

Torture and Turkification in the Diyarbakır Military Prison*

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On the practical level, it was not the Orientalist but an Orientalised Oriental, a ‘Third Worlder’, one of ‘us’ who tortured my friend Neval and many others on a winter day in the basement of the security department. It was another Saddam Hussein or Ali Mahdi who gave the ‘counter them’ order, not a Westerner. At best, the Westerner was perhaps the torturer’s teacher in the schools of ‘science of torture.’ Neval’s torturer was a Third World man, and while he was perfecting his skills on fragile bodies and minds, the father of all Turks, the sophisticated Oriental (Atatürk), was overseeing the process from his picture on the wall.¹

Abstract

The transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish nation-state gave way to a violent nationalism promoted and defended by the Turkish military elites. With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, a program of turkification was launched to create a homogenous nation of “Turks”. Nation-state-hood was seen as the criteria for Turkey’s “Western-ness” but the ethno-religious diversity of the country was an obstacle to this project. With the intensification of the nation building process, the dilution of the largest linguistically distinct non-Turkish people, the Kurds, became a “necessity”. The articulation of “Kurdishness” was interpreted as a threat to territorial integrity or as an anachronism. Throughout the twentieth century, military and ideological offensives resulted in waves of turkification and systematic state coercion, with the Kurdish provinces placed under emergency rule for the best part of modern Turkey’s history. The relationship between Turkish modernity, torture and the turkification of Kurds has largely been neglected by scholars, despite the fact that torture has been a widespread and systematic practice in Turkey, targeting all sectors of society considered as “others”. This paper places torture at the heart of Turkish modernity and the nation-building process and analyses the use of torture as a tool for forced assimilation through the case of the Diyarbakır Military Prison in the 1980s.

Key Words: Turkey, Nationalism, Torture, Kurds, Turkification, Kemalism

* Chapter in *Rights, Citizenship & Torture: Perspectives on Evil, Law and the State*, Welat Zeydanhoğlu and John T. Parry (eds.), Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2009, pp.73-92.

¹ N Soğuk, ‘Reflections on the ‘Orientalised Orientals’’, *Alternatives*, vol. 18 no. 3, 1993, p. 377.

Torture, Modernity and the State

It is an unwritten rule that in general most detainees in Turkey, political or otherwise, will be tortured or inhumanely treated.² According to the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey (HRFT):

Torture in Turkey is not a problem limited to the period of detention. Torture is systematically applied in Turkey as an administrative practice. Whoever is deprived of his/her freedom is under permanent threat of torture from the very minute of detention...The very existence of threat of torture is itself a method of torture...Torture is not just a method of obtaining information. It is at the same time an arbitrary way of punishment. One of the main purposes of torture is to punish the criticisms and political activities, and to frighten and manipulate the whole society through terrorism. This...starts with those who have been prosecuted and subjected to torture and then spreads to and pinches the whole society...³

Torture in Turkey is practiced systematically despite the fact that it is banned in the constitution (Article 17, 1982) and that Turkey is a signatory to several international conventions on the prevention of torture and ill-treatment.⁴ In recent years, as part of a requirement of European Union membership, Turkey has adopted significant legislative and constitutional reforms and various Turkish governments have assured a “zero tolerance” policy on torture.⁵ In fact, recently the Human Rights Foundation of Turkey released statistics showing that since the 1980 military intervention more than a million people have been tortured in Turkey.⁶ Furthermore, in August 2008, following a parliamentary inquiry, Turkey’s Justice Minister Mehmet Ali Şahin admitted that almost 5,000 people had submitted complaints to judicial bodies over torture and ill-treatment at the hands of police and gendarmerie

² The UN Convention Against Torture defines torture as: “any act by which severe pain or suffering, whether physical or mental, is intentionally inflicted on a person for such purposes as obtaining from him or a third person information or a confession, punishing him for an act he or a third person has committed or is suspected of having committed, or intimidating or coercing him or a third person, or for any reason based on discrimination of any kind, when such pain or suffering is inflicted by or at the instigation of or with the consent or acquiescence of a public official or other person acting in an official capacity.”

³ Quoted in Medical Foundation for Care of Victims of Torture, *Staying Alive by Accident: Torture Survivors from Turkey in the UK*, Medical Foundation, London, 1999, p. 23.

⁴ Turkey is signatory to several international conventions such as the UN Convention against Torture, The European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

⁵ See for example Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s speech on 31 August, following victory in the 2007 general elections, for his government’s pledge on stamping out torture. See also Human Rights Watch, ‘Turkey: EU Bid Hinges on Further Rights Reforms’, 14 June, 2004, date of viewing 19 February 2009,

<http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2004/06/14/turkey-eu-bid-hinges-further-rights-reforms>.

⁶ Türkiye İnsan Hakları Vakfı, *İşkence Atlası*, TİHV Yayınları, Ankara, 2008. Such statistics are confirmed by the reports of national and international human rights organizations and bodies such as Amnesty International (AI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), Kurdish Human Rights Project (KHRP), The Human Rights Association of Turkey (IHD) and Organization of Human Rights and Solidarity for Oppressed People (Mazlum-Der).

between 2006 and 2007.⁷ In October 2008, in an unprecedented move, Minister Şahin apologised to the family of a human rights activist beaten to death in detention by prison officers “on behalf of government and the state”.⁸ Recently, human rights experts have concluded that “in spite of ostensible government commitment to a zero tolerance policy, all the evidence suggests that torture in fact remains widespread, officially sanctioned and habitual, and hence part of state policy and a systematic practice of Turkey.”⁹ There has also been a shift in Turkey in recent years towards less detectable and more devious methods, what Darius Rejali has called “clean techniques” or “stealth torture”, referring to torture practices that do not leave visible marks on a prisoner.¹⁰ These include deprivation of basic needs, spraying with high pressure water, death threats, sleep and sensory deprivation, assault, sexual harassment and mock execution.¹¹ In short, despite significant reforms and pledges to stamp out torture, the Turkish state’s “habitus” of purposefully sponsoring torture as a general instrument to modify the behaviour of people deemed “hostile”, seems to be firmly in place.

The persistent deployment of systematic torture in Turkey that targets various groups defined as enemy “others” cannot be fully understood without placing torture in particular and state-violence in general within the historical process of Turkey’s nation-building project. By this, I mean that torture in Turkey is not necessarily an anachronism from an earlier despotic past which will diminish as Turkey modernises and becomes more “European”, but that torture is directly linked to the making and maintaining of Turkey as a homogenous nation-state of Turkish speakers. In other words, torture came to be deployed and gained new purposes as Turkey became a nation-state with a new vision of achieving homogeneity. Here I have Darius Rejali’s argument in mind, when he considers torture in Iran not as an anachronism but a sign that Iran is already “modern” and that its use by different regimes is already indicative of the modernity of Iran and of nation-states in general. Rejali argues that societies can make the transition to modernity without abandoning torture and demonstrates how Iranian regimes did not discard the practice of torture, but only transformed and systematized it, using torture more to discipline their subject’s minds, instead of previous elaborate and public ceremonial practices of punishing bodies.¹² Michel Foucault has also shown that the horrific torture practices and ritual executions predominant in Western Europe prior to the eighteenth century were gradually replaced by more subtle “techniques of pain” that employed perpetual discipline and surveillance to create self-policing subjects.¹³ However, it must be added that whilst these European states were no longer torturing their own citizens

⁷ B Akkaya, ‘Zero Tolerance Policy’ on Torture Ends in Fiasco, *Today’s Zaman.com*, 27 August 2008, date of viewing 24 September, 2008,

<http://www.todayszaman.com/tzweb/detaylar.do?load=detay&link=151354>.

⁸ See BBC News, ‘Turkey Apology Over Prison Death’, *BBCNews.co.uk*, 14 October 2008, date of viewing 17 October, 2008,

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/7670678.stm>.

⁹ K Yıldız and M Muller, *The European Union and Turkish Accession: Human Rights and the Kurds*, Pluto Press, London and Ann Arbor, MI, 2008, p. 50.

¹⁰ Rejali has pointed out that the rise of human rights monitoring since the 1970s has not reduced the use of torture, but merely driven regimes that practice torture to utilise “clean” methods that are more difficult to detect. He points in particular to the rise of electro-torture and stun technology as indicative of this trend. D Rejali, *Torture and Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2007, p. 4.

¹¹ Yıldız and Muller, pp. 45-46.

¹² D Rejali, *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1993, pp. 62-81.

¹³ M Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Vintage, New York, 1979.

in the same way, they continued to systematically use the most barbaric practices of torture in their colonies throughout the world.¹⁴

Antonio Cassese argued in 1990 that, “torture is today practiced almost exclusively at the instigation or with the involvement of governments.”¹⁵ His statement remains as true today as it did then. This is confirmed by the most recent world report of Amnesty International, which has documented cases of torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatments by the governments of more than 81 countries in 2007.¹⁶ Herbert Kelman labels torture a “crime of obedience”, initiated under direct instruction from the authorities, or if not explicitly sanctioned then such acts are at the very least tolerated by those in power.¹⁷ The continued use of torture as a tool of policy can be directly linked to the very nature of the modern nation state itself. Any challenge to the security, integrity or identity of the state from internal or external sources, can precipitate the use of repressive measures and the deployment of systematic torture to respond to such threats. Torture can be used as a state mechanism to maintain control over populations, through obtaining information about “subversive” groups. However, scholars have raised questions about the usefulness of information gathered under torture,¹⁸ and these practices cannot solely be defined as the collecting of intelligence. Historically, torture has played an important role in assisting states to assert their authority and maintain law and order, and also as an instrument for national identity formation and preservation.¹⁹ It is therefore not surprising that the current “war on terror” and the torture practices that are an integral part of this war, have been justified as a necessity in the “war against evil” and “struggle to preserve [Western] civilisation.”²⁰

In such circumstances, torture is regarded as an ideologically legitimate practice and thus the perpetrators of torture are not considered as “torturers” but rather as “security forces” or “counter-terrorist agents” that heroically defend the nation. This discourse dehumanises potential targets and constructs them as “enemies of the state”, “terrorists” and “traitors”, effectively placing them outside of the state’s protection and denying them their citizenship rights. When victims are citizens of the state that carries out the torture, they are often not members of the dominant political, ethnic or religious community in that society (which the torturer belongs to). Indeed, the victim’s ethno-religious or political identity may be the very reason they are targeted.²¹ Marnia Lazreg has in her seminal work on French colonialism and torture in Algeria explained that torture is a political practice that unfolds in a social situation from which it is inseparable:

¹⁴ S Graham, ‘Apartheid Prison Narratives, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Construction of National (Traumatic) Memory’ in G Harper (ed), *Colonial and Postcolonial Incarceration*, Continuum, London and New York, p. 230. See also C Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya*, Henry Holt & Co, New York, 2005; M Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: from Algiers to Baghdad*, Princeton University Press, NJ and Oxford, 2008; J T Parry, *Understanding Torture: Law, Culture and State Violence*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI., 2010.

¹⁵ A Cassese, *Human Rights in a Changing World*, Polity, Cambridge, 1990, p. 93.

¹⁶ Amnesty International, *The State of the World’s Human Rights*, AI Publications, London, 2008.

¹⁷ H C Kelman, ‘The Social Context of Torture: Policy Process and Authority Structure’ in R D Crelinsten and A P Schmid (eds), *The Politics of Pain: Torturers and Their Masters*, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1995, pp. 19-34.

¹⁸ Rejali has for example pointed out that there is no documented case of torture uncovering a “ticking bomb”, and that torture is more likely to produce unreliable information than other forms of intelligence. Rejali, 2007, pp. 23-25. See also John Janzekovic’s chapter in this volume.

¹⁹ For the example of Bangladesh see Mohammad Shahabuddin’s chapter in this volume.

²⁰ See President George Bush’s speech, ‘Bush: Nation in Struggle to Preserve Civilization, *CNN.com*, 12 September, 2006, date of viewing 19 September, 2008, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/US/09/11/bush.memorials/index.html>.

²¹ Kelman, p. 32.

The torture situation is not summed up by a torturer and his victim thrown together in a room with a few instruments. It is a structured environment with a texture of its own, a configuration of meanings, a logic, and rationale without which physical, let alone, psychic, pain is incomprehensible and ineffective. In the social situation of torture, memory, identity, and culture weave a network of ideas and perceptions, experiences and ideals....²²

Turkish Nation-Building and the Turkification of Kurds

Torture in Turkey can best be understood when considered as an integral part of Turkey's nation-building project. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the founder of the new Turkish Republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk established a regime which was particularly concerned with "reaching the contemporary level of civilisation." The new Turkish nationalist elite, the Kemalists (named after Atatürk), regarded the ethno-religiously diverse society inherited from the Ottoman Empire as an obstacle to progress and based on notions of the superiority of Western statehood, they deemed that only a homogenous and secular nation-state would be successful. This mindset was also underpinned by the trauma caused by the humiliating dismemberment of the Ottoman Empire, as embodied in the 1920 Treaty of Sevres, which had resulted in large territorial losses. The Kemalist regime sought to maintain territorial integrity and create social cohesion by imposing a secularized and westernized "national identity" based on Turkish language and culture. They launched an authoritarian homogenizing project with the aim of eliminating ethnic differences through ethnic domination and forced assimilation.

Atatürk's successor and Turkey's second president, İsmet İnönü, described in 1925 the Turkish state's policy in the following words:

We are frankly nationalists and nationalism is our only factor of cohesion. In the face of a Turkish majority, other elements have no kind of influence. Our duty is to turkify non-Turks in the Turkish homeland no matter what happens. We will destroy those elements that oppose Turks or Turkism. What we are looking for in those who are to serve the country is above all that they are Turkish and Turkist.²³

Five years later in a speech, the chief Kemalist ideologue and Justice Minister Mahmut Esat Bozkurt made the official position perfectly clear:

It is my firm opinion, and let friend and foe hear it, that the lords of this country are the Turks. Those who are not pure Turks have only one right in the Turkish fatherland, and that is the right to be servants and slaves.²⁴

The project to create a homogenous Turkish nation faced a challenge when dealing with the largest culturally and linguistically distinct non-Turkish people: the Kurds. In an effort to re-construct a Turkish national history, state sponsored pseudo-scientific knowledge production established the Turkish race as a "civilising race" and as the founder of all the Anatolian civilisations as well as "proving" that the source of all languages of the world was Turkish.²⁵ This discourse of "Turkish Orientalism"²⁶ solved the problem of placing Kurds within the new Turkish nation

²² Lazreg, p. 6.

²³ A Yıldız, *Ne Muthu Türküm Diyebilene: Türk Ulusal Kimliğinin Etno-Seküler Sınırları, 1919-1938*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, pp. 155-156.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 210.

²⁵ İ Beşikçi, *Türk Tarih Tezi, Güneş Dil Teorisi ve Kürt Sorunu*, Yurt Yayınları, Ankara, 1997.

²⁶ W Zeydanhoğlu, 'The White Turkish Man's Burden: Orientalism, Kemalism and the Kurds in Turkey', in *Neo-colonial Mentalities in Contemporary Europe? Language and Discourse in the*

and it became part of official state discourse that Kurds were “Mountain Turks” who had forgotten their “Turkishness”. Thus the aim to forcibly turkify the Kurds was legitimized through this new “scientific” evidence. The regime sought to eradicate any mention of Kurdish identity, destroying historical artefacts and monuments that indicated a Kurdish presence and removing any references from maps and official documents to a territory called “Kurdistan”, which had been widely acknowledged during the Ottoman era. As part of a spatial turkification, names of Kurdish towns and villages were replaced with Turkish ones and schools, official buildings and even mountains were inscribed with the crescent and star (symbols of the Turkish flag), as well as numerous chauvinist slogans such as “Happy is he who can call himself a Turk” (*Ne mutlu Türküm diyene*). Ever since, the Kurdish provinces have been ruled “in a colonial way” where forced population resettlements, state-terror and ethnic persecution have become the everyday experience for the Kurds in Turkey.²⁷

The 1980 Military Coup

The Turkish army considers itself the protector of the nation and the powerful Kemalist military has intervened by staging three military coups to defend the country against a perceived internal threat (1960, 1971, 1980).²⁸ The coup on 12th September 1980 was provoked by what the military regarded as an attack on the core Kemalist values of national and territorial integrity by subversive leftist and Kurdish nationalist movements. The period that followed this military intervention and the subsequent 1982 Constitution, heralded a systematic and widespread programme of repressive measures in the name of Kemalism:

A total of 650,000 people were detained and most suspects were either beaten or tortured. Over 500 people died while under detention as a result of torture; 85,000 people were placed on trial mainly in relation to thought crimes by association; 1,683,000 people were officially listed in police files as suspects; 348,000 Turks and Kurds were banned from travelling abroad; 15,509 people were fired from their jobs for political reasons; 114,000 books were seized and burned; 937 films were banned; 2,729 writers, translators, journalists and actors were put on trial for expressing their opinions.²⁹

The Turkish state’s project to forcibly assimilate Kurds has always been met with persistent resistance and thus the predominantly Kurdish provinces in the east of Turkey have been under emergency rule for the greater part of the history of the

Construction of Identities. G Rings and A Ife (eds), Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle upon Tyne, 2008, pp. 155-174.

²⁷ For further details see *Ibid*.

²⁸ This chronology can be extended if one is to include indirect military interventions or *coups by memoranda*, where the military has either threatened with a coup or “pressured” governments into resignation by various legal and illegal means. For example, in 1997 a military-led campaign forced the resignation of the popularly elected Islamist government. More recently, in a statement issued on its website on 27 April 2007, the army threatened the government with a coup stating, “Those who oppose Great Leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s understanding of ‘Happy is he who can call himself a Turk’ are enemies of the Republic of Turkey and will remain so.” Türk Silahlı Kuvvetleri Genel Kurmay Başkanlığı, 27 Nisan Tarihli Basın Açıklaması, 27 April, 2007, date of viewing 1 October, 2008, http://tsk.mil.tr/10_ARSIV/10_1_Basin_Yayin_Faaliyetleri/10_1_Basin_Aciklamalari/2007/BA_08.html.

²⁹ İ İmset, ‘The PKK: Terrorists or Freedom Fighters?’ *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1/2, 1996, p. 60.

Republic.³⁰ It is then no surprise that following the 1980 coup the Kurdish region was targeted as a specific threat to national unity, with the majority of the Turkish army being stationed in the region to oversee an extensive plan of turkification.³¹ This plan sought to eliminate all possible outlets for Kurdish cultural and political expression through the closure of political parties, newspapers, publishing houses and charitable organisations. Article 89 of the new constitution prohibited the right of Kurds to political representation, stating that “no political party may concern itself with the defence, development, or diffusion of any non-Turkish language and culture.” The constitution also legally enshrined the ban on the Kurdish language.³²

The Case of the Diyarbakır Military Prison

What has been called “the period of barbarity” (*vahşet dönemi*) or “the hell of Diyarbakır” (*Diyarbakır cehennemi*), refers approximately to the early and mid-1980s (in particular the years between 1981-1984) where the prisoners in the newly built Diyarbakır Military Prison No. 5 in the Kurdish region were exposed to horrific acts of systematic torture. The brutality that took place in Diyarbakır has largely been documented in the form of personal testimonies, memoirs and plays³³ while officially it has either been denied or seen as a necessary evil to protect the Turkish state and nation. The authorities have gone to great lengths to prohibit the publication and dissemination of these testimonies and to this day the Turkish public as well as the international community remains generally unaware of the events in Diyarbakır. Moreover, none of the torturers have faced justice so far,³⁴ despite campaigns by

³⁰ It should be noted here that the articulation of the Kurdish ethnic identity has not been static throughout this period but continuously transformed by internal, regional as well as global dynamics and discourses. However, as far as Turkey’s stance has been concerned since its inception, although formulated and perceived in various ways, there has always been a threat of “Kurdishness” to be negated, targeted and silenced.

³¹ D McDowall, *The Modern History of the Kurds*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2000, p. 414.

³² Article 28/2 specified, “No publications or broadcasts may be made in any language prohibited by law.” These were, “languages other than those which are the primary official languages of states recognised by the Turkish State” (Law 2932) meaning in particular Kurdish. Law 2932, which was not annulled until 1991, stipulated “the mother tongue of Turkish citizens is Turkish.” Article 42/9 added, “No language other than Turkish may be taught as a native language to citizens of Turkey in instructional and educational institutions.” See T Skutnabb-Kangas and Sertaç Bucak, ‘Killing a Mother Tongue: How the Kurds are Deprived of Linguistic Human Rights’, in *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, T Skutnabb-Kangas and R Phillipson (eds), Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1994, pp. 347-370.

³³ For testimonies and related published works see for example E Mavioğlu, *Asılmayıp Beslenenler: Bir 12 Eylül Hesaplaşması*, Babil Yayınları, İstanbul, 2004; The special issue of the journal *Serbestî*, ‘Diyarbakır 5 No’lu Askeri Cezaevi’, 14, Sep/Oct, 2003; S Çürükkaya, *O Türküyü Söyle*, Komal Yayınları, İstanbul, 2006; O Güven, *Zordur Zorda Gülmek: 78 Kuşağı*, Güncel Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2007; M Zana, *Prison No.5: Eleven Years in Turkish Jails*, Blue Crane Books, Watertown, MA, 1997; Amnesty International, *Turkey: Testimony on Torture*, AI Publications, London, 1985; H Kutlu, *12 Eylül Cezaevleri: Olaylar, Sorunlar, Çözüm Yolları*, Alan Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1989; B Bozyel, *Diyarbakır 5 Nolu*, Deng Yayınları, Diyarbakır, 2007; M Baştürk, *Esat, Polat ve Azat*. Tevn Yayınları, İstanbul, 2007; O Miroğlu, *Dijwar: Onlara Dair Herşey*, Avesta, İstanbul, 2004. There is an extensive list of published testimonies in the special issue of *Serbestî*, 2003, p. 205 and the website <http://www.diyarbakirzindani.com> has a large collection of testimonies and related material in Turkish and Kurdish. The documentary *Fasting to Topple Walls* looks at the lives of Kurdish political prisoners from Diyarbakır in exile in Europe; *Fasting to Topple Walls*, Documentary. Directed by Yusuf Yeşilöz, Switzerland, 2003. Currently, a company called Roni Film Productions is producing a film based on the events in Diyarbakır, see <http://www.ronifilm.com> for more details.

³⁴ The Chief Administrator of the Diyarbakır Military Prison No. 5, Captain Esat Oktay Yıldırım, was killed on a public bus by a former prisoner in İstanbul in 1988. At the time of his death he had been

NGOs.³⁵ In contrast, this period has a highly important place in the Kurdish social memory and in the discourse of Kurdish nationalism. Not only because of the sheer brutality of the practices but because of the large number of Kurds that were tortured and their relatives who were affected by it in various ways. It can easily be asserted that the practices in Diyarbakır, the unofficial capital of the Kurdish region, played a crucial role in the crystallisation of nationalist secessionist ideas and the radicalisation of a generation of Kurds, large numbers of which went on to join the ranks of the militant Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK), which launched an armed struggle in 1984 with the aim to establish an independent Kurdish state. As Hakan Yavuz has remarked, "The 1980 coup and its oppressiveness helped to create a siege mentality among Kurds, compelling them to think that their future was constrained and contained by the Turkish state."³⁶ It is an irony of history that the coercive policy of turkification achieved the very thing that it tried to prevent, forcing Kurds to nationalist armed struggle for the establishment of an independent Kurdistan. As former prisoner Selim Dindar has commented:

I am not a political person. I am not very well informed in such issues. But 12 September made everyone aware of the Kurdish question and brought it to the world's attention. Had it not been for the barbarity in the prison, the Kurdish question would not have emerged so soon. They made militants out of people in the Diyarbakır prison. Almost 80 percent of these people went to the mountains [took up arms]. It was very difficult for someone to pursue a normal life after having experienced such brutality. You know, it is said that 'the PKK movement exploded in 1984', this date is when many people were released from the Diyarbakır prison.³⁷

As always, the richness of testimonies is greatest on the side of the victims and very rare from the torturers or their superiors. Recently, the former Turkish General Kenan Evren, who led the 12 September coup, revealed that torture had indeed been a routine practice both before and after the coup in detention centres as well as in prisons across Turkey. However, Evren argued that torture in prisons following the coup was nothing more than the prison guards taking revenge on prisoners who had ruled the prisons and mistreated them prior to the coup.³⁸ Evren's simplistic account fails to explain the sheer systemacity and brutality of the torture practiced in Turkey against leftists in general and in Diyarbakır against Kurds in particular.

Although it is impossible to list all the methods of torture that were used, testimonies reveal that among the most common practices were: severe and systematic beating, pulling of hair, being stripped naked, being blindfolded and hosed, solitary confinement, guards' insults, constant and relentless surveillance and intimidation, death threats, the obligation to salute Captain Esat Oktay Yıldırım's dog, a German shepherd called "Jo", which was trained to bite the private parts of naked prisoners, sleep, sensory, water and food deprivation for extensive periods, *falaka* (beating of the soles of feet), "Palestinian hangings" (hanging by the arms), stress positions or forcing prisoners to stand for long durations, excessive exercise in

promoted to the rank of Major and a monument had been built in his name in the city of Aksaray in central Anatolia.

³⁵ For a recent campaign see B Çakır, 'Aydınlar Diyarbakır Cezaevi Olaylarıyla Yüzleşme Çağrısında Bulundu', *Bianet.org*, 11 September 2008, date of viewing 6 February 2009, <http://bianet.org/bianet/kategori/bianet/109651/aydinlar-diyarbakir-cezaevi-olaylariyla-yuzlesme-cagrisinda-bulundu>.

³⁶ H M Yavuz, 'Five Stages of the Construction of Kurdish Nationalism in Turkey'. *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2001, p. 12.

³⁷ N Düzgel, 'Üç Yılımlı 'Cehennem'de Geçirdi', *Radikal.com.tr*, 23 June 2003, date of viewing 23 August, 2003, <http://www.radikal.com.tr/haber.php?haberno=79191>.

³⁸ F Bila, *Komutanlar Cephesi*, Detay Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2007, p.9-11. In the same interview, Evren also admitted that it was a mistake to have banned the Kurdish language.

extreme temperatures, stretching, squeezing or crushing of limbs and genitalia, piling of naked prisoners on top of each other, asphyxia and mock execution, electric shocks (specifically electrodes attached to genitals), burning with cigarettes, extraction of nails and healthy teeth, forcing prisoners to mix with prisoners with tuberculosis, sexual humiliation and assault, rectal examinations, forcing prisoners to beat/sexually humiliate/rape or urinate on each other, rape or threat of rape of prisoners, or relatives of prisoners in their presence by prison guards, violent forcing of truncheon rectally, forced feeding of rotten/contaminated food or faeces,³⁹ baths in prison sewers (referred to as “the disco” by the guards).⁴⁰

Mehdi Zana, the former major of Diyarbakır who spent eleven years in the prison, explains:

When a new prisoner arrived at the prison, Captain Esat met him at the entrance and then turned to a guard and said, ‘Prepare him a bath; then take him to the dormitory.’ This was a ritual. So almost twenty guards accompanied the prisoner. He received a good welcoming thrashing, and then he was dragged, unconscious, to the ‘bath,’ a bathtub full of shit in which they left him for a few hours. Sometimes they told him ‘Eat it now!’ Other times they put the new arrival naked on a stool above the excrement and left him there for two days in that pestilent and acidic odor. Or they took him, covered in shit, and threw him in a packed-full cell. After a few hours, they came back to get him in order to lock him up again in the cell filled with excrement, and they left him there one or two nights. When he left the cell, because of the acidic emanations, he was pale, poisoned. Other times blindfolded, his hands tied, the prisoner was isolated for two days in a cell full of rats.⁴¹

All the torture took place in an atmosphere of terror and total militarization where prison life consisted of absolute obedience, strenuous drills, strict rules, constant inspections, marching, chanting etc. In fact Murat Paker, an expert in the field, has argued that the term “torture” does not fully capture what went on in Diyarbakır and other prisons at the time, since the purpose of “good” or “successful” torture, from the perspective of the torturer, is not to cripple or kill the prisoner but to “make him speak.” Instead, Paker has argued that the Diyarbakır Military Prison should be seen as more of a “concentration camp.”⁴² This example given by Mehdi Zana again shows that the torture primarily aimed at “breaking down” and humiliating the prisoners rather than obtain information:

They let about fifty prisoners out of the cell and in front of everyone, they would make one of us hold the club and another sit on it. If we refused to sit on the club, we were just as quickly beaten. Yet very few of us gave in. So the jailers ganged up in a group of seven or eight in order to punish and humiliate the rebel. They sodomized him with the club, in front of us, and when they took it out, all covered in blood, they shoved it in his mouth to make him suck it. Those who underwent this test were broken for months, their virility destroyed. We tried to boost their spirits. In order not to undergo this dreaded torture, the prisoners submitted. So they were forced to shout, ‘I am so proud

³⁹ Such practices of state terror were not limited to the prison. A case in point is the village of Yeşilyurt near Cizre in the Kurdish region. On 14 January 1989 a night raid on the village by special commando units on the suspicion of PKK activity, led to some villagers being severely beaten and forced to eat human excrement. This case was successfully taken to the European Court of Human Rights and the Turkish government was required to pay hefty compensation to the Yeşilyurt villagers. Major Cafer Tayyar Çağlayan, the commander of the Cizre Gendarme and the official in charge of the mission, although initially suspended was eventually promoted. For details see H Kaplan, *Bir Onur Kavgası: Cizre'den Strasbourg'a Yeşilyurt Dışkı Yedirme Davası*, Belge Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1996 and C Başlangıç, *Korku Tapınağı: Güçlükönak-Silopi-Lice-Tunceli*, İletişim, İstanbul, 2001, pp. 87-138.

⁴⁰ Although the majority of the prisoners were men, there were also several women prisoners in Diyarbakır and certain torture techniques were specifically developed for them. See for example the testimony of Nuran Çamlı Maraşlı in *Serbestî*, pp. 185-186 and in Mavioğlu, pp. 167-177.

⁴¹ Zana, 1997, p. 25.

⁴² M Paker, ‘Boğazımızdaki Yumru: Türkiye’de İşkence’. *Birikim*, vol. 172, August, 2003, p. 12.

to be Turkish' or 'A Turk is worth the whole universe' or 'Turks have brought civilisation to all the countries they have conquered!'⁴³

Without undermining the severity and brutality of these practices, an important theme that clearly emerges from the above example and other testimonies is the "ethnic character" of torture in Diyarbakır, namely torture practices aimed at the turkification of Kurdish prisoners. It goes without saying that at the time systematic torture was practiced across Turkey in detention centres and prisons, such as Mamak and Metris prisons, where leftist activists received their fair share of torture. However, in the words of ex-prisoner and Kurdish politician Nazif Kaleli, "Diyarbakır is something different. History has not seen anything like the Diyarbakır Prison...This is because the identity of Diyarbakır was different and all these practices were targeting this very identity."⁴⁴

There are many examples that can be given but the following passage as recounted by the Kurdish writer Selahattin Bulut is illustrative:

There was an old man in Cell 8 and his voice was always echoing in my ear; 'I am a Turk, I am a son of a Turk. I am a Turk, I am a son of a Turk.' The same voice, in the same tone, could repeatedly be heard. One day, the cell doors opened so that we could clean out the water in the cell. Again I heard that voice: 'I am a Turk, I am a son of a Turk...' I raised my head; a man was standing in the corner. We were not allowed to look but I looked anyway and it was the muhtar⁴⁵ from Derik who stood in front of me and to whom the voice belonged. I used to know him from the outside. He was around 65 years old. His name was İsmail. I wondered why they had brought him in as well. They had beaten him severely for being old, illiterate and for speaking very little Turkish, but they still had not been able to teach him to sing the military songs by heart. They had to have him say something, so they had him saying 'I am a Turk, I am a son of a Turk.' And so he repeated it constantly.⁴⁶

Testimonies reveal that the constant reciting of the Turkish national anthem, "Atatürk's Address to the Turkish Youth", military and ultra-nationalist songs and slogans such as "A Turk is worth the whole universe" were part of an intensive "prison curriculum" aimed at turkifying the incarcerated Kurds. We learn that the torturers called this form of torture "education". The testimonies reveal that many Kurdish prisoners did not speak Turkish or spoke very little or were illiterate. Nazif Kaleli explains:

What we were forced to do aimed at destroying our personalities. Despite us not being Turks, they used to make us shout 'I am a Turk, I am right.' I think they made us learn 50 to 60 nationalist songs by heart. It might have been more. These songs are nothing you would sing in your daily life. When you consider the limits of the human memory, learning this amount of songs by heart is very difficult. There is not a worse way of torturing, especially when you consider the fact that some of these people were illiterate. A person is already under the pressure of facing torture that will be impossible to endure in case these songs are not learnt by heart. You get the truncheon even when you know them by heart. At least hundred times.⁴⁷

Singing or listening to military songs or speeches while marching were usually accompanied by pictures of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, flags and other paraphernalia and whatever money the prisoners had was frequently confiscated to fund the painting of walls with pictures of Atatürk, General Kenan Evren, and historical Turkish figures or events or writing of nationalist slogans on prison walls, the most

⁴³ Zana, p. 18-19.

⁴⁴ *Serbestî*, p. 112.

⁴⁵ A muhtar is the elected head of a village or of a neighbourhood within a town or a city.

⁴⁶ Mavioğlu, p. 142.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 189-90.

common being “Happy is he who can call himself a Turk.”⁴⁸ Moreover, sometimes whole prison blocks were painted in the colours of the Turkish flag in order to “ease” the turkification process. Former Diyarbakır inmate Felat Cemiloğlu explains, “We entered Cell Block Number 33 when the sun was setting. All the windows were closed and painted in red with the crescent-star in the middle, so it was very dim. We were told it was a workshop.”⁴⁹ This type of torture also continued during visiting times. Several testimonies refer to a large sign in the main visiting hall reading “Speak Turkish, Speak a Lot.” As speaking Kurdish was strictly forbidden in prisons, as elsewhere in the country, and doing so could result in severe punishment, many prisoners recall not being able to speak to their monolingual relatives (usually mothers of prisoners) and of “silent prison visits.”⁵⁰ Nuri Sınır remembers:

For six months I could not speak to my mother because she could not speak Turkish and I was not allowed to speak Kurdish. My mother used to visit me regularly. But all we could do was to look into each others’ eyes without uttering a single word...For six months I could not ask my mother how she was.⁵¹

The Diyarbakır Prison also saw stiff resistance by the prisoners against their treatment, some of which were successful in periodically improving their conditions and in drawing national and international attention. In the early 1980s there were several riots and hunger strikes by the prisoners and cases of individual and group suicide in protest against the torture. For example prisoners such as Kemal Pir, Hayri Durmuş, Akif Yılmaz and Ali Çiçek died during the hunger strike in 1982 and many others were crippled, while on 21 March the same year, on the day of the traditional Kurdish New Year *Newroz*, Mazlum Doğan, a member of the PKK, hanged himself in his cell in protest. On May 18, four young prisoners, Mahmut Zengin, Eşref Anyık, Ferhat Kurtay and Necmi Öner, rolled up in newspapers and sprayed with paint and holding hands, burned themselves alive in protest and have since become important figures in Kurdish collective memory and in the martyrdom discourse of the PKK. Language was also a part of the resistance of the prisoners against torture and the ban on Kurdish. Speaking, singing or shouting slogans in Kurdish were a way of improving the collective mood and showing defiance, despite risk of further torture: “...We started singing a Kurdish song. It was our way of being together.”⁵²

By the mid to late 1980s, with Turkey returning to a kind of parliamentary democracy, the condition of the prisoners in Diyarbakır started to improve. Many prisoners were also released after show trials. The legacy of the Diyarbakır Military Prison No. 5, however, continues to this day to haunt Turkey and those who survived “the period of barbarity”:

Today I am 43 years old and yet whenever Diyarbakır Prison is mentioned I still lose touch with reality. I can’t control myself, I want to shout, cry and scream. I have a wife and a kid. I have a large extended family and network of friends. Sometimes I can’t control myself and burst into tears in front everyone, I cry and cry....⁵³

Conclusion

Torture is rarely solely about obtaining information or the work of an “evil” person acting on his/her “sadistic urges”. Instead, torture is best understood as not

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 166.

⁴⁹ H Cemal, *Kürtler*, Doğan Kitapçılık, İstanbul, 2003, p. 27.

⁵⁰ Among many, see for example the testimony of M Ece in *Serbestî*, p.88.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 118.

⁵² Zana, p. 33.

⁵³ Selim Dindar in Düzel, 2003.

arbitrary but systematic practices of state sponsored violence against internal/external “enemies” and legitimised as protecting “us”, “our way of life” and “our country”. This chapter argued that torture in Turkey needs to be analysed as part of the historical process of Turkey’s nation-building project. Torture has been an important tool in the hands of the ruling Kemalist political and military elites in the project of creating a politically and ethnically homogenous nation and in the crushing of internal dissent against this project.

This chapter discussed the case of the torture in the Diyarbakır Military Prison in the 1980s, where systematic torture was part of a policy to subdue Kurdish nationalist resistance against the assimilation policies of the Turkish state. The various testimonies reveal a state of total terror and brutality, where the prison seemed to have functioned as a laboratory for humiliation, punishment and “rehabilitation” of Kurdish prisoners through torture as turkification. As such one can see torture as turkification as the very embodiment and the literal implementation of the 1982 Constitution, and a process of inscribing “Turkishness” on to the bodies and minds of the prisoners. Ultimately, torture as turkification was and continues in many ways to be a part of the Kemalist (unaccomplished) assimilationist vision of creating and maintaining a homogenous nation-state of “Turks”.

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