersimi's book, he adds some information from oral sources. On the 1938 campaign he writes (in free translation):

In the spring of 1938, the government offered amnesty to all who would surrender their arms. The Karabal, Ferhad, Pilvank, Sheykh Mehmedan and Karaca tribes, who responded to this call, were entirely annihilated. In a later stage, they also killed most of the Kureyshan tribe of Mazgirt district, the Yusufan and the Bakhtiyar tribes, not sparing women, old men and children. They were killed en masse, in many cases by the bayonet. Towards the end of summer, the Hormekan, Kureyshan and Alan of Nazimiye district, and part of the Bamasuran of Mazgirt were also annihilated, by poison gas bombs as well as by bayonets. Their corpses were doused with kerosene and set alight.²¹

¹⁸ The trial and executions were carried out with great haste because all had to be settled before President Atatürk, who was already on his way, visited the region. The officials in charge did not wish to embarrass the president by having the local people petition him for mercy. The events are narrated, with apparent feelings of shame, by the man who was ordered to organize the summary trial and executions, the later foreign minister Ihsan Sabri Çağlayangil, in his memoirs, *Anılarım* (Istanbul: Yılmaz, 1990), 45-55.

¹⁹ Dersimi, *Kürdistan tarihinde Dersim*, 318-20. Dersimi mentions especially his own brother, who then had a clerical job at Diyarbakir air base, and who was taken away to be shot, together with two friends.

²⁰ Dr. Sivan, *Kürt millet hareketleri ve Irak'ta Kürdistan ihtilali* [Kurdish national movements and the revolution of Kurdistan in Iraq] (Stockholm, 1975; previously published clandestinely in Turkey in 1970).

²¹ Sivan, *Kürt millet hareketleri*, 98.

Improbable though it may seem, these accounts are to a large extent confirmed by the documents published in the official military history of the campaign.²² Only the claim that the army used poison gas in the 1938 offensive, made by both Dersimi and Şivan, cannot be substantiated. At several instances the reports mention the arrest of women and children, but elsewhere we read of indiscriminate killing of humans and animals. With professional pride, reports list how many "bandits" and dependents were "annihilated," and how many villages and fields were burned. Groups who were hiding in caves were entirely wiped out. The body count in these reports (in some engagements a seemingly exact number like 76, in others "the entire band of Haydaran tribesmen and part of the Demenan") adds up to something between three and seven thousand, while tens of villages are reported destroyed. In seventeen days of the 1938 offensive alone, 7,954 persons were reported killed or caught alive;²³ the latter were definitely a minority. According to these official reports, then, almost 10 percent of the entire population of Tunceli was killed. The Kurds claim that their losses were even higher.

Genocide or Ethnocide?

The killing in Dersim was undoubtedly massive, indiscriminate, and excessively brutal, but was it genocide? Was the killing done "with intent to destroy, in whole or in part" the Kurds (or only the people of Dersim) "as such"? Or was it only the suppression of an armed rebellion, with considerable overkill? I shall try to show that it was neither. There was never a policy of physically destroying the Kurds or part of them as such. There was, however, in the Dersim campaign, a deliberate intent to destroy rebels and potential rebels, and this was part of a general policy directed toward the Kurds as such. But this policy is more appropriately termed ethnocide, the destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity.

Intent to destroy may be inferred from the wording of the Secret Decision of the Council of Ministers on the Punitive Expedition to Dersim of 4 May 1937.²⁴ The decision envisages a final solution to the perpetual rebellions in Dersim. "This time," it reads, "the people in the rebellious districts will be rounded up and deported." But then it orders the army to "render those who have used arms or are still using them once and for all harmless on the spot, to completely, destroy their villages and to remove their families." Given the fact that almost every man in Dersim was known to carry arms, this reads like a brief to kill all men in the area.

It is not immediately obvious from official sources that the Dersim campaign was directed against the Kurds as such. There are no explicit references to Kurds, because the Kurds by that time had already been defined out of existence. The military reports call all people of Dersim indiscriminately "bandits" (*haydut*). Interior Minister Şükrü

²² Halli, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 365-480. This important source gives a detailed, day-by-day account of the military operations, prepared by the War History Department attached to the Turkish General Staff. The book is not publicly available; it was printed in a very limited edition, and most of these few copies were moreover requested back and destroyed within a short time after publication. Friends who prefer to remain anonymous provided me with photocopies of the section on Dersim. Some of the key passages are also quoted verbatim in Besikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*.

²³ Halli, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 478.

²⁴ Published in Besikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 67.

Kaya, however, had found it necessary to inform the National Assembly that the people of Dersim were "authentic Turks," thereby implicitly mentioning the unmentionable ethnic dimension of the Dersim question.²⁵ The problem was, of course, that most people in Dersim were not yet aware of their Turkishness. Many did not know any Turkish at all, and the authorities had to communicate with them through interpreters;²⁶ airplanes dropped leaflets "in the local language."²⁷

Dersimi and Şivan, both local men, are at pains to show that the Dersim rebellion was in fact a Kurdish nationalist rebellion, and that this was the reason for the brutality of the campaign. But they appear to project too much of their own sentiments on the rebels, who acted out of narrower interests and loyalties than lofty national ideals. The rebellion seems to have been primarily a response to government interference in the tribes' affairs, resistance to what the government saw as its "civilizing mission."

The regime presented this mission — begun well before the rebellion — as a determined struggle against backwardness and the oppression of the people by feudal lords, tribal chieftains, and reactionary religious leaders. One observer close to government circles enthused, soon after the Dersim campaign, on its civilizing effects:

the tribal chieftains, the mischievous religious leaders and their accomplices have been caught and deported to the west. The successful military operations have once and for all uprooted any possibility for a future bandit movement in Tunceli. Dersim is from now on liberated and saved. There remains no place in Dersim now where the army has not set foot, where the officers and commanders have not applied their intelligence and energies. Once again the army has, in performing this great task, earned the eternal gratitude of the Turkish nation.²⁸

In practice, however, the thrust of the government effort, including the operations in Dersim, was not so much directed against "feudalism" and backwardness as against Kurdish ethnic identity. The brutal Dersim campaign was but the culmination of a series of measures taken in order to forcibly assimilate the Kurds, as I shall presently show.

The Kurdish Policies of Republican Turkey

The Republic of Turkey, proclaimed in 1923, owes its existence to the War of Independence fought by Mustafa Kemal and his associates against the various other nations claiming parts of the former Ottoman territories in the wake of the First World

²⁵ When presenting a special law for Dersim in 1935, two years before the campaigns, the minister (quoted in Besikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 10) declared that the people there were "a group originally belonging to the Turkish race" (*aslen Türk unsuruna mensup bir kitledir*). Destruction of Kurdish ethnic identity was paradoxically legitimated by the denial of its existence (see below).

²⁶ Çağlayan, *Anılarım*, 47.

²⁷ Halli, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 390.

²⁸ Ulug, *Tunceli*, 159 (slightly abbreviated). Nasit Hakki Ulug was a deputy for the province of Kütahya in the Grand National Assembly and had earlier written a journalistic account on "feudal" relations in Dersim and the need for their abolishment. He shows no interest in the human cost of the "civilizing" process, and mentions not a single killing.

War—notably Greeks, Armenians, French, and Italians. A "National Pact" defined the extent of territory for which the independence movement fought as the former Ottoman lands inhabited by non-Arab Muslims — in other words, by Turks and Kurds, for these were the major non-Arab Muslim groups in the Empire. Kurds took part in this struggle along with the Turks, and the movement's leaders in fact often spoke of a Turkish-Kurdish brotherhood, and of the new state as being made up of Turks and Kurds. In January 1923, Mustafa Kemal still suggested there might be local autonomy for Kurdish-inhabited areas,²⁹ but his policies soon changed drastically. The very fact that the new republic was called "Turkey" (a borrowing from European languages) already indicated that some citizens were going to be more equal than others.³⁰

The new republican elite, careful to preserve their hard-won victory, were obsessed with threats to territorial integrity and with imperialist ploys to sow division. In this regard, the Kurds were perceived to be a serious risk. There was a Kurdish independence movement, albeit a weak one, which had initially received some encouragement from the British. The call for Muslim unity, sounded during the War of Independence, had been more effective among the Kurds than Kurdish nationalist agitation, but when Turkey set on a course of secularization the very basis of this unity disappeared. The Kemalists attempted to replace Islam as the unifying factor by a Turkey-based nationalism. In so doing, they provoked the Kurdish nationalist response that they feared.

Some policies caused grievances among much wider circles than those of committed Kurdish nationalists alone. In the World War, numerous Kurds had fled to the west when Russian armies occupied eastern Anatolia. As early as 1919, the government decided to disperse them over the western provinces, in groups not larger than three hundred each, so that they would not constitute more than 5 percent of the population in any one locality. Some Kurds who wished to return to Kurdistan were prevented from doing so.³¹ In the new Turkey, all modern education was henceforth to be in Turkish; moreover, traditional Islamic schools (*medrese*) were closed down in 1924. These two radical changes effectively denied the Kurds access to education. Other secularizing measures (abolition of the caliphate, the office of *shaikh al-islam*, and the religious courts; all in 1924) caused much resentment in traditional Muslim circles. Kurdish

²⁹ When the Istanbul weekly *Ikbin'e Dogru* ("Towards 2000") published in its 6 November 1988 issue the minutes of a press meeting where Mustafa Kemal had spoken of autonomy, it created a sensation in Turkey. The magazine was immediately banned for "separatist propaganda," but a court decision later lifted the ban.

³⁰ At the time of the common struggle for national independence, the territory to be defended was not called "Turkey" but "Anatolia and Rumeli" (the traditional names for the Asian and European parts of the present country).

³¹ British intelligence report on the situation in Eastern Turkey after the war, Foreign Office files, series FO 371, 1919, item 44A/112202/3050 (Public Record Office, London). FO 371, 1919: 44A/112202/3050 (Public Record Office, London); A. Yamulki, *Kürdistan ve Kürd ihtilalleri* (Kurdistan and the Kurdish rebellions) (Baghdad, 1946), 70-71. The latter author mentions the case of a tribal chieftain who wished to collect his tribespeople and return with them to Kurdistan, and was prevented from doing so. Such cases were later mentioned among the major grievances leading to the first large Kurdish rebellion; see Martin van Bruinessen, "Vom Osmanismus zum Separatismus: religiöse und ethnische Hintergründe der Rebellion des Scheich Said," in *Islam und Politik in der Türkei*, ed. Jochen Blaschke and Martin van Bruinessen (Berlin: Express Edition, 1985), 109-65, at 143-44.

nationalist intellectuals and army officers then joined forces with disaffected religious leaders, resulting in the first great Kurdish rebellion, led by Shaikh Said in 1925.³²

The rebellion was put down with a great show of military force. The leaders were caught and hanged, and severe reprisals were taken in those districts which had participated in the uprising. According to a Kurdish nationalist source, the military operations resulted in the pillaging of more than two hundred villages, the destruction of well over eight thousand houses, and fifteen thousand deaths.³³ Shaikh Said's rebellion did not pose a serious military threat to Turkey, but it constitutes a watershed in the history of the republic. It accelerated the trend toward authoritarian government and ushered in policies which deliberately aimed at destroying Kurdish ethnicity. Immediately after the outbreak of the rebellion, the relatively liberal prime minister Fethi Okyar was deposed and replaced with the grim Ismet İnönü. By way of defining his position on the Kurds, İnönü publicly stated, "We are openly nationalist. Nationalism is the only cause that keeps us together. Besides the Turkish majority, none of the other [ethnic] elements shall have any impact. We shall, at any price, turkicize those who live in our country, and destroy those who rise up against the Turks and Turkdom."³⁴

Several other local rebellions followed, the largest of which took place in 1928-30 in the area around Mount Ararat. This was the most purely nationalist of all rebellions, organized and coordinated by a Kurdish political party in exile. In all these rebellions, however, tribes played the major part, acting under their own aghas (chieftains) and sometimes coordinated by shaikhs, religious leaders of wide-ranging authority. (Hence the emphasis, in Turkish public discourse, on the need to abolish "feudalism," tribalism, and religious reaction.) The government, perceiving this, responded by executing some shaikhs and aghas and separating the others from their tribes by deporting them to other parts of the country. Some entire tribes (notably those that had taken part in the Ararat rebellion) were deported and dispersed over western Turkey.

The first deportations were simply reprisals against rebellious tribes. In later years, deportations became part of the concerted effort to assimilate the Kurds. The turkification program announced by İnönü was embarked upon with characteristic vigor. The Kurdish language, Kurdish dress, Kurdish folklore, even the very word "Kurd" were banned. Scholars provided "proof" that the "tribes of the East" were of pure Turkish stock, and that their language was Turkish, though somewhat corrupted due to their close proximity to Iran. Henceforth they were to be called "Mountain Turks." It goes without saying that there was no place for dissenting views in academic or public life. Another historical theory developed under government sponsorship in those days held that all great civilizations — Chinese, Indian, Muslim, even ancient Egyptian and Etruscan — were of Turkish origin. Turkification, even when by force, was therefore by definition a civilizing process. The embarrassing question why it was necessary to turkify people who were said to be Turks already was never addressed.

³² Van Bruinessen, "Vom Osmanismus zum Separatismus"; Robert Olson, *The Emergence of Kurdish Nationalism and the Sheikh Said Rebellion, 1920-1925* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

³³ Bletch Chirguh, *La question kurde* (Le Caire, 1930), 52.

³⁴ Address to the Türk Ocakları in Ankara, 21 April 1925. Quoted in Güney Aslan, *Üniformali kasaplar* (Butchers in uniform) (Istanbul: Pencere Yayinlari, 1990), 14, after the popular history magazine *Yakin Tarihimiz*.

Massive population resettlement was one measure by which the authorities hoped to strengthen the territorial integrity of the country and speed up the process of assimilation. Kurds were to be deported to western Turkey and widely dispersed, while Turks were to be settled in their place. The most important policy document, the Law on Resettlement of 1934, shows quite explicitly that turkification was the primary objective of resettlement. The law defined three categories of (re)settlement zones:

— one consisting of those districts "whose evacuation is desirable for health, economic, cultural, political and security reasons and where settlement has been forbidden,"

— the second of districts "designated for transfer and resettlement of the population whose assimilation to Turkish culture is desired,"

— and the third of "places where an increase of the population of Turkish culture is desired."³⁵

In other words, certain Kurdish districts (to be designated later) were to be depopulated completely, while in the other Kurdish districts the Kurdish element was to be diluted by the resettlement there of Turks (and possibly deportations of local Kurds). The deportees were to be resettled in Turkish districts, where they could be assimilated.

The intent of breaking up Kurdish society so as to assimilate it more rapidly is also evident from several other passages in the law. Article 11, for instance, precludes attempts by non-Turkish people to preserve their cultures by sticking together in ethnically homogeneous villages or trade guilds. "Those whose mother tongue is not Turkish will not be allowed to establish as a group new villages or wards, workers' or artisans' associations, nor will such persons be allowed to reserve an existing village, ward, enterprise or workshop for members of the same race."³⁶ This is clearly more than just legal discrimination; the Law on Resettlement provides the legal framework for a policy of ethnocide.

It is against the background of this law that the pacification of Dersim has to be considered. Dersim was one of the first regions where it was to be applied. A year after the Law on Resettlement, in December 1935, the Grand National Assembly passed a special law on Dersim. The district was constituted into a separate province and placed under a military governor, who was given extraordinary powers to arrest and deport individuals and families. The Minister of the Interior of the day, Şükrü Kaya, explained the need for this law with references to its backwardness and the unruliness of the tribes. The district was in a state of lawlessness, caused by ignorance and poverty. The tribes

³⁵ The assignment of specific areas to these three categories (of which I have reversed the order for the sake of clarity) was to be made by the Ministry of the Interior, in accordance with the spirit of this law. The law itself, its political context and implications are extensively discussed in Ismail Besikçi, *Kürtlerin "mecburi iskan"i* (The "forced resettlement" of the Kurds) (Ankara: Komal, 1977); the quoted passages from article 2 are at 133. There is a French summary of the law in Rambout, *Les Kurdes*, 32-33. The partial translation in Ute Baran, "Deportations: Tunceli Kanunlari," in *Documentation of the International Conference on Human Rights in Kurdistan* (Bremen, 1989), 110-16, is unfortunately marred by serious errors. No serious study of the implementation of the law seems to have been made; a geographer who visited Kurdistan in the late 1930s, however, observed numerous recent Turkish settlements in the area (J. Frödin, "Neuere kulturgeografische Wandlungen in der östlichen Türkei," *Zeitschrift der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde* 79, no.1-2 [1944]:1-20). Many of those settlers, feeling less than welcome, have migrated back to western Turkey since then.

³⁶ Besikçi, *Kürtlerin "mecburi iskan"i*, 142.

settled all legal affairs, civil as well as criminal, according to their own primitive tribal law, with complete disregard of the state. The minister termed the situation a disease, and added that eleven earlier military campaigns, under the *ancien régime*, had failed to cure it. A radical treatment was needed, he said, and the law was part of a reform program (with "civilized methods," he insisted) that would make these people also share in the blessings of the republic.³⁷

The minister's metaphor of disease and treatment appears to be borrowed from a report on Dersim that was prepared ten years earlier for the same ministry. This document was reproduced in the official history of the military campaign, as a guideline for military policy. The author, Hamdi Bey, called Dersim "an abscess [that] the Republican government. . . would have to operate upon in order to prevent worse pain." He was more explicit than Şükrü Kaya about the nature of Dersim's malady: it was the growing Kurdish ethnic awareness.³⁸

The treatment began with the construction of roads and bridges, and of police posts and government mansions in every large village. The unrest resulting from this imposition of government control provided the direct reason for the pacification campaign of 1937-38, which at the same time served to carry out the first large-scale deportations under the 1934 law.³⁹ After the Dersim rebellion had been suppressed, other Kurdish regions being "civilized" from above knew better than to resist.

The Kemalist enterprise was a grandiose attempt to create a new world. Mustafa Kemal and his associates had created a vigorous new state out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, the Sick Man of Europe. By banning the Arabic script they destroyed all memory of the past and were free to rewrite history as they felt it should have been. The Kemalists set out to create a modern, progressive, unitary nation out of what was once a patchwork of distinct ethnic communities. Whatever appeared to undermine national unity, be it ethnic or class divisions, was at once denied and brutally suppressed. In the Kemalists' eyes, this was a process of liberation, an assertion of human dignity and equality.

"The people of Ankara, Diyarbakir, Trabzon and Macedonia," Mustafa Kemal proclaimed, "are all children of the same race, jewels cut out of the same precious stone." Reality often turned out to be less equalitarian. Even today, a person whose identity card shows that he was born in Tunceli will be treated with suspicion and

³⁷ Kaya's speech before the Grand National Assembly, 25 December 1935 (quoted in Besikçi, *Tunceli kanunu*, 10, after the parliamentary minutes).

³⁸ Report on the situation in Dersim by Hamdi Bey, inspector of the civil service, dated 2 February 1926, reprinted in Halli, *Türkiye Cumhuriyetinde ayaklanmalar*, 375-76. This study speaks of a long-term policy of the General Staff based on the ideas in the report, suggesting that the military campaign was not simply a response to an unforeseen incident in 1937. In 1926, when Hamdi Bey wrote his report, it was still possible to mention Kurds and Kurdish political sentiment; in the 1930s, they could only be referred to in oblique terms like "tribal," "uncivilized" (i.e., lacking in modern Turkish civilization) or "originally Turkish."

³⁹ The only figure on deportations from Dersim in the 1930s that I have seen is given by the retired general Esengin, according to whom, 3,470 persons, belonging to many different tribes, were deported to western Turkey. See Kenan Esengin, *Kürtçülük sorunu* (The problem of Kurdish nationalism) (Istanbul: Su Yayinlari, 1976), 145. The actual number may well have been higher.

antipathy by officials and will not easily find employment, even if he is quite turkicized.⁴⁰ Another famous saying of Mustafa Kemal, inscribed on official buildings and statues throughout the country, is subtly ambiguous: "how fortunate is he who calls himself a Turk!" — implying little good for those who don't. Justice Minister Mahmut Esat was less subtle but robustly straightforward when he proclaimed in 1930, "The Turks are the only lords of this country, its only owners. Those who are not of pure Turkish stock have in this country only one right, that of being servants, of being slaves. Let friend and foe, and even the mountains know this truth!"⁴¹

The ambivalence, or internal contradiction, inherent in the Kemalist position on the Kurds has persisted for over half a century. The Kemalist concept of Turkishness is not based on a biological definition of race. Everyone in Turkey (apart from, perhaps, the Christian minorities) is a Turk, and many are the Kurds who have made brilliant political careers once they adopted Turkish identity. Both President Turgut Özal and opposition leader Erdal İnönü are of (partially) Kurdish descent. But there is also a sense of Turkish racial superiority that occasionally comes to the surface. Mutually contradictory though these attitudes are, they have reinforced one another in the suppression of Kurdish ethnicity.

The democratization of Turkey, which began after World War II, brought a resurgence of Kurdish ethnic awareness, along with an upsurge of left- and right-wing radicalism. Military coups in 1960, 1971, and 1980 sought to restore Kemalist purity, and resulted in renewed efforts at forced assimilation of the Kurds. Tunceli, the old Dersim, has come in for more than its share of repression. No longer a "den of ignorance and primitive tribalism," it has for the past few decades been considered a hotbed of communism, besides remaining ineradicably Kurdish. A few years ago, new plans were made to evacuate large parts of Tunceli and to resettle the inhabitants in the west, ostensibly for the sake of reforestation.⁴² The majority of the people of Dersim now live in the diaspora, either in western Turkey or abroad. Not much is left of Dersim's distinctive culture.

The Chemical War Against the Iraqi Kurds

The other case of alleged genocide in Kurdistan that I wish to discuss took place in Iraq, fifty years after the Dersim massacres. Iraq had become a one-party state, ruled by the Arab nationalist Baath party; the regime was modernization-oriented, authoritarian, and increasingly totalitarian. The country had been at war with Iran since 1980. A guerrilla war fought by Kurdish nationalists against the central government had been going on for much longer but had received a new impetus during the Iran-Iraq War. The Kurdish

⁴⁰ Cf. Peter Bumke, "Kizilbas-Kurden in Dersim (Tunceli, Türkei): Marginalität und Häresie," *Anthropos* 74 (1979): 530-48.

⁴¹ Daily *Milliyet*, 19 September 1930.

⁴² In January 1987, the inhabitants of 233 villages in Tunceli (out of a total of 434) were notified by the district forestry department that they had to evacuate their villages and were to be resettled in western or southwestern Turkey. See the special report in the Istanbul weekly *Ikibin'e Dogru*, 15-21 February 1987. Widespread protest occasioned by this report has apparently delayed the implementation of the evacuations.

parties of Iraq had contracted a tactical alliance with the Iranian regime, based on perceived common interests.

In mid-March 1988, Iraqi planes dropped chemical warheads on the Kurdish town of Halabja, close to the Iranian border, which had recently been conquered by the Iranian army with essential support from Iraqi Kurdish guerrilla fighters. The number of casualties given by different sources varies, but a figure of around five thousand dead has become widely accepted. Iran invited foreign journalists to witness the carnage and show the world some gruesome pictures. It was obvious that many of the victims were non-belligerents. Photos of parents lying dead with babies still clenched in their arms are among the most moving images that the Iran-Iraq War has burned into our visual memory.

Even then, there were initially doubts as to whether Iraq had actually used chemical arms; the Iraqi government routinely denied it. The use of chemical agents, however, was established beyond doubt by a Belgian toxicological expert who visited Halabja a few weeks after the event. He interviewed surviving victims and took blood, urine, and hair samples. His conclusion was that at least three different types of poison gases had been used in combination: mustard gas, cyanide or derivatives, and *tabun* or similar nerve gases.⁴³ This was the first widely publicized case of chemical warfare against the Kurds, but by then Iraq had been using gas in Kurdistan for almost a year.

The first chemical attacks on the Kurds reportedly took place in April 1987, when areas controlled by Kurdish guerrilla fighters (*peshmergas*) were bombed. The targets were a *peshmerga* base and a number of villages. In one attack, on the Balisan Valley northeast of Arbil, more than a hundred casualties were reported, half of them civilians. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), against which these attacks had been mainly directed, attempted to draw world attention to them but met with great skepticism. Very few news media ever reported on them.⁴⁴ Immediately after the bombing of Balisan Valley, ground troops attacked and captured several dozen wounded. These were allegedly taken to a military hospital near Arbil, where they were filmed and

⁴³ A. Heyndrickx, "Clinical Toxicologic Reports and Conclusions Concerning the Biological and Environmental Samples Brought to the Department of Toxicology at the State University of Ghent for Toxicologic Investigation," in *Documentation of the International Conference on Human Rights in Kurdistan* (Bremen, 1989), 210-25. I quote the conclusion of this report: "The results of blood and urine analysis of men and of environmental samples (bird, sand, stone, water and rice) confirm that at least three war gases in combination have been used: mustard gas (YPERITE), an organic phosphate which inhibits the human plasma acetylcholinesterase (Tabun, Soman, Sarin, VX or analogues) and cyanide or derivatives (cyanogen chloride, CN- or analogues). (...) The amounts found are toxic. There is no scientific doubt that the patients were injured by chemical war agents" (p. 225). The fact that cyanide was also used led a U.S. Department of Defense study later to conclude, somewhat surprisingly, that many of the Kurds killed in Halabja were in fact victims of an Iranian gas attack, since the Iranians had cyanide (*Washington Post*, 3 May 1990).

⁴⁴ One exception was the Dutch daily *Volkscrant* of 25 April 1987. Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 83, relates the events after a news bulletin of the New York-based Kurdish Program, dated 15 June 1987. An appeal by the PUK to the United Nations secretary-general dated 17 April 1987 gives the names of villages and districts attacked with chemical bombs. These reports differ in details; interviews with persons who were in the area at that time have convinced me that they are substantially correct, although the number of casualties remains unclear.

photographed as being victims of an Iranian attack. Thereupon they were allegedly all executed.⁴⁵

The most dramatic gas attacks, however, took place in August 1988 in northernmost Iraq. Valleys controlled by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP, the other major Kurdish organization in Iraq), which had been under attack with conventional arms for some time, were bombed with a variety of chemical agents. Tens of thousands, civilians and *peshmergas*, fled in panic across the Turkish border.⁴⁶ The KDP later published a list of seventy-seven villages that had been hit; it estimates that some three thousand were killed in these attacks.

Genocide by the Iraqi Regime?

I am reluctant to use the term genocide for the Iraqi regime's chemical warfare against the Kurds, although it has been argued that this case appears to fit the definition of the 1948 Convention.⁴⁷ The final verdict will probably hinge on the question of intent. There are no indications that the Iraqi regime intended, by its use of chemical arms, to physically destroy the Kurds as such. The ultimate aim was the elimination of the Kurdish movement as a political problem; the gas killings were purely instrumental to that purpose. The Halabja bombing was apparently meant as both reprisal and warning, a deterrent against further rebellion. This is also apparent from later Iraqi references to it.⁴⁸ The August offensive apparently served a more ambitious dual aim: to break the Kurdish armed resistance and to enforce a massive resettlement program by frightening the civilian population into leaving their villages. This resettlement program was itself meant to impede future Kurdish guerrilla movements.

The horrors of chemical warfare are spectacular, especially when there are cameras to record them. It is not surprising that Iraq's use of chemical arms against the Kurds has drawn more international attention than other aspects of its Kurdish policies. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that these gas attacks represent the pinnacle of violent repression of the Kurds in Iraq. In terms of sheer numbers of casualties, the everyday disappearances and summary executions have demanded a much higher toll, not to mention conventional counterinsurgency operations. All this violence should be seen in the context of Iraq's overall Kurdish policies. The gas attacks are only the tip of the iceberg and are part of a more horrible strategy of overall destruction of Kurdish society.

Let me quote just one example that has, in spite of Kurdish efforts, received much less attention than the gas attacks but is in my eyes more unambiguously a case of genocide.

⁴⁵ Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Iraq*, 83. According to one of my informants, who was in Kurdistan at the time, the source of this report was a doctor at the military hospital, who witnessed the executions and was so disgusted that he then fled to the *peshmerga*-held area.

⁴⁶ Cf. Peter W. Galbraith and Christopher Van Hollen, Jr., "Chemical Weapons Use in Kurdistan: Iraq's Final Offensive" (Staffreport to the Committee on Foreign Relations, U.S. Senate, October 1988).

⁴⁷ E.g., Middle East Watch, *Human Rights in Iraq*, 92-94.

⁴⁸ On the eve of the Kuwait war, the vice president of Iraq's ruling Revolutionary Command Council, Izzat Ibrahim, visited the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniya and warned its inhabitants not to rebel during the coming war or their city would face a fate worse than Halabja.

I mean the disappearance without trace of eight thousand Barzani Kurds — about the same number as were killed in the gas attacks. In August 1983, Iraqi security troops rounded up the men of the Barzani tribe from four resettlement camps near Arbil. These people were not engaged in any antigovernment activities. The name of the tribe, of course, is associated with the legendary Kurdish leader Mulla Mustafa Barzani (around whose family this tribe had initially come into existence). Two of Barzani's sons at that time led the Kurdistan Democratic Party and were engaged in guerrilla activities against the Baghdad government, but only a part of the tribe was with them. The entire area of Barzan had, along with many other parts of Kurdistan, been evacuated by the government, and the Barzanis who had opted no longer to oppose the government had been moved to resettlement camps. All eight thousand men of this group, then, were taken from their families and transported to southern Iraq. Thereafter they disappeared. All efforts to find out what happened to them or where they had gone, including diplomatic inquiries by several European countries, failed. It is feared that they are dead. The KDP has received consistent reports from sources within the military that at least part of this group has been used as guinea pigs to test the effects of various chemical agents.⁴⁹ Insofar as the Barzanis constitute a very distinct group among the Kurds, the obliteration of a significant part of them (if this is true, as I fear) is an act of genocide by anyone's definition. They were killed because they were Barzanis.

Iraq's Kurdish Policies

The most striking aspect of Iraq's Kurdish policies, apart from the bloody violence generally characteristic of Baath politics, has been the deliberate transformation of Kurdish society by the destruction of villages and massive deportations. This is reminiscent of Turkey's policies of the 1930s, although Iraq's deportations are if anything more radical and more brutal. A major difference with Turkey, however, is that the Kurds are not only recognized as a separate ethnic group but that they enjoy more cultural rights in Iraq than in any neighbor country. Iraq has not sought to obliterate Kurdish language, folklore, music, and an awareness of Kurdish history, as Turkey has, but it has deliberately destroyed Kurdish culture in another sense, by annihilating almost all traditional villages and the way of life associated with them. The chief motive for this policy of destruction was to deprive the Kurdish guerrilla movement of its social support. At times, the government has sought to present it as a policy of modernization from above.

When the Baath party came to power in 1968, its initial attitude toward the Kurds was one of accommodation. In 1970 the government concluded a peace treaty with Barzani's KDP, granting the Kurds both autonomy and a share in the central government. A new constitution promulgated the same year also promised equal rights: "[t]he people of Iraq is formed of two principal nationalities, the Arab nationality and the Kurdish nationality. This Constitution shall recognize the national rights of the Kurdish

⁴⁹ Personal communication from Hoshyar Zibari, the representative of the KDP in Europe. See also his earlier article on this case, "The Missing Barzani Kurds," in *Documentation of the International Conference on Human Rights in Kurdistan* (Bremen, 1989), 205-9.

people and the legitimate rights of all minorities within the unity of Iraq.”⁵⁰ One perceives a certain tension, however between this statement and the one immediately preceding it, which affirms that "Iraq is part of the Arab nation." This tension was never resolved; it became more serious as the Baath party, came to consider itself the sole embodiment of the Arab nation, and as Saddam Hussein emerged as the sole leader of the Baath party.

The first problems emerged over the delimitation of the autonomous region, which, according to the agreement, was to include all districts with a Kurdish population majority. The government was, however, unwilling to relinquish control of the oil-producing districts of Kerkuk and Khaniqin, and of the strategically important Sinjar district near the Syrian border. It therefore embarked upon a policy of "Arabization": large numbers of Kurds were deported from these districts to southern Iraq, and Arabs settled in their stead. These and other districts were excluded from the region that was in 1974 proclaimed autonomous by the government.⁵¹ There were more deportations in those years: Some forty thousand Shiite Kurds (known as Faylis), most of whom lived in Baghdad, were expelled to Iran because of their alleged Iranian descent.⁵² Smaller numbers of the Kurdish Goyan tribe, which had members living on both sides of the Turkish border, were similarly expelled to Turkey.

These deportations and a number of other serious grievances severely disaffected the Kurds. Barzani and his KDP demanded a full implementation of the 1970 agreement and rejected the government's limited autonomy. This led to a resumption of guerrilla warfare on an unprecedented scale in March 1974. The Kurds received very important financial and military support from Iran, which was then establishing itself as the major regional power. The Shah had moreover secured the Kurds covert CIA support, while there were apparently also some Israeli advisers assisting the Kurds. In the view of the Baath regime, therefore, the Kurds committed high treason by collaborating with its worst enemies. It is probably true that the Kurds would not have rejected the limited autonomy if Iran had not assured them of all the support they would need in a war. In March 1975, Iran and Iraq concluded an important agreement, significantly signed at the OPEC conference in Algiers. Iraq made concessions to Iran in a long-standing border conflict, in exchange for which the Shah gave up his support of the Kurds. The guerrilla movement then soon collapsed, and perhaps as many as a hundred thousands Kurds, civilians and *peshmergas*, fled to Iran.

In the wake of the 1974-75 war, several new waves of deportations followed. Iraq proclaimed an amnesty for the Kurds who had taken part in the war and invited the refugees in Iran to return. Tens of thousands did return to Iraq, while comparable numbers, not trusting the Iraqi regime, stayed behind in Iran. Many of the returnees

⁵⁰ The text of the provisional constitution of 1970, with revisions of 1973 and 1974, is reproduced in Majid Khadduri, *Socialist Iraq: A Study on Iraqi Politics since 1968* (Washington, DC: The Middle East Institute, 1978), 183-98.

⁵¹ For more elaborate descriptions of the conflict between the Kurds and the government about the ethnic character of Kerkuk and Khaniqin, see Ismet Chériff Vanly, "Le Kurdistan d'Irak," in *Les Kurdes et le Kurdistan*, ed. G. Chaliand (Paris: Maspéro, 1978), 225-305, and Edmund Ghareeb, *The Kurdish Question in Iraq* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1981). The former author emphasizes Kurdish grievances, the latter also presents the government's view of the problem.

⁵² Many more persons of alleged Iranian origins were expelled in the following years. The best discussion of this question known to me is in Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 18-20 and 135-38.

were not allowed to go back to their original villages and towns but were sent to southern Iraq. Some of the rebels who had preferred to surrender to the Iraqi army rather than flee into Iran, too, were allegedly banished to southern Iraq. Many of these exiles, but by no means all of them, appear to have been able to return to northern Iraq in later years. It is, however, impossible to collate even vaguely approximative statistics.

Deportations of Kurds to the south, to which over the years several hundred thousand were subjected, served a number of related purposes. In the first place, of course, they were intended to reduce the proportion of Kurds in the northern districts. This was most clearly the chief motive of the deportations from Kerkuk and Khaniqin. Secondly, they served to remove potentially insurgent elements from the rest of the Kurdish population, thereby also working as a deterrent for those staying behind. Thirdly, it appears that one of the results hoped for was the gradual assimilation of the deportees. In the second half of the 1970s, the Iraqi regime had recourse to various methods of assimilation, while officially continuing to tolerate and even patronize Kurdish culture. The government offered, for instance, a financial bonus to every Arab man who married a Kurdish woman. The aim was apparently not an all-out assimilation as in Turkey but a gradual weakening of Kurdish ethnicity and reduction of the numbers of Kurds. Another consequence of the deportations to the south, which may not have been intended but did not cause the authorities great concern, was a significant increase in mortality. The desert climate demanded a high toll among the Kurds, who were used to the much cooler mountains.

Another wave of deportations, not all to the south, began as early as 1976 and continued until the late 1980s. A strip along the Iranian and Turkish borders, some fifteen to twenty kilometers wide, was entirely evacuated in order to prevent future penetrations of guerrilla fighters from across the border. The villages were destroyed, fruit trees burned or cut, and wells filled up to prevent people returning. The inhabitants were taken to resettlement camps in various parts of the country. People's resistance to these evacuations gave rise to a new guerrilla movement, which however remained limited in scale until the Iran-Iraq War began. With the onset of the war, Iran resumed support to the Iraqi Kurds, at first only the KDP, but eventually the PUK as well. Operating precisely from the evacuated zones along the borders, *peshmergas* gradually brought some of the inhabited parts of Kurdistan under their control too. The KDP did this in the northernmost part, the PUK further south, in the area around Sulaimaniya.⁵³

During the war with Iran, Iraq gradually extended the scope of its deportations from Kurdistan — along with numerous other reprisals against the civilian population. If anything, the deportations and resettlements became even grimmer than before. In the 1970s, the resettlements were still accompanied by large-scale investments in agricultural infrastructure. New model villages were built, with modern amenities and facilities that were lacking in most of the traditional villages.⁵⁴ The entire program was

⁵³ The developments were far more complicated than can be sketched here. See Martin van Bruinessen, "The Kurds between Iran and Iraq," *MERIP Middle East Reports* no.141 (July-August 1986): 14-27.

⁵⁴ Interesting observations on this process are presented in Leszek Dziegiel, *Rural Community of Contemporary Iraqi Kurdistan Facing Modernization* (Krakow: Agricultural Academy, 1981). The author is a Polish anthropologist who worked for an agricultural development project in the late seventies.

presented as one of state-led modernization, with the best interests of the village population in mind. Some of those who were forced to vacate their villages appear to have ended up in such new agricultural settlements. Many others, however, possibly the vast majority, came to live in resettlement camps whose location was determined by security rather than agricultural considerations-in the plains of Kurdistan or in the ecologically alien and inhospitable south of Iraq. The large numbers that were deported during and immediately after the war were all relocated in strategic villages or deported to unknown destinations, without economic resources.

The 1988 Offensives

In retrospect, an important turning point in Iraq's Kurdish policies appears to have been the appointment, sometime in early 1987, of Saddam Hussein's cousin, Ali Hasan al-Majid, as the chief of the Baath party's Bureau for Northern Affairs. He was given absolute powers and could overrule all other civilian or military authorities. It was after his appointment that chemical arms began to be used against the Kurds. Al-Majid extended the zone along the borders that was to be emptied of all habitation to thirty kilometers. But villages that were located much further from the border were also destroyed and their inhabitants resettled. In 1987, parts of the "forbidden zone" were actually controlled by *peshmergas* of the various Kurdish organizations, so that the drive for deportation and struggle against the *peshmergas* had to go hand in hand. The dual aim was pursued in three violent military offensives ominously named *al-Anfal*, "Spoils." This is the title of the eighth chapter of the Koran, in which Muhammad and his followers are urged to fight courageously against the unbelievers until final victory is achieved or the enemies have accepted the faith. These offensives were not directly connected with the Iran-Iraq War.

The first *al-Anfal* offensive began in February 1988 and was completed before the Halabja massacre. It was directed against the Kurdish-controlled parts of the Sulaimaniya district, large parts of which were laid waste. The second offensive, directed against the mountainous parts of Kerkuk and southern Sulaimaniya, took place in spring 1988. All villages in the "liberated areas" were destroyed and people's possessions looted. According to Kurdish claims, chemical arms were again used during this campaign. Even valleys where there was no habitation were saturated with mustard gas to make sure no one hiding there could survive. Almost fifteen thousand people were reportedly taken to desert camps, where many of them perished.⁵⁵ The third offensive began after the cease-fire with Iran, and was directed against northernmost Iraq, the area controlled by the KDP. When conventional arms failed to secure the Iraqi troops a quick conquest, the notorious chemical attacks of 25 August took place,

⁵⁵ Since the present chapter was prepared for publication, new information on the *Anfal* campaigns has come to light, suggesting that the number of victims was still considerably higher. During the March 1991 rebellion the Kurds seized tons of Iraqi secret police documents and started compiling lists of people who had disappeared. The first outsider to have studied this documentation, Iraqi author in exile Kanan Makiya, concluded that the number of those killed in the period of the *Anfal* campaigns was probably not less than 100,000; Kurdish leaders put forward estimates in the order of 180,000. See Kanan Makiya, "The Anfal: Uncovering an Iraqi Campaign to Exterminate the Kurds," *Harper's Magazine* (May 1992): 53-61.

driving the surviving *peshmergas* and much of the village population across the Turkish border.

Both aims of the *al-Anfal* offensives were achieved: the Kurdish guerrilla forces were effectively destroyed and the civilian population was removed from the mountain villages. Those remaining in Iraq were either resettled in closely watched new towns in the plains, or deported to camps in the south. Altogether almost five thousand villages have been destroyed and their inhabitants deported.⁵⁶ Members of a medical relief organization who visited the area in November 1989 reported that little of the old society remained.⁵⁷ The town of Halabja had been razed to the ground, and instead some twenty kilometers further west a new town of concrete blocks had been erected, appropriately named "New Saddam City Halabja." Similarly, the old town of Qale Dize, some sixteen kilometers from the Iranian border, had been razed in mid-1989 and the resisting inhabitants carried off by force to resettlement camps. Fifteen "New Towns," housing between twenty thousand and forty thousand people each, had been established in 1989 alone. The "New Towns" are of the well-known "strategic village" type, and are surrounded by a ring of guard posts. Most of the people resettled here used to be farmers and have now no regular work or other sources of income.

The Iraqi regime has obliterated much of traditional Kurdish society, destroying its habitat and preventing the Kurdish villagers from pursuing their traditional agricultural and pastoral activities. The chief motivation was security-related; the deportations were either reprisals or preventive measures taken in connection with the Kurdish political and military struggle for autonomy. These measures were combined with a policy of economic modernization, violent military repression of the Kurdish guerrilla, attempts at co-optation of the urban Kurds and at assimilation. There were no attempts at extermination, but numerous individual Kurds were killed in the process, not just during military operations or in police custody, but also indirectly, as a result of the deportations. The chemical attacks of 1988 do not stand alone, but represent one phase in that ongoing process.

Conclusion

The recent destructive offensive mounted by the Iraqi army against the Kurds (as well as the other ethnic groups in the north, and the Shiite Arabs in the south) is so atrocious that all else mentioned in this chapter pales in comparison. One can only guess what the intentions of the regime are in mustering such brutal violence. Is it revenge against a population that has shown its unanimous rejection of a detested leadership that has ruined the country? Is it an attempt at wholesale destruction of the Kurds (and Shiites) or at their forced transfer to neighboring countries? Is the aim to destroy all opposition, or perhaps to change the demographic balance in favor of the Arab Sunnis, the only

⁵⁶ Detailed statistics have been compiled in Shorsh Mustafa Rasool, *Forever Kurdish: Statistics of Atrocities in Iraqi Kurdistan* (N.p., 1990; distributed by the PUK foreign representation).

⁵⁷ Medico International, "Deportations in Iraqi Kurdistan and Kurdish Refugees in Iran" in *The Kurdish Academy Yearbook 1990* (Berlin, 1990), 59-77.

ethnic group among whom the regime has some roots?⁵⁸ The element of revenge for disloyalty is certainly a recurrent feature in Baathist politics, nor do I have any doubt that the regime would welcome demographic changes in favor of the Sunni Arabs. But the most likely explanation is that the regime, just as it has in the past, is using violence instrumentally, for the purpose of maintaining or, in the present case, reasserting its control of the population.

The question whether the present massacres in Iraq constitute genocide against the Kurds is not, I think, a very useful one, and it is bound to lead to a sterile debate as to whether there is "intent to destroy" and whether this intent is directed at the Kurds "as such. " It would almost seem as if the present killings and other outrages were less terrible if they do not fit the definition. Not being a legal scholar, I gladly leave final judgment to the experts in this field. Whatever their verdict, however, the moral question whether the world community can afford to tolerate such massive slaughter, and the practical one of how future occurrences can be prevented, seem much more urgent.

To return to the two cases discussed in this article, there too it is not immediately obvious whether it is appropriate to speak of genocide of the Kurds. I hope I have sufficiently brought out the complexity of both cases. The massacres took place in the course of the suppression of Kurdish insurgencies — which, however, were themselves at least in part reactions to the governments' *ethnocidal* policies. Neither for Turkey nor for Iraq was the physical destruction of significant numbers of Kurds an end in itself, but this does not make the overkill any less deliberate. The killings were intentional, even if they were only intended as means to the pacification and, in Turkey, the assimilation of the Kurds. The question whether the violence was directed against the Kurds as such invites ambivalent answers. There is little doubt that the victims were killed, among other reasons, because they were Kurds. On the other hand, however, many Kurds who were willing to be co-opted and to disassociate themselves from the nationalists suffered no persecution and at most mild discrimination. Neither Turkey nor Iraq have officially sponsored the sort of racial theories that constitute a warrant for genocide. One does find racial discrimination and claims of racial superiority in both Turkish and Arab nationalist circles. Apart from a lunatic fringe, however, no one ever proposed a policy of extermination of the Kurds or of drastically reducing their numbers,⁵⁹ and there are no indications that mass killing of Kurds as such was ever part of a hidden agenda (until, perhaps, Iraq's recent offensive).

⁵⁸ Before the Iran-Iraq War the Shiite Arabs constituted around 55 percent of the population of Iraq, the Kurds just over 20 percent, other minorities 4 to 5 percent. Sunni Arabs represented only a quarter of the total population. It is not known how the bloodshed of the past decade has affected these proportions.

⁵⁹ Among this lunatic fringe one may count in Turkey the well-known nationalist author Nihat Atsız who in 1968 wrote in the Pan-Turkist magazine *Ötüken* that the Kurds, instead of making trouble for the Turks, had better get lost and find themselves a homeland in Iran, Pakistan, or India or, better still, somewhere in Africa. He advised them to ask the Armenians what could happen when the Turks were to lose their patience. In Iraq, the racist fringe has come to occupy center stage; it was Saddam Hussein's foster-father, uncle, and father-in-law Khairullah Tulfa who wrote the edifying pamphlet *Three Whom God Should Not Have Created: Persians, Jews and Flies*. The Kurds, though related to the Persians, appeared to be somewhat less offensive to Tulfa's sensibilities, however. I am not aware of similar anti-Kurdish pamphlets.

The massacres described above are not, however, isolated unfortunate incidents, excesses such as may occur in any repression of rebellion. They were part of a policy that transcended the suppression of individual rebellions and that aimed at destroying the very social and economic foundations of Kurdish separatism. Turkey, more radically than Iraq, has long sought to annihilate the Kurds as *a separate people or ethnic group* by forced assimilation. The events of Dersim in Turkey may be paraphrased by saying that thousands were massacred for resisting a policy of ethnocide. Does this not come close to the definition of genocide?

Iraq, while formally continuing to recognize the Kurds as a distinct nationality within Iraq, has destroyed the physical infrastructure of Kurdish society and condemned many hundreds of thousands of Kurds to lives of exile. Its use of chemical arms against the Kurds in August 1988 was, to some extent at least, also a violent reprisal for resisting ethnocide. The Iraqi regime's primary intention, however, was to deter the Kurds from further rebellion or collaboration with Iran. An appreciable number of people were killed, the massacres were deliberate, and they were meant as a message directed at the Kurds as such. Whatever the legal verdict, the moral issue is clear: this is in a class with the major crimes against humanity committed in this century.

Turkey and Iraq have at least once deliberately eliminated a significant proportion of distinct subgroups among their Kurdish population. The people of Dersim and the Barzanis had, each in their own way, come to exemplify Kurdish resistance to central government policies. In Dersim, not only rebel tribes but also tribes that had remained neutral or even cooperated with the government were partly wiped out. The disappearance of all men of the Barzani community in Iraq is an even more clear-cut case. It was not a reprisal for anything they had done themselves but an action against the spirit of resistance that the name Barzani symbolized. To all appearances, they were deliberately wiped out.

Postscript

This chapter received its final form at the time of Iraq's post-Desert Storm offensives against the Kurds and the southern Shiites, in March and April 1991. The international intervention that I was despairing of did take place after all. The allies (which by then meant the United States and its West European partners, minus Germany) first declared a no-fly zone over northern Iraq; in a later stage allied land forces entered northern Iraq from Turkey in order to create "safe havens" for the displaced Kurds. The "safe havens" gradually developed into a fragile, self-ruling, Kurdish quasi-state.

This situation made it possible for researchers, for the first time, to systematically collect information about what had really happened in the *Anfal* offensives. Truckloads of Iraqi security police and intelligence documents captured during the March 1991 uprising, lists of people who disappeared, testimonies of eyewitnesses (including several survivors of mass executions) are gradually yielding a view of the real dimensions of the 1988 massacres. Middle East Watch (a division of Human Rights Watch), which several times sent teams of trained investigators to northern Iraq, deserves great credit for its efforts to coordinate the information-gathering process and for making the findings

public in a series of reports.⁶⁰ These findings require that I revise some of the statements and conclusions I presented in the preceding article.

The *Anfal* campaigns (in which not three, as I had it, but seven distinct phases can be discerned) targeted zones declared "forbidden for security reasons," in which there were a number of guerrilla bases but also numerous inhabited villages. These villages, as I wrote, were destroyed and the inhabitants deported (apart from a number of on-the-spot mass executions). The deportees, however, were not simply resettled in desert camps in southern Iraq, as was initially believed. The evidence strongly suggests that virtually all the men and at least some of the women and children ended up in mass graves near the Saudi border, after having been processed, screened, and earmarked for execution by a well-organized bureaucratic machine.

From the evidence analyzed so far, Middle East Watch concludes that the number of victims of mass executions connected with the *Anfal* "cannot conceivably be less than 50,000, and it may well be twice that number."⁶¹ These deaths were not the unfortunate side effects of a violent anti-insurgency campaign. The people concerned were executed and buried in mass graves at a great distance from the places where they were captured; their executions were planned and carried out on the orders of the highest authority in northern Iraq, Ali Hasan al-Majid. They had been collectively condemned to death because they were Kurds who happened to live in the wrong place.

⁶⁰ The most complete report to date is titled *Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign Against the Kurds* (New York: Human Rights Watch, July 1993). This well-researched and meticulously detailed report is essential reading.

⁶¹ Middle East Watch, *Genocide in Iraq*, 345.

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