Spatializing Difference: The Making of an Internal Border in Early Republican Elazığ, Turkey

The macadam road from Elazığ to Dersim in eastern Turkey offered a sublime landscape of breathtaking beauty and imminent danger at once: As the military jeep gingerly climbed the steep hills, leaving Elazığ’s verdant vineyards and gardens behind, Sıdıka Avar surveyed from her passenger seat the deep ravines and the endless tracery of waterfalls, brooks, lakes, and hundreds of caves nestled between them. But from her window, she could also see the abandoned remains of numerous horse carts, trucks, trailers, and even a bulldozer that had fallen off the cliffs together with its passengers. As she clung to her seat for dear life, she counted 157 sharp bends on the road in the space of just 9 miles. Avar had begun to embark on these yearly journeys after convincing the regional inspector general that, as a civilian, she could more effectively recruit students for the Elazığ Girls’ Institute, where she was a Turkish teacher, than could armed gendarmes forcibly wresting children from their frightened parents’ arms. Nonetheless, especially in the early years, Avar seldom traveled alone, and as she moved from guard post to garrison across this increasingly militarized landscape, she was greeted at every stop by young conscripts who expected her. For the perils were not just in the indomitability of this geography but in its multiple, embedded conflicting interests (Figure 1).

During the early years of the republic, the objectives and policies of the newly formed Turkish nation-state frequently clashed with established patterns of social, political, and economic life in and around Dersim. Local Kurdish tribes, who had long-standing autonomous structures of governance and ethnic and religious solidarity, repeatedly rose up against the state’s centralizing and assimilationist policies, causing constant restlessness throughout the 1920s and 1930s, with major eruptions of violence in 1931 and 1937. Anxious to consolidate its still-fragile authority, the government responded with an aerial bombing campaign that destroyed nearly a third of the villages in the province. As part of a major administrative restructuring, the government also reassigned some of the most violent counties to the region of Dersim, cordoned off the newly formed province, forcibly evacuated thousands of survivors to western Turkey, and summarily embarked upon a project of “civilizing,” that is, “Turkicizing” it. Dersim’s name, along with several other place-names in the region, was changed to Tunceli, as if to rewrite a new identity over its manifest Kurdishness. Thereafter, travel beyond Elazığ into this combat zone required special military permits akin to internal passports, and Elazığ itself became a border town in the middle of Turkey’s national territory (Figure 2).
Figure 1 Panoramic view of Elazı looking north (from Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Demiryolları (TCDD) [Turkish State Railways], Elazı-Genc Demiryollunun İşletmeye Açılışı [Ankara: TCDD, 1939]).

Figure 2 Map of Regional Inspectorates indicating the location of Dersim and Elazı as of 1936 (drawn by Jennifer Webb).
This peculiar concentration of administrative and institutional structures, military presence, and surveillance technologies in the expanse between Dersim and Elazığ provides an invaluable opportunity for interrogating the spatiality of borders. Typically, modern borders conjure up images of barbed wire, walls, watchtowers, drop gates, searchlights, and more recently, sophisticated surveillance devices—all intended to keep check on the movements of goods and individuals. Borders are dividers, between here and there, us and them, inside and outside; in the age of illegal immigration they are sites of drug trafficking and other transgressive crossings. Their uneven, porous, and liminal qualities have become the focus of innovative recent scholarship. A border is often envisioned as a line—even though as thick and intricately constructed one—rather than as a surface, a space consisting of complex, reticulated, and inhabited mechanisms and practices that produce territorialities and subjectivities. This latter conceptualization reveals not only how borders demarcate domains by monitoring flows and controlling access between them but also how they mediate the constitution of social hierarchies and the performance of otherness through the layout and use of very context-specific structures. Such an approach draws attention to the experience of passing through and that of living at a border site, thereby foregrounding the production of multiple interpretations of space and the negotiation of differentiated identities at these critical locations of encounter, exchange, and segregation. At a time when border agencies have begun to expand their coverage and operate more diffusely across national territories—sometimes even reaching beyond borders to keep closer tabs on the activities of individuals by ranking them and filtering them based on their official or perceived identities—conceptualizing borders as spaces may be all the more useful.

Elazığ provides a particularly illustrative case in point. During the 1930s and 1940s, the province’s mountains and valleys, streets and squares, homes and school classrooms, as well as the myriad activities these places engendered, revealed how components of the physical environment served as social sorters. Spatial practices ranging from innocuous daily encounters between schoolchildren to solemn collective ceremonies or military raids, which accentuated the uneven power relations between the state, its agents, and the local population, generated and reified differences among people, depending on their ethnoreligious tribal affiliations and relationship with the central authorities.

Changing state–citizen relations in this region are the key to understanding the sites and practices constituting the focus of this study. Although the earliest bouts of violence date back to local resistance against the mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman bureaucratic reforms to modernize the state, the founding cadres of the Turkish Republic espoused a far more ambitious agenda than their predecessors to consolidate the national territory and homogenize the polity, and they pursued it far more forcefully. Their interventions profoundly altered this region’s built environment and its broader geography, affecting how local populations and agents of the state engaged with and moved through it, ultimately changing how this landscape was imagined by all. To elucidate this process, I first provide a short overview of this turbulent history to familiarize readers with the context. In the subsequent sections of this article, I turn to the emergence of divergent cognitive maps, the expansion of infrastructure and institutions, and spatial practices, symbolic and utilitarian, to explicate the production of a borderscape in the region between Elazığ and Dersim.

A Remote and Tribal Region

From the middle of the nineteenth century, Ottoman bureaucrats embarked on wide-ranging reforms often modeled on European precedents intended to modernize the state apparatus, expanding its jurisdiction and broadening its reach into various arenas of social life. Inspired by the Napoleonic Code, they restructured Ottoman territories into a hierarchical system of vilayets (provinces), sanjaks (departments), and kazas (districts) to bring the empire’s expansive landholdings under a uniform, centralized administrative network. They began to regularize institutional structures and diversify their remit with a particular focus on improving tax collection, expanding conscription, and providing modern education. Moreover, Ottoman reformers understood how crucial transport networks were for shoring up state authority across a large geography. Hence they issued laws and regulations for the construction of roads and facilitated the expansion of transport and communication infrastructure in the empire.

Nonetheless, the expanding state apparatus was uneven in its reach: Ottoman attempts to assume more direct control over administrative matters, construct roads, extract taxes, and demand military service from the population met with significant resistance and were partially effective at best. In eastern Anatolia, administrative redistricting was implemented and new institutions were introduced, including the creation in 1879 of the vilayet of Elazığ (previously known as Mamuret-ü Aziz), comprising the sanjaks of Malatya, Dersim, and Elazığ—with Elazığ serving as the provincial seat. But the state’s resources were meager and this was a remote and mountainous region, so it remained relatively
untouched by most of the aforementioned changes. The limitations of the centralizing reforms were more obvious there since local tribes retained a significant degree of autonomy from the Istanbul government, their leaders kept their status and power, and, importantly, they acted as tax farmers. Consequently, the next few decades were marked by sporadic confrontations throughout eastern and southeastern Anatolia between Ottoman security forces and their local tribal allies on the one hand and the various other Kurdish tribes that refused to consent to government reforms on the other. Despite mutual misgivings, however, the Kurds fought with the Ottoman forces during World War I. After the empire’s demise, the nationalists mobilized a resistance movement to liberate the country from post–World War I occupation by the Allies, and Kurdish leaders would join them, forming a coalition, albeit a provisional one.

After establishing the republic in 1923, however, the country’s new leaders, steered by the founding president, Kemal Atatürk, not only continued to further centralize the state apparatus but also adopted assimilationist policies designed to forge a homogeneous national polity out of the heterogeneous population inherited from the Ottoman Empire. This latter objective of forced social engineering implied a radical shift in the foundational premises of the state and a deep disappointment for the Kurds, who had become an important nationalist goal. For the locals—already familiar with every nook and cranny of this sparsely populated and rugged terrain—Dersim, Elazığ, and the area around them became a vast site of resistance against the homogenizing policies of the state implemented through increasingly violent means. For the state—more specifically its military and civilian agents—unfamiliar with the peculiarities of this geography, this was treacherous terrain that had to be surveyed, documented, and rendered legible and accessible.

**Discrepant Mappings**

One of the most remarkable aspects of the battle maps used by the Turkish military during the 1930s was the pervasive lack of specific topographic information about the terrain in question. Two maps depicting consequent phases of a major military operation that took place in 1930 in Pülümüür (the northeastern district of Dersim) provide representative examples of this observation (Figure 3). The same base map was clearly used to register troop movements.
What is remarkable here is how little detail the base map includes about the physical geography of this area, which, given its severity, had an outsize effect on military logistics, tactics, and the outcome of events. Except for the paths of major creeks and a few mountain peaks, the sheet is mostly blank, and the symbols indicating military installations and troop positions and movements seem to float in a vacuum. During the early years of the republic, the widespread lack of familiarity with regional geography was a major challenge for the military in eastern Turkey, which was beset by hostilities between government forces and various local tribal entities. According to Staff Major Lütfü Güvenç, who authored a field manual with advice on lessons to be drawn from the 1937 operations, this was a major impediment to internal pacification and had cost the military dearly in terms of lives and equipment.30 The rebels' intimate familiarity with the peculiar land formations in this region was a good weapon against government forces.31

To mitigate this profound knowledge gap, government bureaucrats and military officials like Güvenç produced reams of reports, field manuals, and guides for operational purposes, and these have only recently become public.32 With systematically gathered information, such documents provided a quick start for the chiefs of staff planning military operations and for field commanders leading their troops to battle. They contained drawings, diagrammatic maps, and photographs supplemented with lengthy descriptions to make up for the dearth of detailed location maps, especially of the most impregnable sites where some of the bloodiest confrontations took place.33 The documents provided surveys of the region’s climate, topography, and demographic breakdown; inventories of available networks and
technologies of transport and communication; and information about the movement patterns and camouflage and survival techniques used by the locals (Figure 4).

As secret internal documents they were unencumbered by procedural constraints or legalities and provided invaluable insight into how the Turkish state sought to survey and render legible this “strange” terrain. Despite limited resources, the state invested considerable capital in acquiring technologies for obtaining and conveying intelligence not available to the locals as readily. In these reports we learn how radiotelegraphy and flashlight signaling using Morse code allowed troops to obtain advance intelligence about suspicious movements in the gorges and hills. As early as 1930, reconnaissance flights monitored peasants—men, women, and children—to identify routes they used and places where they congregated. The rhythms of day and night were altered by equipment making possible nocturnal troop movements in a place otherwise asleep. By a range of modern means to collect and catalog data, the state was producing this geography anew (Figures 5 and 6).
Differences in the production and transmission of knowledge about the physical environment also entailed the formation of differential subjectivities in relation to it. The soldiers, commanders, and bureaucrats recruited from other parts of the country came to the region reluctantly and wanted to stay there as briefly as possible. They knew little about it before their arrival and had to rely on reports, formal instruction, and technology to navigate it. In contrast, the locals had cultivated a lifelong familiarity with the harsh climate and peculiar land formations characterizing this geography. Theirs was an embodied knowledge, transmitted through informal endogenous social networks and woven into their daily activities. Much to the consternation of authorities, who preferred them to settle in denser communities in the plains, many Kurds lived in small, scattered, and remote villages ensconced on mountains and connected through tenuous networks of steep and narrow footpaths. They drew their subsistence from the land: topography made farming impossible, but they took their animals to pasture and harvested herbs, berries, and other necessities. In short, their livelihood, seminomadic and rudimentary for centuries, depended on their developing from early childhood a keen sense of orientation, temporality, and weather patterns, as well as a solid knowledge of the local flora and fauna. Incongruous readings and inhabitations of the land became particularly evident in relation to its symbolic significance and uses. The Dersim report published in 1935 described the province as if it were an island at the confluence of Anatolia’s crucial river networks. Verdant and sublime, fertile with life as well as origination and regeneration myths, this was also a sacred land. Some sites along the creeks, on tiny islands or in hidden caves, were ziyaret sites, holy shrines or sites of pilgrimage, which were revered by these local practitioners of Alevi Islam (Figures 7 and 8). Some of these ziyaret sites offered solace to individuals at times of distress; others could hold large enclaves of tribal gatherings on a seasonal cycle. But the distinctive yet imperceptibly subtle features imbuing these places with mystic meanings eluded government officials, who disdained this nearly pantheistic reverence. Their actions violently punctured such sacred local cosmologies. They considered these unstructured outdoor rituals that lacked well-defined precincts to be prone to subversion, so they tried to catalog them and, when possible, infiltrated them, which Dersimis found unbearably intrusive. The life that emanated from the ziyaret sites—trees, flower, birds, fish—were sacred gifts from local saints; Dersimis believed harming them was sinful and saw themselves as their custodians, but government officials regarded them as resources and showed little misgiving about hunting or fishing in them. Like their Ottoman predecessors—and in efforts that drive government policy to this day to construct megadams—republican officials proposed flooding these valleys and caves, ostensibly to improve the region’s agricultural prospects but with the implicit intention to render them inaccessible for ritual purposes and use as shelter during raids. This is not to romanticize the life of the locals nor demonize the state’s agents but rather to establish how one side’s perception of a trap could be seen as an asset for the
other. Combat conditions tested everyone’s limits, sometimes in unexpected ways, and both sides were vulnerable to the knowledge and the tools of the other. On the one hand, military commanders filed countless frustrated field reports about elusive targets and invisible movements; about losing men to freak accidents, to altitude sickness, or drowning. Scattered around the mountains and ravines, hidden from the view of unfamiliar eyes, deep caves provided shelter where up to a hundred locals with supplies could hide for several days.43 The military described in detail how to identify such cave entrances and detect human presence— recommending, for instance, listening for the cries of thirsty toddlers as the likeliest source of sound—and smoking out those hidden inside.44 On the other hand, frightened locals told of narrow escapes by hiding in the hollow of a tree or the undercroft of a large rock—thanks, they said, to the providence of the prophet Hzr.45 They baffled commanders by jumping into ice-cold waters never to resurface but
managing to breathe through hollow reeds while submerged as they waited for the soldiers to move on. These testimonies illustrate how even as they stood side by side in the same physical location, the state’s agents and the locals were never quite in the same representational space. Importantly, I would argue, these testimonies go a long way toward explaining why the government—unable to permeate what looked to be an indomitable landscape and opaque social structures—resorted to the use of blunt instruments and overwhelming force, costing so many lives and causing such extensive destruction.

**Infrastructural Expansion in the Countryside**

Military needs also informed infrastructural priorities. The provision of an expansive transport and communications network was widely seen as essential to pacifying eastern Anatolia and keeping it under sustained state control. Although Ottoman reformers had repeatedly tried to initiate road construction in the region, they had met with fierce resistance and completed few of their projects. Starting from the late 1920s, republican officials took up infrastructural expansion with renewed enthusiasm. The officials from the Ministry of Public Works collaborated closely with the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in determining the itineraries of roads and priorities in construction.

Arguably the most important component of the republican pacification strategy was investing in the development of railroads in eastern Turkey, which previously had no train service (Figure 9). An accelerated effort to install tracks, build bridges, and dig tunnels followed, and in quick succession the first trains reached Malatya in 1931, Elazığ in 1934, and Diyarbakır in 1935 (Figure 10). These infrastructural achievements, which transformed the region’s geography, were widely touted in public speeches, contemporary architectural journals, and propaganda publications as indispensable instruments of progress. They were vital to consolidating the national market, moving goods across the country,
and reducing the need for imports. Railroad access was seen as crucial for national defense against foreign aggression should troops need to be rushed from east to west, as during the War of Independence. In actuality, however, this transit network was used to move troops, equipment, and ammunition from west to east into the combat zones of Dersim and surrounding provinces. In the year it was opened to service, the Elazığ train station became the locus from which thousands of Dersimis were dispatched to western provinces in a compulsory internal exile, severing them from their homes and dividing their families for more than a decade (Figure 11).

The Turkish military also resorted to the use of new aircraft technology to gain the upper hand in the battle for eastern Turkey. Although warplanes had been used by the Ottomans during World War I and had seen some action during the War of Independence, the air force was expanded to a full-fledged branch of the Turkish military and used for suppressing Kurdish uprisings. The planes were flown in from larger bases in central Anatolia or Diyarbakir or shipped in crates by train and assembled in small airfields scattered in eastern Anatolia. The base for the 1937 Dersim operations was in Vertetik; as the military improved its foothold in the
region, Elazığ acquired a military airport in 1940, one of the first in the country. Aircraft were deployed for reconnaissance missions and for the somewhat indiscriminate aerial bombardment of hideouts and settlements of dissident tribes. “Iron eagles” rained death and destruction, terrifying and overpowering the Dersimis, who had never before seen airplanes. Flying overland eliminated the challenges of soldiers scaling dizzying heights or crossing ice-cold rapids, effectively flattening the topographical challenges that had benefited the locals.

The introduction of new technologies and the expansion of transport infrastructure was a double-edged knife: while opening new corridors of transit between previously unconnected places and meeting logistical demands, it also exposed valuable equipment and structures to sabotage. Construction to augment the state’s military capabilities and to protect the infrastructural investments made necessary a 6-mile exclusion zone on each side of the rail lines. Guards were posted at particularly vulnerable or strategic points such as bridges (damage to which was difficult to repair), and auxiliary networks of roads were stabilized for transporting soldiers to these positions and enabling the supply chain (from ammunition to foodstuffs) to reach them in these remote corners (Figures 12 and 13). In small towns such as Hozat, Amutka, and Mameki, nine large barracks were built to house the hundreds of conscripted young men stationed...
Road construction and logistical arrangements were put into place to facilitate the deployment in relevant checkpoints and, when necessary, in military operations.

Wherever large concentrations of military and institutional structures were built, the government also tried to provide subsidized housing for military and bureaucratic personnel. Ministers, military commanders, and governors constantly complained about the shortage of well-qualified staff to run the various offices and to maintain public security. But they were reluctant to recruit and train the locals, since they felt they could not trust the people of the region.
Enticing personnel from other parts of the country where the standard of living was relatively better to this deprived and remote region proved difficult. Service in the East (Şark hizmeti) was widely perceived as punishment, and those who took office often did so with resentment. Many did not want to move their families, and conditions for men who came to their postings alone were not very good. To remedy this, officials recommended providing subsidized housing built to a reasonable standard as an incentive for moving families (Figure 16). But the government’s means were limited; construction was uneven and realized in far less quantity than needed. State officials had envisioned these accommodations to be showcases for modern life, serving as aspirational examples for the locals. By the same token, with their gridlike site layout, whitewashed exteriors, and pitched roofs, these government-built units had a distinctive appearance, and they helped create segregated environments, further reinforcing differences between the region’s long-term inhabitants and the newcomers.

Cumulatively these structures and technologies inscribed a will to permanence on what had been, for the state, uncharted territory. The changes introduced new paths and forms of movement, transformed the notions of prospect and refuge, and recast notions of near and far. A nuanced examination of the changes in Elazığ, Dersim, and their surroundings reveals that militarization had an extraordinarily wide reach, not only bringing into its fold sites explicitly dedicated to military and bureaucratic personnel use and their various official activities but also engulfing seemingly civilian spaces and practices.

The State and the City

The ebbs and flows of military activity and the urgency of the assimilationist mission also shaped the urban environment. In contrast to Dersim, where a militarized forbidden zone hindered the establishment of bureaucratic and institutional facilities, neighboring Elazığ was overwhelmed by the presence of the state. Until 1946, it had to host offices pertaining to the administration of Dersim as well. Centered on Republic Square, which was anchored by an Atatürk monument, Elazığ’s new “cultural district” comprised the recognizable institutional structures of the early republican urban landscape such as schools, the Halkevi (party-run community center), a family teagarden, and a children’s playground (Figure 17). Such familiar cultural and recreational spaces provided Elazığ with only an apparent sense of normalcy, because elsewhere in town the signs of military activity were plainly visible. In addition to new barracks and staff headquarters, many existing buildings were converted into warehouses, army supply offices, and an animal hospital for the hundreds of horses and mules that belonged to the army.

The template of urban elements and architectural language used in Elazığ was comparable to contemporaneous developments in other Turkish cities but also differed in significant ways. In the first place, in eastern Turkey, components of urban life embodying the state’s ideological message were given precedence over other services. For example, Elazığ received its Atatürk monument in 1933, the erection of which was prioritized over the provision of more pressing needs for supplies or infrastructure, long before much larger
cities were provided with such monuments (Figure 18). Given the region’s “sensitivities,” republican officials also expedited the construction of Halkevleri, centers tasked with adult education and indoctrination. Hence, to accelerate the setting of its concrete slabs and columns, heat from stoves was used in the construction of the Elazığ Halkevi—one of the first such centers in the country—which was completed in just nine months and was inaugurated in early 1934 (Figure 19). A less visible but more fundamental distinction concerned the provision and management of these institutions and the structures housing them. Unlike in other cities, these functions were not determined by the relevant ministry, such as the Ministry of Public Works or Education, and its functionaries. Rather, as evidenced by direct correspondence with the prime minister, they were decided by the demands of the local inspector general, a military governor.

Figure 17 The Kültür Mahallesi (cultural district) of Elazığ (from Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Devlet Demiryolları [TCDD] [Turkish State Railways], Elazığ-Genc Demiryolunun İşletmeye Açılışı [Ankara: TCDD, 1939]).

Figure 18 The Atatürk monument in Elazığ in 1933 with incomplete urban infrastructure beyond (courtesy of Marmara Elazığlılar Derneği from the collection of Mahmut Kahraman).
with extraordinary powers who also controlled the civilian bureaucracy and the judiciary. Even when they appeared similar to their counterparts elsewhere in Turkey, institutions in Elazığ worked in very different ways. All republican didactic institutions sought to “civilize” by example and to cultivate a loyal citizenry, and in the eastern provinces, where most of the population spoke Kurdish, government officials were particularly keen to prioritize the installation of institutions facilitating the enforcement of their assimilationist policies. But Elazığ presented a more complicated challenge: according to Ziyaeddin Fahri Findkoğlu, a renowned professor of sociology, the town’s demographic makeup—a predominantly Zaza-speaking Alevi Kurdish population with strong tribal affiliations and a mix of Armenians, Syriacs, and recent converts—was a serious cause for concern for the central government. Speaking at a weeklong compulsory conference aimed at civil servants and educators posted in Elazığ, Findkoğlu reminded his audience of the importance of their mission as social engineers in charge of suppressing the locals’ diverse ethnoreligious loyalties (“Turkicizing” them) and keeping in check any potentially threatening conspiratorial behavior.

Nowhere did these contrasts snap into focus more clearly than in the Elazığ Girls’ Institute, founded in 1937 under direct orders from Abdullah Alpdoğan Paşa, the region’s inspector general, who deemed the need so pressing that the Elazığ State Hospital building, which was nearing completion, was reassigned for the new Girls’ Institute (Figure 20). Girls’ institutes were vocational schools for secondary education designed to train modern wives and
mothers, but in Elazığ the primary task was to train “mothers who spoke in Turkish with their children.” In addition to the typical recruits from families of civil servants and the town’s elite, the institute had a sizable number of boarders, all of whom were Kurdish. The latter was a mixed crowd ranging from daughters of government-friendly tribal chiefs to children forcibly taken from their families and orphans whose parents had died in clashes with government forces.

In the words of one government official, it was like the ultramodern American factory in the proverbial Turkish joke, which “took cows from one end and churned out sausages from the other”: the institute was a factory that took “pigheaded and disobedient” girls with no language skills from “the poorest and the most primitive backgrounds imaginable” and “turned them into civilized human beings.”

The graphic factory analogy disturbingly mirrored the destruction and reconstruction of identity the Kurdish girls experienced—a process school officials, such as Sıdıka Avar, meticulously documented in albums filled with before-and-after photographs (Figure 21).

The institute was effectively a microcosm of social stratification: difference was made tangible immediately in how the girls’ bodies were treated. Many of them were deliberately severed from their families and the only homes they knew and were further traumatized upon arrival as their clothes were taken and burned, their hair was shaved to get rid of head lice, and they were quarantined in separate quarters for days before they could join the other students. Even when implemented in the name of health and hygiene, these measures scarred them for life. Decades later, they still recalled how they felt branded since “otherness” was inscribed on them with their bald heads and government-issued uniforms.

Ethnocultural differentiation was reinforced through coursework as well. When they arrived, almost none of the Kurdish girls spoke Turkish; hence their curriculum differed from that of their Turkish schoolmates. They were not allowed to speak Kurdish among themselves and were afraid to do so even when they were alone. Furthermore, students self-segregated by ethnicity in the common areas of the school, acting on what they implicitly understood to be their designated status within its social order. In the dining hall, it was understood that the daughters of civil servants would serve as role models demonstrating civilized manners by example and that Kurdish girls would emulate them, without much regard for what the latter could bring to the exchange. In sum, language and ethnicity coupled with the visible signs of abject poverty became painful markers at the institute of a disparity felt by those on either side of the divide.

The ranking practices occurring inside the close quarters of the Girls’ Institute resonated with the broader world experiences of Elazığ’s variegated constituencies, highlighting differences all the more. This was especially true of how the new “cultural district” was used and understood. The centerpiece of the district, the Atatürk monument, served as the anchor for national gatherings, as was the case in many other Turkish cities. Surrounded by the institutional landmarks of the new order, the monument was frequently a backdrop for souvenir photos of visiting civil servants (Figure 22). It also was the culmination point of commemorative ceremonies celebrating Turkey’s foundation myths and the tenuous union its leaders forged, glossing over the clashes unfolding just outside city limits.

Far away from these sites of strife, sitting in his atelier in Istanbul, the sculptor Kenan Ali Yontunç noted that Turkey’s earliest Atatürk monument, in Zeytinburnu (Istanbul), portrayed the president in civilian clothes whereas his design for the Elazığ monument featured him in his field marshal uniform, “standing at the farthest edge of our nation’s territory” with a pair of binoculars in his hands and “surveying the front.” Considering that Elazığ was nowhere near the edge of Turkey’s national territory, Yontunç’s statement is revealing for unwittingly exposing how—with the uprisings in the neighboring regions and the movement restrictions imposed on the local population—it was actually beginning to be imagined as a border town of sorts, one that was well within Turkey’s national borders.

Less well known outside Elazığ were the rituals of shaming that happened in the same places but were designed to underscore Kurdish disenfranchisement, such as the decision to photograph captured tribal leaders in front of the Atatürk monument (Figure 23). Particularly remarkable was Atatürk’s visit to Elazığ in the immediate aftermath of the 1937 Dersim rebellion for a much-publicized inspection tour of the eastern provinces, when as if enacting a symbolic conquest of
the region, his itinerary followed along the newly installed railways, and he made high-profile stops at sites of recent violence. During this trip, Atatürk was very noticeably accompanied by Sabiha Gökçen, his adopted daughter and Turkey’s first female fighter pilot, who was known to have taken part in the Dersim air campaign. In this publicity visit, Gökçen not only embodied the state’s superior firepower, but as a young female warrior her sheer presence was also a symbolic emasculation of the patriarchal Kurdish society (Figure 24). Yet, any perceived notion of tactical advantage was tentative, for tensions were all too close to the surface. Hours before the arrival of Atatürk and his entourage, Seyit Rıza, the most sought-after rebel leader in Dersim, and his sixteen-year-old son were hastily and unlawfully executed by local government officials, who were determined to forestall a confrontation with Kurdish tribesmen, who were gathering on the hills facing Elazığ to demand an audience with the president or, worse, to stage a violent rescue raid during the much-anticipated visit. To avoid a showdown, Atatürk’s train was delayed for several hours at a stop outside town.
The convergence of these incommensurate rituals in the city’s most prominent new public spaces registered differently depending upon one’s ethno-religious affiliations. Once experienced, they became part of everyone’s repository of memory and inflected everyone’s sense of belonging, social ranking, and loyalties.

Conclusion

In this article, I have sought to paint a broad-brush picture of Elazığ as a borderscape. This is not to underestimate insights gained from conceptualizing borders as linear formations with an emphasis placed on their porosity. But I would argue that perceiving borders as surfaces, that is, as “borderscapes,” refocuses our critical attention on how those who inhabit that specific landscape experience it—rather than just those moving through it or those keeping tabs on their movements.

This line of inquiry uncovers how in Elazığ and its environs an ensemble of military officials, technocrats, and bureaucrats cultivated a new kind of territoriality through their technologically mediated representations and navigations of the landscape, which was transformed through their extensive infrastructural interventions. Unlike a frontier where we could observe gradual dissipation of central surveillance and military powers as is more typical of pre-modern states, Elazığ and its environs experienced a deliberate and sustained buildup of the personnel and material presence of the state. Although this buildup was uneven and vulnerable to myriad tactical subversions, the state’s policies were distinctively modernizing and were designed to exert across-the-board pressure on a clearly delimited domain. This approach foregrounds the manner in which the practices of physical and symbolic violence engendered in a wide range of spaces at different scales produced social stratification, undermining the stated goals of national integration. Identity formation and the production of social allegiances are tied intimately to spatial experience. Continuous can be perceived between seemingly disparate mediums of expression from permanent transformations of the physical environment to ephemeral appropriation of sites as divergent as intimate domestic spaces to prominent public spaces, allowing us to identify the emergence of a habitus of differentiation that we may begin to associate with the transformative formation of a border landscape. By conceptualizing borders as complex surfaces we can appreciate how Elazığ emerged at the intersection of military interventions, infrastructural networks, and institutional structures as a liminal site exposing the limits of the Turkish state’s central authority, the rigidity of its official ideology, and the incongruity of its attempts to suppress Kurdish identities.

Notes
2. Ibid., 71, 381.
3. Ibid., 23, 163.
6. The meaning of the name Dersim is not settled. In his encyclopedic tome, Bilge Umar notes that he was unable to locate a reliable source; Bilge Umar, Türkiye’deki Tarıbel adları: Türkiye’nin Tarıbel Cografyası ve Tarıbel Adları Üzerine Alfabetik Dizende Bir İnceleme (İstanbul: İnkıláp Kitabevi, 1993), 211. According to the Turkish Automotive Association’s guide (Türkiye Tıring ve Otomobil Kurumu, Türkiye rehberi [İstanbul: Türkiye Tıring ve Otomobil Kurumu, 1991], 962), Dersim has Persian origins (Kurdish and Persian are closely related languages), and it is a composite noun meaning silver (sim) gate (der). This is also the most commonly used explanation in Kurdish sources: Nuri Dersimi, Kürdistan Tarıbinde Dersim (Aleppo: Am Kurda, 1952), 11; Sükrü Aslan, Herkecin Bildiği Şir: Dersim: Tarih, Toplum, Ekonomi, Dî ve Kültûr (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2010), 18.
7. Sites that mediate transition from one state or status to another (frontiers, boundaries, borders) have long been of interest to scholars in political science, history, geography, and anthropology. For a brief, critical overview of approaches, see Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State (Oxford: Berg, 1999); Hastings Donnan, Borderlands: Ethnographic Approaches to Security, Power, and Identity (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 2010). An especially useful and continually updated resource for the study of borders is maintained by the Centre for International Borders Research, Queens University Belfast (http://www.qub.ac.uk/research-centres/centreforinternationalbordersresearch).


7. *For a recent comparative overview of increasing border-control mechanisms, with special emphasis on their materiality in light of eroding state sovereignty, see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2014). Although primarily focused on the US–Mexico border, Peter Andreas also provides a global context for the expansion of diffused control mechanisms; Peter Andreas, *Border Games: Policing the U.S.–Mexico Divide*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004). Examples of this diffused pattern of operation abound and make themselves felt more and more in everyday life. In the UK, for instance, as of the last academic year, universities are required by the UK Border Agency to monitor and report student attendance weekly; Don Ingham, “Universities Need to Be Ready When a UK Border Agency Inspector Calls,” *Guardian: Higher Education Network*; “UKBA Clarifies Universities’ Responsibilities,” *Times Higher Education*, http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/news/ukba-clarifies-universities-responsibilities/2002099.article (accessed 27 June 2013). Border agencies, especially of countries that are concerned about illegal immigration, also monitor territories that lie outside those of the sovereign government to which they are attached. How beyond-borders monitoring needs to be done is a highly contested issue. Debates over the deployment of various technologies to monitor the US–Mexico border are well known to American audiences. Spain, borrowing quite heavily from the United States, has also installed high-tech monitoring equipment, including infrared cameras and other heat-seeking surveillance devices to track the northbound movement of people in Morocco; Documentos de Seguridad y Defensa, Ministerio de Defensa, Centro Superior de Estudios de la Defensa Nacional, *Las Nuevas Tecnologías en la Seguridad Transfronteriza*, Feb. 2010.


22. The Kurdish language spoken in the broader region comprises a number of dialects, including Kurmanc and Zaza. The former is spoken in the southern sections of the Dersim province near Elazğ, the rest speak Kurmanc. In Dersim locally, Zaza is also known as Dünul; Kemal Burkay, “Dersim–Doğa, Tarih, İnşan,” in Herkese Bîdîlêr Şîr: Derivim, Tarîb, Topûmûn, Ekonomi, Dîl ve Kültûr (İstanbul: Iletişim Yayınları, 2010), 25. In 1915, Ottoman government officials ordered the mass deportation of Anatolian Armenians, which decimated their population as hundreds of thousands died at the hands of Ottoman officials and marauding bandits as well as from exposure, disease, and starvation. Dersimis, who had a long tradition of offering refuge to those escaping persecution by the central authority also provided some degree of shelter to Elazğ–Harput Armenians. While some of the refugees eventually left the country, some stayed with the Dersimis and lived out their lives as Kurds. See, for example, Boghos Jafarian, Claire Mangasarian, and Leon Mangasarian, Farewell Karabert: The Autobiography of Boghos Jafarian (Madison, Wis.: C. Mangasarian, 1989), 105–9; Dersimi, Kürdistan Tarıbine Dersim, 41–42.
23. Dersim is in Zaza, the local language. The Turkish word would be Dersimli, a different grammatical construction. I use the former in this article. For contemporary documents that imply the possibility of Armenians’ incorporation into the ranks of Dersimi fighters, see the report published by the directorate general of the gendarmerie; Dersim report, 47, 62. Newspapers reporting at the time also suggested similar mixing. One article published during the trial of Seyit Rüz, the local leader of the rebelling tribes, noted that he had a church in his village and that in moments of distress he crossed himself and sought solace in Christian spiritual practices. The article can be read either as suggesting that Seyit Rüz is a secret Armenian—therefore inherently disloyal—or as an exposé of his unorthodox Alevi practices borrowing from local Christian practices and, from a Sunni perspective (espoused by state officials), bordered on the blasphemous; “Seyit Rüz’un Mahkemesinde Ortaya Cikan Hakikatlar,” Akam, 30 Oct. 1937. The issue remains alive to this day: during an academic conference in the summer of 2007, Yusuf Halajoglu, the then director of the Turkish Historical Society, the main state-funded institution for historical research, argued controversially that many Alevi Kurds in the region were Armenians who had converted (http://arsiv.ntvmsnbc.com/news/417879.asp).
24. Seyid (and variations seyid, sayît), a term borrowed from Arabic, refers to a person who traces his lineage (xere) to the Prophet Muhammad. While it is doubtful whether local religious leaders in the region could really trace their ancestry to the Prophet, these men commanded respect in their localities; they acted as tribal elders; they settled disputes; and their wisdom provided guidance to their followers. In the Dersim–Elazğ, pur or dede was also used to refer to Alevi religious leaders. Reformer republican officials considered the deeply entrenched local authority of these religious leaders to be an important roadblock to their centralization efforts and sought to completely eliminate it. For informative studies of the ethnoreligious religious structures in this region, see Erdal Gezik, Alevî Kürtler: Dinsel, Etnik ve Politik Sorunlar Baglaminda (Ankara: Kalan, 2000); Ahmet Kerim Gültekin, Tunçeli’dê Katsal Mekan Kültûs (Ankara: Kalan Yayımları, 2004). For a detailed English-language study, see Van Bruinessen, Ağa, Şahbik, and State.
26. Dersim report, 12, 224, 240.
27. The other comparable area would be Hakkari, in the southeasternmost corner of the country, bordering both Iran and Iraq, a similarly inaccessible and mountainous region with a predominantly Kurdish population. For a military assessment of the geographic challenges of both regions, see Genel Kurmay Coğrafya Encümeni, Doğu Anadolu Coğrafyası: Tâbi, Zera, Beşeri, Bayatâr (Ankara: Genelkurmay Matbaası, 1938).
28. James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998). Scott’s insights have been influential on studies focusing on efforts to pacify the Dersim region both during Ottoman rule (Klein, The Margins of Empire) and during the republican administration; Joost Jongerden, The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity, and War (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Gündoğdu and Genç, Dersim’dê Osmanlı Sıyasatı.
29. Encümeni, Doğu Anadolu Coğrafyası, 3.
30. Lütfi Güvenç, Sason Kilavuzu ve 95’lik Harakâtçında Atina Dersleri: Atatürk Serisi 1 [Sason guide and lessons to be drawn from the 1937 operations] (Ankara: T. C. Jandarma Genel Komutanlığı, 1939), 18–19. Güvenç gave a detailed inventory of the physical properties of the region around Sason, a province to the southeast of Dersim. He frequently underscored the difficulty of navigating and moving troops across this rugged topography. He also noted that some location maps were generated at 1/25,000 scale by magnifying the 1/200,000 scale map and adding some annotations, but these were not very accurate (Güvenç, Sason Kilavuzu, 14). Similar concerns regarding the lack of accurate and detailed information about the terrain are also recorded in the Dersim report.
32. In the past ten years, there has been a multipronged effort to republish these documents. Various publishers, including Kaynak, Belge, and İletim, have reprinted original reports and correspondences. Tarîh Vâkıî printed facsimiles of various documents as part of its Yurt Yayımları series. Especially useful among these is the large archive of former MP Necmeddin Silan, which has been made available as a multivolume collection. Most remarkably, in late 2011, the Turkish government has made various documents public and has opened the archives of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Ankara, though full access to relevant documents remains uneven at best.
33. Both the Dersim report and Güvenç, Sason Kilavuzu, suggest the existence of 1/200,000 scale maps.
34. Ulûğ, Tunçeli Medeniyyetçe Açılar, 132.
41. Ibid., 10, 20.
42. Only in the mid-1960s did the government manage to obtain sufficient funds to start the construction of megadams, which had always been on an official wish list of infrastructural projects for this region. The Keşan Dam,
the expansive reservoir of which decisively severs Elazığ from Dersim (Tunceli), was built between 1966 and 1982; another twenty megadams have been constructed on the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers, resulting in a profound transformation of the physical geography and climate.


44. Güvenç, Sason Kılavuzu, 98, 102–3.


46. Ibid., 30.

47. The difficulties in communication, navigation, and conflicts that arise out of incongruent spatial epistemologies are akin to Paul Carter’s descriptions of the encounters between Australia’s explorers, natives, and the landscape; Paul Carter, The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape History (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). See also Alice Garner’s examination of the divergences between different stakeholders, including fishermen, salt harvesters, bureaucrats, and technocrats on the southwestern coast of France during the late nineteenth century; Alice Garner, A Shifting Shore: Locals, Outsiders, and the Transformation of a French Fishing Town, 1825–2000 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005).


49. Uluğ, Tunceli Medeniyete Açılyor, 191–95.

50. Dersim report, 75.

51. The Eastern Reform Plan, approved by the government just as the very first of the violent uprisings in Diyarbakır was being suppressed, called for an expansion of the rail network into eastern Anatolia, connecting Erzincan, Sivas, Elazığ, Diyarbakır, Çapaçık-Muş, and Van Lake, all provinces in areas that had a large Kurdish population (article 20, Şark İshlah Planı Kararı, 24 Sept. 1925). Building secure railroad networks into the east was a recurring theme in many reports written by government officials and local commanders and inspectors general appointed to the region. Ibid., 73–75; Koçak, Umumi Müfettişlikler (1927–1952), 165–66, 186, 250.


53. On 30 Aug. 1930, at the inauguration of rail services to the Sivas—the first major province along the eastern expansion project, Prime Minister İsmet İnönü, speaking to the gathered crowds, noted that to ensure İnönü’s wealth and well-being it was crucial to provide a way to reach it from Sivas in less than twenty-four hours; see İsmet Paşa’nın Siyasî ve İşîmî Nâticlari (1920–1935) (Ankara: Başkaşeta Matbaası, 1933), 295.


56. Ibid., 79.

57. In the aftermath of the 1930 uprising, the inspector general for region 1, İbrahim Tali (Ozören), noted in his report the necessity of positioning a large aircraft fleet in Elazığ; Dersim report, 207. See also Sabiha Gökcen and Oktay Verel, Atatürk’le Bir Omur (Istanbul: Altın Kitaplar Yayınları, 1994), 111–26. See also the Elazığ Airport’s official website, history, http://www.dhmi.gov.tr/havaalanlari.aspx?hv=22.


65. Varlık, Umumi Müfettişler Toplantısı Tutanakları, 140.

66. Koçak, Umumi Müfettişlikler (1927–1952), 238; Varlık, Umumi Müfettişler Toplantısı Tutanakları, 140. The difficulty of deploying personnel in eastern provinces was commonly acknowledged; the construction of schools and subsidized homes to accommodate them come up in the correspondence of those commanding not only the 4th Inspectorate General overseeing Elazığ and Dersim but also, more broadly, the eastern Anatolian provinces, many of which were under the control of the Inspectorates General.


72. Ibid., 97–99, 116.


77. Avar, Dağ Çıçeklerim, 232; Muhtar Körükçü, Köşen Haber (Istanbul: Varlık Yayınları, 1950), 55. The analogy is drawn originally by Körükçü, a bureaucrat who spent his life posted in various provinces throughout eastern Turkey, who includes his observation in his professional memoirs. Avar also reports this as an anecdote from conversation with him in his memoirs.

78. Avar, Dağ Çıçeklerim, 18, 187–88. In Sevim Yelis’s oral history interviews with Dersimí girls who attended the institute, the compulsory shaving of hair and in later years the more merciful short hairstyles come up frequently as painful memories with Salime, Saray, and Seher, women age sixty, seventy-one, and seventy-six, respectively, at the time of the interviews. They also mention how this made them feel marked in relation to others. An interesting contrast is a Dersimi girl from a wealthier background who also happens to speak Turkish upon arrival. That she does not get her hair cut becomes an undesirable separator for her from other Dersimí girls. Yelis, “Unfolding Republican Patriarchy,” 110–13.


80. Ibid., 104, 113.

81. Ibid., 117; Elif Ekin Akşit, Kesintiler Sonbisliği: Kesintilerinin Uzun Tarihsel (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005), 148–49.
