

Martin van Bruinessen, "Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival". This is an extended version of the article published under the same title in *Middle East Reports* # 200 (Summer 1996), pp. 7-10.

## **Kurds, Turks and the Alevi revival in Turkey**[\[1\]](#)

Martin van Bruinessen

Until a few years ago, Kurdish nationalism was the only movement in Turkey that openly defied the official doctrine that Turkey is a homogeneous nation-state. Informally, people would freely apply ethnic labels to their acquaintances; everybody was aware of the rich ethnic variety of the country, [\[2\]](#) but it was thought undesirable to acknowledge this and most people were reluctant or afraid to define themselves as anything but Turks. In the 1970s, Kurdish nationalists had begun challenging this official view, and in 1979 a cabinet minister caused a political scandal by calmly remarking that he too was a Kurd.[\[3\]](#) The military regime of 1980-83 made a last-ditch attempt to silence those Kurds who wished to be different, but its oppressive measures had the opposite effect of what was intended; they strengthened the Kurds' sense of their distinct identity and resulted in massive sympathy for the separatist PKK. By 1990, the Turkish government realised that further efforts to impose uniformity would probably be counterproductive and that they would moreover hamper closer relations with Europe, where the protection of minority cultures had become an important political issue. In a sudden reversal of policy, the government in 1991 repealed the law banning the use of other languages than Turkish in publishing.[\[4\]](#)

This relaxation allowed not only an upsurge in Kurdish cultural activities. Two other ethnic groups, the Laz and especially the Circassians, also began publishing and organising. These activities were stimulated both by the Kurdish example but perhaps even more by developments in the (former) Soviet Union. The Laz live in the region bordering on the republic of Georgia and their language is related to Georgian. The Circassians (called Cherkes in Turkish) originate

from the northern Caucasus; the name is in fact a blanket term for various related North Caucasian peoples, primarily Abkhazians, Adighe and Uigh, and occasionally Chechen and Ingush are also included. There are hundreds of thousands of Circassians in Turkey, most of them the descendants of refugees who left their homelands when these were occupied by Russia in the mid-19th century.<sup>[5]</sup> The devolution of the Soviet Union caused a reorientation of young Turkish Circassians towards their ancestral homelands, and some actually went back. The recent struggles in Abkhazia (1992) and the war in Chechnya (1995) have not made remigration an attractive option, but they have had a strong mobilising effect on the Circassian (and Chechen) communities in Turkey.

The same period also witnessed a sudden resurgence of the Alevi identity. The Alevis, a heterodox religious minority, began manifesting themselves very much as yet another ethnic group. All over the country, as well as among the migrant communities in Europe, Alevi associations sprang up. Alevi intellectuals and community leaders set out to define the Alevi identity, Alevi tradition, Alevi history. Between 1990 and 1995, more books were published in Turkey about the Alevis than about any ethnic group, the Kurds included. Both the Kurdish movement and the government courted the Alevis, and both did their utmost to prevent the other from making inroads among them. Both, but especially the government, were handicapped in these efforts because they depended on Sunni majorities which had always been hostile to the Alevis. The police, which after 1980 had been purged of left-wing elements, was in many places dominated by conservative Sunnis or right-wing nationalists, and there were a number of major incidents in which the police took part in murderous violence against Alevis, causing renewed alienation between the Alevis and the state.

The most shocking of these incidents were the firebomb attack on a leftist-cum-Alevi cultural festival in Sivas in 1993, in which 37 people were killed, and the riots following a terrorist raid on Alevi teahouses in the Istanbul neighbourhood Gazi (district Gaziosmanpaşa), in which policemen deliberately fired into the crowd of protesters, killing more than a dozen persons. Both are briefly described below. Of a different nature, but not unrelated, was the violence directed at the (Alevi) villages in eastern central Turkey, where the Kurdish war began spilling over into the Alevi-inhabited zone.

In the autumn of 1994 and again throughout 1995, the

Turkish army carried out large-scale counter-insurgency operations in the mountainous province of Tunceli, resulting in the (partial or complete) destruction and forced evacuation or around a third of the villages there.<sup>[6]</sup> Tunceli, which is almost exclusively inhabited by Kurdish Alevis,<sup>[7]</sup> had a long tradition of resistance to government authority, but had not earlier been a stronghold of Kurdish nationalism. The military operations indicated that the Kurdish struggle in Turkey had entered a new phase. The radical Kurdish movement PKK (Workers' Party of Kurdistan) was making inroads among the Kurdish Alevis, who had long been considered as constituting a sort of buffer between the Kurdish provinces proper and Central Anatolia. In early 1996, Turkish public opinion was shocked to discover that similar operations had also taken place in the (largely Turkish) province of Sivas, to the west of Tunceli. Dozens of Alevi villages here, Turkish as well as Kurdish, had been evacuated under strong pressure from the military. Alevi representatives spoke of 'ethnic cleansing' in this religiously mixed province.

### **Who are the Alevis?**

Just as is the case with such ethnic groups as the Kurds and the Arabs, estimates of the number of Alevis in Turkey vary widely, from around 10 percent to as much as 40 percent of the total population. Censuses have never registered Alevis as a distinct category; and even if they had, the outcome would be unreliable, for the Alevis, fearing religious and political discrimination, have often attempted to hide their identity. Mixed (Sunni-Alevi) marriages and the slow but steady process of assimilation of substantial Alevi communities to (secularised) Sunni Islam make all statistics inherently ambiguous.

The name of Alevi is a blanket term for a large number of different heterodox communities, whose actual beliefs and ritual practices differ much. Linguistically four groups may be distinguished. In the eastern province of Kars there are communities speaking Azarbayjani Turkish and whose Alevism differs little from the 'orthodox' Twelver Shi'ism of modern Iran. The Arabic speaking Alevi communities of southern Turkey (especially Hatay and Adana) are the extension of Syria's `Alawi (Nusayri) community and have no historical ties with the other Alevi groups. Like the first group, their numbers are small and their role in Turkey has been negligible. The important Alevi groups are the Turkish and Kurdish speakers (the latter still to be divided into speakers of Kurdish proper and

of related Zaza); both appear to be the descendants of rebellious tribal groups that were religiously affiliated with the Safavids.

The religion of these Alevis, though to some extent Islamicised, differs considerably from Sunni Islam. Prayer (namaz), the fast in Ramadan, zakat and the hajj are alien practices to most Alevi communities. Instead they have their own religious ceremonies (cem), officiated by 'holy men' (dede) belonging to a hereditary priestly caste, at which religious poems (deyi• or nefes) in Turkish are sung and (in some communities at least) men and women carry out ritual dances (semah). As among other extremist Shi`i groups, Ali and the Safavid Shah Isma`il are deified, or at least considered as superhuman. Many more elements of pre-Islamic Turkish and Iranian religions have been retained than among Sunni Muslims, and pilgrimages to sacred springs and mountains are especially common. Instead of adherence to the shari`a, Alevis profess obedience to a set of simple moral norms; they claim to live according to the inner (batin) meaning of religion rather than its external (zahir) demands.[\[8\]](#)

The major concentrations of Turkish Alevis used to be found in central Anatolia, but there are important pockets of Alevi villages throughout the Aegean and Mediterranean coastal regions and in the European part of Turkey as well. Kurdish Alevis were concentrated in the north-western part of the Kurdish settlement zone, with Dersim (approximately the present province of Tunceli) as the cultural centre and with important pockets further south, east and west. An arc of ethnically and religiously mixed districts, stretching from Gaziantep and Kahramanmara• in the south through Adiyaman and Malatya to Sivas in the north, constitutes a zone of transition from Turkish Kurdistan (the Southeast) to the rest of the country. It was in this zone that during the 1970s the most serious clashes between Sunnis and Alevis took place. The Alevis, Turks as well as Kurds, used to live in mountainous and relatively isolated villages, reflecting their history of persecution in the Sunni Ottoman Empire. Only from the 1950s on did they start leaving these villages in large numbers to settle in the towns of the region or migrate to the large cities in the west.

## **Emancipation and politicisation**

The secularisation of Turkey made the gradual emancipation of the Alevis possible. It is not surprising that during the first great

Kurdish rebellion of 1925, which had a strong (Sunni) religious colouring, Kurdish Alevi tribes actually fought against the rebels. It is true that there also were, in 1920 and 1937-38, rebellions of Kurdish Alevis against the Kemalist movement and the Republic,[\[9\]](#) but at no time until the present did Kurdish Alevis in significant numbers join forces with Sunni Kurds against the Kemalist regime. By and large, Kurdish as well as Turkish Alevis were supportive of the secular and populist ideals of Kemalism; many Kurdish Alevis voluntarily assimilated to Turkish culture and came to identify themselves as Turks rather than as Kurds.

Secularisation did not, however, bode the end of the widespread Sunni prejudices against the Alevis (who, like heterodox groups anywhere, are commonly accused of sexual licentiousness and other immoralities). The Alevis' gradual integration into the wider society — migration to the towns, education, careers in public service — brought them into closer contact, and sometimes in direct competition, with strict Sunnis, from whom they had remained socially separated for centuries. This caused growing tension, especially in the towns of the ethnically and religiously mixed zone mentioned above, but also in the large cities further west. Recent immigrants from the villages tended to cluster together with people of the same backgrounds, so that there emerged more or less distinct Alevi and Sunni neighbourhoods.

The political polarisation that began in the 1970s exacerbated the situation. The radical left, perceiving in the Alevi rebellions of the past proto-communist movements, saw the Alevis as its natural allies. The extreme right (the fascist Party of Nationalist Action but also religious right-wing groups), on the other hand, concentrated its recruiting efforts on the conservative Sunni Muslims of the mixed regions, by fanning their fear and hatred of the Alevis and provoking armed incidents. Spreading rumours that Alevis had bombed a mosque or poisoned its water supply was an unfailing method of mobilising Sunni reaction and drawing the Sunnis towards the extreme right. A series of violent Sunni-Alevi clashes culminated by the end of the decade in anti-Alevi pogroms in Malatya, Kahramanmara• and Çorum. The local police, already infiltrated by the extreme right, did little to protect the Alevis, resulting in a growing alienation of Turkey's Alevis from the state.

The years 1950-80 had seen the gradual decline of

Kemalism and the return of Islam in public life. The anti-Alevi pogroms appeared to indicate that both secularism and populism had failed to take root. The growth of a strong though divided Kurdish movement and of a radical labour movement also appeared to signal the end of Kemalism. Political polarisation and violence, left and right youth movements bringing entire urban neighbourhoods under their control, threatened to divide all of society. The military took over in 1980 to reverse all these trends and to re-establish Kemalism. A decade and a half later, it is clear that, measured by these objectives, they were at best partially successful - although this is no doubt balanced out by such other achievements as the officers' vastly improved economic conditions, a high military budget that no civilian politician dares to cut, and a lasting influence on government policies.

The military succeeded in decimating the radical left and preventing the emergence of a new generation of left radicals. Their brutal suppression of the Kurdish movement, however, resulted in the emergence of a strong Kurdish cultural and intellectual movement in European exile and in the emergence of the radical and violent Workers' Party of Kurdistan (PKK) as the strongest political movement of Turkey. The PKK gained a massive degree of popularity among Turkey's Kurds that it would never have achieved without the army's senseless harassment of Kurdish civilians. The fascist right, though its leader Turke• was briefly jailed, was co-opted and to some extent even integrated into the state apparatus. Young rightwing hoodlums no longer carried out terrorist raids against 'leftist' tea-houses but became policemen and schoolteachers, and the real Rambos among them were recruited into the 'special teams' sent to Kurdistan on counter-insurgency missions.

Apparently expecting thus to steal a march on fundamentalist Islam, the military in fact actively fostered Sunni Islam. Religious education, although of a secularised variety, was reintroduced as an obligatory subject in schools; the Directorate for Religious Affairs, which is answerable to the prime minister's office, was strengthened, and numerous new mosques were built at the state's expense. The Turkish-Islamic Synthesis, a confused doctrine combining fervent Turkish nationalism and Muslim sentiment, that was first formulated by a small group of right-wing intellectuals as an answer to socialism, was virtually elevated to the status of official ideology.[\[10\]](#) The military thus refrained from a return to the classical Kemalist attitude towards religion and deliberately



strengthened conservative Islam as an ally against both the left and radical Islam.

These developments directly affected the Alevis too, and were perhaps in part intended as measures against the Alevis' flirt with left radicalism during the 1970s. The government built mosques in numerous Alevi villages, Alevi schoolchildren were obliged to attend Sunni religion classes, and the police and many other state services in the mixed regions came to be dominated by conservative Sunnis even more than before. There was one important positive change, however: throughout the 1980s there was much less physical violence directed against Alevis than there had been in the 1970s, and no pogroms at all. It did happen from time to time that Alevi villages or urban neighbourhoods were raided by the police and the inhabitants harassed, but this usually was in pursuit of left radicals and did not appear to reflect a specifically negative attitude towards the Alevis.

One effect of the changes in the 1980s was a renewed interest, among the Alevis themselves, in Alevism as a religion. Whereas in the 1970s most of the young Alevis had completely rejected religion as nothing but ideology and had only taken pride in Alevism as a democratic social movement, the failure of the left movement in Turkey made many reflect on Alevism as a cultural and then as a religious identity. On the one hand, some of the radical left movements that in the 1970s had found a measure of support all over the country (although perhaps somewhat more among the Kurdish Alevis than elsewhere) by the late 1980s had lost most of their non-Alevi supporters. Having thus practically become non-religious Alevi movements, they could not help but taking part in the debates on Alevi identity.[\[11\]](#) On the other hand, there was among Alevis of all generations also a strong reaction to the previous flirt with left radicalism, which expressed itself in a desire to know more about their own religious traditions.

The imposition of Sunni Islam by the state no doubt was a major factor contributing to the Alevi revival as a reaction. When in 1989 the ban on organisations (which had been total after 1980) was somewhat relaxed, Alevi associations sprang up all over the country. Under the sponsorship of these associations, Alevi rituals (cem), which like the rituals of the Sunni Sufi orders had been practically banned since 1925, were publicly performed and houses of worship (cemevi) were opened. There was a sudden tidal wave of publications by Alevi

intellectuals, purporting to explain history, doctrine and ritual of Alevism and to define its relation to Sunni Islam. Some of the books engendered heated polemics within the community on such questions as whether Alevism is a sect within Islam or an essentially different religion (and whether this different religion is of Iranian or Turkish origins).[\[12\]](#)

These developments marked an important change in the nature of Alevism, the transition from a secret, initiatory, locally anchored and orally transmitted religion, which it had been for centuries, to a public religion with formalised, or at least written, doctrine and ritual. Most of these Alevi authors did not belong to the priestly caste that had always held a monopoly of ritual competence and claimed superior knowledge of the tradition (and the few authors who did hail from such a family were not themselves practising as dede). They all have a modern education, and their books reflect their mentalities of educators, all very much in the Kemalist mode. The way they reformulate and (at times even literally) invent Alevi tradition is highly reminiscent of what goes on in nascent nationalist movements.

The Alevi revival received encouragement from secular elements in the political establishment, who had always considered the Alevis as their natural allies against the rise of political Islam.[\[13\]](#) The growing influence of the PKK among Turkey's Kurds, by the late 1980s increasingly also among Alevi Kurds, gave the authorities another incentive to allow and even stimulate the development of Alevism as an alternative 'ethnic' identity. In the early 1990s, the state began to publicly support Alevism, among other things by officially sponsoring the annual festival commemorating the Alevi saint Haji Bektash.[\[14\]](#) Some of the more conservative Alevi leaders were courted and it was attempted to co-opt their associations in the pursuit of strengthening Turkey-based nationalism. At the same time, suspicion of the Alevis with their relatively liberal values and their past tendencies towards leftist politics remained strong among many of the same authorities, and the police and certain government departments were in fact filled with elements that distinctly despised Alevis.

Many Alevis were only too happy with the degree of recognition implied in co-optation by the political establishment. It was attempted to turn Haji Bektash, after whom the major federation of Alevi associations was named, into a symbol for loyalty to the Turkish state.[\[15\]](#) Another group



of associations named itself after a different Alevi saint, the poet Pir Sultan Abdal, who was believed to have rebelled against the state and to have been hanged for his religious convictions. Although generalisations about the Alevis are hazardous, it seems safe to say that the religious-minded and the relatively conservative among the Alevis tended to drift towards the former associations, whereas in the latter one finds a higher proportion of former leftists.

### **New outbursts of violence against Alevis**

The first serious outburst of violence against Alevis since 1980, an event that not only disturbed the process of accommodation between the state and the Alevis but that in many quarters created anxieties about the possible dissolution of Turkey, occurred in the town of Sivas in 1993. Sivas is one of the provinces with a considerable Alevi population in the villages (both Kurdish and Turkish speakers), but the towns are dominated by conservative Sunnis. The Alevi rebel saint Pir Sultan Abdal was from Banaz, a village in this province, and he was executed in the city of Sivas.

In July 1993 the Pir Sultan Abdal association organised a cultural festival in Sivas, to which numerous prominent authors and other artists were invited. One of the authors present was the aged Aziz Nesin (not an Alevi, incidentally), who had recently provoked the anger of many Sunni Muslims by announcing his intention to publish a translation of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. The festival was protested by a large group of violent right-wing demonstrators, who were clearly intent upon killing Nesin. They also attacked and destroyed a sculpture representing Pir Sultan Abdal that had been erected on the occasion of the festival. Encouraged rather than calmed down by a speech by the mayor of Sivas (who belonged to the right wing of the Muslim Welfare Party), they laid siege to and attacked the hotel where the participants of the festival were lodged. After throwing stones through all hotel windows, the demonstrators succeeded in setting fire to the hotel. Thirty-seven people in the hotel died in this fire.[\[16\]](#)

The events in Sivas differed from the pogroms of the late 1970s. There was no massive attack on neighbourhoods inhabited by Alevis this time; the primary target of the demonstrators was Aziz Nesin and the other, mostly Alevi, intellectuals and artists who had come to Sivas for the festival.

The Pir Sultan statue was another, highly symbolic target, but Pir Sultan was not so much a symbol for Alevism as one for the rebellious and 'leftist' tradition in Alevism.

The degree of involvement of the police and local authorities was perhaps the most shocking aspect of the Sivas events. The police, although it had advance warning of the demonstrations, had taken insufficient measures to protect the festival (which had been authorised by the provincial governor) and it did not make any serious attempt to disperse the demonstrators or to keep them away from the hotel (apart from a police cordon in front of the hotel). While the hotel was under siege, Aziz Nesin and friends succeeded in reaching vice prime minister Erdal İnönü by telephone and requested him to order measures for their protection. İnönü told them that precautions had been taken, but whatever orders had been sent from Ankara, the police remained passive. In a video film of the events taken by the police and later leaked to the press one can actually hear orders being given over the police radio not to intervene when the demonstrators were already attacking the hotel. Most of the police simply looked on as the hotel caught fire.[\[17\]](#)

The clashes between the police and Alevi demonstrators in the Gazi neighbourhood of Istanbul, in March 1995, were if anything more threatening even than the Sivas events. Gazi is a poor new neighbourhood with a high proportion of Alevi inhabitants. In the evening of March 12, unknown gunmen in a stolen taxi drove through this neighbourhood and riddled five tea-houses with bullets, killing one and wounding numerous people. The police was remarkably slow in taking action, and the rumour soon spread that the local police post might have been involved in the terrorist attacks.[\[18\]](#)

Young people of Gazi neighbourhood took to the streets in protest, and they were soon reinforced by groups from elsewhere who had heard the news on local television. The demonstrators directed their anger at the police post, which was believed to be manned by extremely right-wing and anti-Alevi policemen, and where not long ago a young detainee was said to have been tortured to death. Throughout the neighbourhood police and demonstrators clashed; in the general rioting that ensued a number of shops and workshops owned by alleged 'fascists' were raided and destroyed. That night the police shot one demonstrator. The rioting continued the following days and spread to yet another neighbourhood. Young radicals attempted

to seize control of the situation, throwing stones to the police and raising barricades, while moderate Alevi community leaders made great efforts to calm the masses. It was the police, however, who went completely out of control and who instead of using conventional methods of crowd control repeatedly shot into the crowds, killing another 15 persons. Even after the Istanbul police chief, in a meeting with Alevi leaders, had by radio given his men orders not to use firearms any more, several more demonstrators were deliberately shot dead. The insulting language and threats shouted by the police to community leaders who attempted to negotiate with them showed that many of the police acted out of aggressive hatred towards the Alevis. There were, it is true, policemen who attempted to hold their colleagues back, but they were not successful.[\[19\]](#)

The arson in Sivas had shown up that part of the state apparatus — the local police and local government in Sivas — did not stand above communal divisions but sided with the aggressors. Central government authorities apparently did not have control over part of the police force, which through selective recruitment in the 1980s consisted mostly of extremely right-wing Sunni Muslims. The reactions to the events showed that society was deeply divided; the division ran right through the government, whose conservative members without blinking declared Aziz Nesin responsible for the events.[\[20\]](#) The rift between the government and the Alevi communities was opened wide and deep again.

The social democrat members of the government failed to restore confidence in the government, because they were completely ineffective. Their criticism of the police, in connection with the Sivas events and on several later occasions, was only answered with scorn and oblique threats. When the Istanbul police chief — a man who had become notorious for the extra-judicial executions of left radicals carried out by his force, and whose men it were who killed 16 demonstrators in the Gazi riots — publicly insulted the (social democrat) minister of human rights and blamed him for the death of a policeman, they in vain demanded his resignation. Supported by Çiller, the police chief did not even have to apologise. Nor was he ever held accountable for the shooting in Gazi.[\[21\]](#)

The events in Sivas and Gazi reinforced and radicalised the Alevi revival. Community leaders who go on closely co-operating with the authorities in the hope of recognition as a

distinct religious community or in pursuit of personal gains appear to be losing support from below, while left radicalism appears to be gaining influence among the young. The government's efforts to use Alevi awareness as an alternative to Kurdish nationalism have largely failed. Alienation from the state inevitably brought many Alevis closer to the PKK (which within a few weeks took revenge for the arson in Sivas by killing a group of men in a staunchly Sunni village north-east of Sivas). Whereas until the early 1990s most Kurdish Alevis had little sympathy for the PKK, among other things because of its flirt with Sunni Islam, by 1994 it appeared to have gained considerable support among them.

Many if not most of the Kurdish Alevis define themselves as Alevis first and only in the second place, or not at all, as Kurds. State-sponsored publications have hammered on the old theme that Alevism is a specifically Turkish form of Islam and that the Alevis, even those who speak Kurdish or Zaza, descend from Turcoman tribesmen and therefore are essentially Turkish. The PKK and other Kurdish nationalists, on the other hand, have made efforts to persuade them that in the present confrontation their most relevant identity is that of Kurds, and that moreover the Alevi religion has Iranian (Zoroastrian) rather than Turkish origins (so that by implication even the Turkish Alevis are related to the Kurds).[\[22\]](#)

It is hard to determine how much effect both propaganda offensives have had, but it appears that among the radical left Turkish Alevis there is now a tendency to view the PKK as their natural ally because they are up against much the same coalition of extreme right-wing political forces, which have gradually come to control important parts of the state apparatus. This conservative religious and ultra-nationalist block is not interested in cultural and religious pluralism and rejects compromises with Kurds and Alevis alike. In its efforts to create a monolithic state and society, this block constitutes the most divisive force in Turkey today.

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[1] [Written in the spring of 1996 and published, in slightly abbreviated form, in *Middle East Report* 200 (Summer 1996).

[2] A recent study, Peter A. Andrews' *Ethnic groups in the Republic of Turkey* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989), enumerates 47

distinct ethnic groups in Turkey, and the choice of another set of criteria for ethnic identity might have yielded an even higher number.

[3] This was Serafettin Elçi, then minister of public works. After the 1980 military coup he was sentenced to two years imprisonment for this remark.

[4] This law was a product of the 1980-83 military regime. It violated several international agreements on the protection of minorities to which Turkey was a party. See C. Rumpf, "The Turkish law prohibiting languages other than Turkish", in: *Documentation of the International Conference on Human Rights in Kurdistan*, 14-16. April 1989 (Hochschule Bremen, 1989), pp. 68-89 and the same author's "Das Sprachenverbot in der Türkei unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer völkerrechtlichen Verpflichtungen", *Orient* 30 (Hamburg, 1989), 413-27.

[5] See B. Özbek, "Tscherkessen in der Türkei", in: P. Andrews, *Ethnic groups in the Republic of Turkey*, pp. 581-90; M. Bjedug & E. Taymaz, "'Sürgün' halk Çerkesler", *Birikim* 71-72 (March-April 1995), 118-24.

[6] See the report *Forced evictions and destruction of villages in Dersim (Tunceli) and the western part of Bingöl, Turkish Kurdistan*, September-November 1994 (Amsterdam: Netherlands Kurdistan Society, 1995).

[7] I use the term 'Kurdish Alevis' as a shorthand for 'Alevis whose mother tongue is Kurdish or the related Zaza language'. My use of the term does not imply that I consider all these people as essentially Kurdish; in fact, a considerable number of them prefer to identify themselves not primarily as Kurds.

[8] There is no satisfactory description in English of Alevism as a religion. Most useful are: S. van Rensselaer Trowbridge, "The `Alevis", *The Moslem World* 11 (1921), 253-66 and I. Markoff, "Music, saints, and ritual: sama` and the Alevis of Turkey", in: G. Martin Smith & C.W. Ernst (eds.), *Manifestations of sainthood in Islam* (Istanbul: Isis, 1993), pp. 95-110. The only systematic study presently available is in German: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, *Die Kizilbas/Aleviten* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1988). [Two recent volumes in English redress this shortcoming: K. Kehl-Bodrogi, B. Kellner-Heinkele, and A.

Otter-Beaujean (eds), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); T. Olsson, E. Özdalga, and C. Raudvere (eds), *Alevi identity: cultural, religious and social perspectives* (Istanbul: Swedish Research Institute, 1998).]

[9] On these rebellions see: H.-L. Kieser, "Les Kurdes alévis face au nationalisme turc kémaliste. L'alévité du Dersim et son rôle dans le premier soulèvement kurde contre Mustafa Kemal (Koçkiri, 1919-1921)" (Amsterdam: MERA, 1993); M. van Bruinessen, "Genocide in Kurdistan?: The suppression of the Dersim rebellion in Turkey (1937-38) and the chemical war against the Iraqi Kurds (1988)", in: G.J. Andreopoulos (ed.), *Genocide: Conceptual and historical dimensions* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), 141-170.

[10] See B. Toprak, "Religion as state ideology in a secular setting: The Turkish-Islamic synthesis", in: M. Wagstaff (ed.), *Aspects of religion in secular Turkey* (University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 1990), pp. 10-15; Feroz Ahmad, "Islamic reassertion in Turkey", *Third World Quarterly* 10 (1988), 750-69.

[11] This is notably the case of the TKP-ML (Communist Party of Turkey/ Marxist- Leninist) and its various splinters.

[12] An excellent overview of this recent flood of books on Alevism, understood as part of the process of construction an Alevi 'ethnic' identity, is given by Karin Vorhoff, *Zwischen Glaube, Nation und neuer Gemeinschaft: Alevitische Identität in der Türkei der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1995).

[13] The Alevis vote has always been divided over the whole political spectrum, but the political party closest to the Alevis was the Social Democrat Populist Party (SHP), which had several vocal Alevi deputies. In 1991 the SHP became a junior partner in the government coalition with the True Path Party (DYP), led by Süleyman Demirel and later Mrs. Çiller.

[14] This festival, celebrated for the first time in 1964, had become the country's major left-wing cultural festival during the 1970s, was depoliticised during the 1980s, and received government patronage in the 1990s. Politicians of all parties now put in appearances in order to show how much they like the Alevis.



[15] Historically, the Bektashi Sufi order had played a role in integrating heterodox and insurgent groups into the Ottoman fold. In the war of independence, the order had given Mustafa Kemal's movement significant support, and in the early years of the republic word was spread among the simple Alevis that Mustafa Kemal was no less than a reincarnation of Haji Bektash. Around 1990, this theme was revived, the journal *Cem* proclaiming Atatürk 'a new Haji Bektash.' Other Alevi authors presented Haji Bektash as a proto-nationalist, some even calling him an *ülküciü* ('idealist', a term monopolised by the extreme nationalists and fascists of Türkiye's party).

[16] The most accessible reports on the events (all in Turkish) are in: Ali Yıldırım, *Ate•te semaha durmak* (Ankara: Yurt, 1993); Çetin Yigeno•lu, *•eriatçi siddet ve ölü ozanlar kenti Sivas* (Ankara: Ekin, 1994); and, by a prominent Alevi intellectual who narrowly escaped the fire, Lütfü Kaleli, *Sivas katliamı* (Istanbul: Alev, 1994).

[17] There were, however, individual police officers who did make efforts to save people. One of those saved, ironically, was Aziz Nesin, who was not recognised at first. Once they realised whom he was, some firemen and a policeman started beating him up, but others protected him and rushed him to hospital.

[18] The actors were never caught, but according to the press the raids were claimed by a radical and violent Muslim organisation, IBDA-C, which had carried out numerous terrorist acts before, and by a more shadowy ultra-nationalist organisation, the Turkish Revenge Brigades.

[19] See the interview with prominent Alevi spokesperson Lütfü Kaleli in the weekly edition of *Cumhuriyet*, March 24-30, 1995. A description and analysis of the events from the view of young Alevi radicals is given in Zeynep Çabuk, *Gazi direni•i: ta•, yürek, barikat...* ('The uprising in Gazi: stones, courage, barricades', Istanbul: Öz, 1995).

[20] The public prosecutor of the Ankara State Security Court, Nusret Demiral, even announced his intention to start proceedings against Nesin and request the death penalty.

[21] Only in the late summer of 1995, when the SHP had merged with the CHP and the enlarged party renegotiated the conditions for its participation in the government, could it force

the police chief's resignation.

[22] On these ideological debates, see M. van Bruinessen, "Aslını inkar eden haramzadedir! The debate on the ethnic identity of the Kurdish Alevi", in: Krisztina Kehl-Bodrogi, Barbara Kellner-Heinkele and Anke Otter-Beaujean (eds), *Syncretistic religious communities in the Near East* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 1-23.