

Editorial | Martin van Bruinessen [‡]

The year 2018 is an anniversary year of two traumatising episodes in twentieth-century Kurdish history. Eighty years ago Dersim was “pacified” by the Turkish army, which finished the job it had begun the previous year in a ruthless campaign against the tribes of this region, bombing and torching entire villages, roasting people alive inside their houses and sheds, gunning down captives, using poison gas against those who tried to escape and sealing the large caves where people were hiding, burying them alive. A significant part of Dersim’s population, at least ten to twenty per cent, was deliberately exterminated; many of the survivors were deported and dispersed over western Turkey in order to assimilate and “civilise” them. By the end of summer 1938 it was said, as the British consul in Trabzon reported to London, “that the Kurdish question no longer exists.” It was to take decades for Turkey’s Kurdish question to re-emerge. The massacres of Dersim were silenced by perpetrators and victims alike, although the trauma was, and has remained, palpable. Only in the past few decades have there been efforts to come to terms with the events of 1937-38 and give them meaning in terms of contemporary political struggles and identities. The term that was chosen to refer to the events, *tertele* (catastrophe), was the Zazakî word that had previously also been used to describe the Armenian genocide; it hinted at the similarity of the fate of Armenians and Dersimis and a continuity in state policies towards undesirable minorities.

A half century after the *Tertele* of Dersim, the regime of Saddam Hussein concluded the Iran-Iraq war with a genocidal campaign against Iraqi Kurds who were considered untrustworthy subjects. The shelling of Halabja with poison gas in March 1988 became the iconic event, due mainly to the shocking images that were available and reached the public all over the world. The operations, which went by the name of *Anfal* (“Spoils”, after a chapter in the Qur’an), had begun earlier and continued through August 1988, systematically covering the parts of Kurdistan whose loyalties were in doubt. Starting with poison gas bombings and accompanied by summary executions, each of the successive *Anfal* campaigns targeted the entire village population of an entire region. Men, women and children were rounded up from their villages and taken to collection points, where most of the men were separated and trucked to unknown destinations; the others, women, children and the elderly, were

[‡] Emeritus Professor of Islamic Studies at Utrecht University, The Netherlands and Editor-in-Chief of *Kurdish Studies*. E-mail: m.vanbruinessen@uu.nl.



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relocated in prison camps. On the basis of Iraqi intelligence documents captured in 1991, Human Rights Watch calculated that the *Anfal* operations had resulted in fifty to hundred thousand killed; the Kurds put the number of the disappeared (most of whom likely ended up in mass graves) at 180,000. Thirty years after the fact, the *Anfal* operations are not yet a closed chapter. Although mass graves have been discovered and the remains of victims identified, many families are still in doubt about what happened to their relatives. Worse still, although Halabja and the *Anfal* are often invoked as symbols of Iraq's oppression of the Kurds, many of the displaced survivors of the *Anfal* operations were never re-integrated into society and continue to lead a marginal existence.

Eighty years after the Dersim *Tertele* and thirty years after the *Anfal* campaign, debate about these dramatic events continues and is in fact more lively than at any moment before. They loom large in discussions of memory and identity, resistance and collaboration, cultural traditionalism and assimilation. Different political and cultural movements have attempted to interpret the events in the light of their own distinctive struggles: was the *Tertele* part of the suppression of a Kurdish nationalist uprising or the violent culmination of a policy to settle unruly tribes? Was it a re-enactment of the Ottoman campaigns against the *Kizilbash* (Alevites), or was Dersim targeted for some other ethnic or political characteristic? Will international recognition of the *Anfal* as genocide legitimate the demand for independence? And besides the Baath regime, which Kurdish actors share responsibility for the *Anfal* and its aftermath?

Feminists have drawn attention to the gender dimension of both *Tertele* and *Anfal*. In fact the two most important recent *Anfal* studies, by Choman Hardi and Karin Mlodoch, both focus on women's experiences of the violence and its aftermath (Choman Hardi, *Gendered Experiences of Genocide: Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq*, Ashgate, 2011; Karin Mlodoch, *The Limits of Trauma Discourse: Women Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq*, Klaus Schwarz, 2015). There are no corresponding studies of Dersim's *Tertele*, but it has been noted that one of the most well known people to be killed in battle there, Alişer's wife Zerife, was probably the first woman warrior in the history of the Kurdish movement. She had a counterpart on the other side in Turkey's first woman fighter pilot, Atatürk's adopted daughter Sabiha Gökçen (believed to be an orphan survivor of the Armenian genocide), who flew one of the aircraft bombing Dersim. Some of the assimilation efforts that followed the mass killings also specifically targeted women, as the carriers of Dersim's religious and cultural traditions. (It is through their mothers rather than their fathers that the post-*Tertele* generations relate to what survives of Dersim's culture.) Sıdıka Avar's memoir *Dağ çiçeklerim* (my mountain flowers) narrates how an enterprising woman teacher brought young girls down from the mountains of Dersim to educate them and turn them into proper, modern Turks.

In our coverage of Kurdish history and society, it has been our journal's intention to pay adequate attention to the gender dimension (besides those of class, ethnicity, language, religion and political economy). We are therefore pleased to present this special issue titled *Theorising women and war in Kurdistan: A feminist and critical perspective* with a focus on the role of women as actors as well as victims in war and conflict. The guest editors, Nazand Begikhani, Wendelmoet Hamelink and Nerina Weiss, are long-time members of the Kurdish Studies Network (KSN) and have each previously published relevant and memorable work themselves, and for this issue they have brought together a set of remarkable papers, each of which offers a new and unusual perspective on cases of gendered violence.

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Editors' acknowledgment

We are proud to present this special issue focusing on the important yet neglected issue of women and war in Kurdistan and would wholeheartedly like to thank our guest editors for bringing together such interesting articles. Our sincere thanks to the authors for their hard work and cooperation during the rigorous and intensive peer-review and co-editing process. As always, we are grateful to our anonymous reviewers who generously gave us their time and expertise. Special thanks also go to our dear colleagues Sacha Alsancakli, Marlene Schäfers, Joost Jongerden, Naomi Houghton and Ethem Çoban for their dedicated help in preparing the special issue. Last but not least, we are grateful to Ergin Öpengin, Rezhîar Fakhir, Rûnbîr Serkepkanî, Seevan Saeed and Choman Hardi for assisting in the translation of the article abstracts into Kurdish.

Welat Zeydanhoğlu
Managing Editor of Kurdish Studies
editor@kurdishstudies.net

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