

ROUNDTABLE

DYNAMICS OF DISRUPTION: ETHNOGRAPHIC PRACTICE IN CONTEMPORARY TURKEY

## Ethnography in War and Peace

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What is ethnography in times of war? How does war shape the conditions and possibilities of ethnographic research? How do the exigencies of daily life in a war zone ultimately prescribe and restrict what kinds of research can be done? In the following essay, I reflect on my experiences conducting ethnographic fieldwork in southeastern Turkey in unexpected wartime conditions. During the two years that I spent in the field, a series of local and national crises disrupted a fragile peace that had lasted for the previous few years. Confronted with disaster after disaster, I was continually compelled to reevaluate my project—interrogating my research questions, changing my research methods, and assessing whether I would be able to continue my research at all. The war defined my time in the field and dictated the possibilities and limitations of the work that I was able to do. While I had planned to examine earlier histories of violence, ultimately the contemporaneous war and its effects on daily life, the politics of memory, and the landscape became a central focus of my fieldwork.

My research focuses on silenced histories and legacies of state violence in the context of continuing political repression. I seek out untold stories, the subtext of narratives, and the contradictions intrinsic to a place in which the past is simultaneously invisible and in plain view. Building on the work of scholars who explore histories of violence and their affects on the material world, I search for the traces of past violence in the present.<sup>1</sup> This type of work necessarily entails entering thorny political terrain and leads to uncomfortable encounters. Because of the sensitive nature of my research, I expected certain difficulties during fieldwork when I first conceptualized my research project, but I would never have guessed the magnitude of the obstacles that I would encounter along the way.

I began my research in the city of Van, in southeastern Turkey, with a preliminary trip during the summer of 2014. I set out to conduct fieldwork on histories of state violence against Armenian and Kurdish communities in the region over the past century through a focus on local memory and architectural ruins on the landscape. From the outset, my project was political and fraught with tension. The topics of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey and ongoing violence against Kurdish communities have long been taboo—and often dangerous—

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<sup>1</sup> Alice von Bieberstein, “Treasure/Fetish/Gift: Hunting for ‘Armenian Gold’ in Post-Genocide Turkish Kurdistan,” *Subjectivity* 10, no. 2 (2017): 170–89; Heghnar Zeitlian Watenpaugh, “Survivor Objects: Cultural Heritage In and Out of the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 752–56; Zerrin Özlem Biner, *States of Dispossession: Violence and Precarious Coexistence in Southeast Turkey* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020); Salih Can Aciksoz, *Sacrificial Limbs: Masculinity, Disability, and Political Violence in Turkey* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019); Yael Navaro et al., eds., *Reverberations: Violence across Time and Space* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021); Marlene Schäfers, *Voices That Matter: Kurdish Women at the Limits of Representation in Contemporary Turkey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

topics to discuss openly.<sup>2</sup> Having lived and studied in Turkey for some years already, I was familiar with the political landscape and knew that it would be wise to avoid asking about these topics directly. Rather, I should attune myself to the oblique as well as overt ways in which they enter conversations and shape everyday interactions. As an Armenian-American with family roots in southeastern Turkey, my presence in the country was always politically charged. This was especially true in Van, a city that was violently emptied of its historic Armenian population. There, I embodied a history that was supposed to be buried, silenced, erased—a troubled past uncomfortably reemerging in the present.

## Peace

When I traveled to Van in July 2014, I held something of an idealized vision of what fieldwork might entail. I imagined myself as an intrepid ethnographer, confidently exploring the city and the countryside, notebook and pen in hand and camera at the ready, chatting with locals, who might invite me into their homes and shops for tea, where we would discuss everything from history and politics to their childhood memories and family recipes. While this might sound like a romantic vision of what fieldwork looks like, it was not far from the truth during my preliminary research. In 2014, Turkey was in the middle of a peace process between the Turkish military and the PKK, and a shaky ceasefire and ongoing negotiations created an unusually open environment in the southeast that had for decades been accustomed to drawn-out conflict. That summer, the pause in fighting and the unusual tolerance by officials for ostentatious expressions of support for the Kurdish movement created an almost festive atmosphere in Van. At weddings held on neighborhood streets, Kurdish songs with overtly political lyrics filled the air and Kurdish flags were displayed prominently. Such scenes would have been unimaginable some years earlier and would again become unthinkable just a year later.

At that time, intercity roads were largely unrestricted. Although one could travel relatively freely, the signs of the ongoing military occupation were never far from view. On hilltops throughout the region, fortified military outposts and watchtowers provided constant reminders of state surveillance. Permanent checkpoints at the entrances of certain cities and near military bases and impromptu roadblocks by military police along intercity highways reflected the ongoing tension simmering beneath the veneer of normality brought by the tenuous ceasefire.

During a visit to the majority-Kurdish city of Yüksekova (Gever in Kurdish), I witnessed the ongoing contestations between the Turkish military and militant Kurdish youth over control of public space. At the entrance to the city, all travelers passed through a military checkpoint guarded by the Turkish military police, where soldiers checked IDs and the contents of vehicles. Meanwhile, after nightfall, local youth aligned with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*, or PKK), their faces covered with scarves to mask their identity, blocked intersections in the city center with piles of burning tires, thereby enacting their own form of spatial control. While driving through the city to attend a wedding one evening with a local friend, we came upon one such roadblock, and a masked youth approached the driver's window and asked for a cigarette in the local Kurdish dialect. My friend, in Kurdish, replied politely that, unfortunately, we had no cigarettes. The youth was satisfied and allowed us to drive on. After we turned onto a side road, my friend commented that if we had not spoken to them in Kurdish, they may have thrown stones at the car, or worse.

<sup>2</sup> Mesut Yegen, "'Prospective-Turks' or 'Pseudo-Citizens': Kurds in Turkey," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 4 (2009): 597–615; Ayşe Parla and Ceren Özgül, "Property, Dispossession, and Citizenship in Turkey; or, The History of the Gezi Uprising Starts in the Surp Hagop Armenian Cemetery," *Public Culture* 28, no. 3 (2016): 617–53; Evren Altinkas, "Displaced Scholars as a Contribution to Academic Diversity," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 544–47.

## War

The following year, just days after I arrived in Turkey to begin two years of fieldwork, the peace process came to an abrupt end. In July 2015, fighting resumed between the Turkish military and Kurdish militants, and subsequently the conflict took on a new, massively destructive dimension, as clashes began to intensify in the majority-Kurdish urban centers of the southeast. In many cities, security forces declared round-the-clock curfews that went on sometimes for months. During these curfews, in places such as Diyarbakır, Cizre, Yüksekova, and others, many neighborhoods were relentlessly shelled, and buildings were burned. Residents returning after the curfews were lifted found smoldering rubble in place of their homes. Many civilians, along with soldiers, militants, and affiliated youths, lost their lives in the conflict, and many families had their homes and livelihoods destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

Because of this political upheaval in Turkey, I found myself in a volatile and violent situation that no one had expected just a few months prior. When the war suddenly reignited, I was shaken and unsure of how I could or if I should proceed with my research plans while a war had begun to rage, and civilians were being killed. Over time, however, I understood that this renewed war was more than an obstacle to my research, but a tragic and unexpected new episode in the ongoing cycles of violence that I had planned to study. In the original formulation of my project, I had intended to compare the material remains of the Armenian Genocide of 1915 and the ruins of Kurdish villages burnt in the 1990s as two layers of state violence inscribed onto the landscape of eastern Turkey. While I had expected to focus on two layers of ruins, I realized that the renewed violence in 2015 was producing a third, contemporary layer of ruins, which was newly being etched onto the landscape by the tanks and warplanes of the Turkish military.<sup>4</sup>

Although my first foray into fieldwork in Van took place during an unusual moment of openness, my long-term fieldwork was defined by escalating war, political crisis, and constant insecurity. The short-lived peace process ultimately proved to be the exception, rather than the rule, in a region that has long been subjected to martial law. By necessity, my fieldwork during this period of war looked very different than it had the previous summer and departed from what I had originally envisioned. The conflict restricted my mobility in many ways. Although no curfews were imposed in the city of Van itself, frequent clashes erupted between armed Kurdish militants and youth and Turkish police and soldiers in and around the city, and military vehicles were regularly targeted with makeshift explosives. Many civilians were caught in the crossfire, and many teachers, doctors, civil servants, and academics were detained, fired, or suspended on charges of alleged support for a terrorist organization after participating in strikes and signing petitions to protest the death of civilians in Cizre.<sup>5</sup>

Due to the intensifying conflict, the atmosphere was markedly different from the previous year. Palpable fear, uncertainty, and mistrust prevailed. Rumors circulated widely about which neighborhood or town would be the next target of military curfews and destruction. At the beginning of the new conflict, the government announced a novel policy according to which any citizens who informed on others suspected of supporting terrorist activity would

<sup>3</sup> Haydar Darıcı and Serra Hakyemez, “Neither Civilian nor Combatant: Weaponised Spaces and Spatialised Bodies in Cizre,” in *Turkey’s Necropolitical Laboratory: Democracy, Violence and Resistance*, ed. Banu Bargu (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 71–95.

<sup>4</sup> Anoush Tamar Suni, “Palimpsests of Violence: Ruination and the Afterlives of Genocide in Anatolia,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 65, no. 1 (2023): 192–218.

<sup>5</sup> Ilana Feldman, “Threats to Academic Freedom Are Global, and So Must Be Its Defense,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 517–19; Nihat Celik, “The AKP-Era Higher Education Strategies for Establishing Hegemony over Turkish Universities,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 520–27; Selin Bengi Gumrukcu, “Democratic Backsliding and Universities: Between Control and Resilience,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, no. 3 (2023): 528–36.

be rewarded with a monetary prize, thus elevating the already heightened sense of insecurity.

Whereas previously I had enjoyed many relaxed, leisurely discussions about politics and history with people from all walks of life, now, suddenly, no one wanted to talk to me. People with whom I had shared meals and intimate conversations now seemed to avoid me, not answering my phone calls and messages, or constantly offering new excuses about why they could not meet. When, in the fall, I asked an acquaintance if I could interview her about her family history, she politely agreed, but suggested that we wait until the spring. Another acquaintance, whose village was built around an Armenian church that I hoped to see, invited me to visit the village, but insisted that it was already too cold, and that we should wait until summer. A third acquaintance, whose home I had visited multiple times, finally agreed to an interview after many months of postponing. We met at a café and spoke for over an hour about local Armenian history. He seemed comfortable and confident during our conversation, making jokes and pleasant banter. However, a week later, rumors circled back to me through mutual acquaintances, and I understood that he harbored suspicions that I might be a spy.

In 2014, I had spent much of my time frequenting cultural centers affiliated with the Kurdish movement, where leftist, activist youth passionate about Kurdish political causes gathered. I attended a Kurdish language course, where my classmates were eager to talk to me, to tell me about their villages where Armenians had once lived, and to ask about my experiences learning Kurdish. One such cultural center was run by the Van municipality while it was in the hands of the Kurdish party. I visited the center just after I arrived in Van in August 2015. I was eager to meet the young people who ran the center and to learn about their programming and music classes.

The staff of the center were welcoming and offered me tea as they described their events and courses. I was introduced to six or seven people who worked there, and, worried that I would forget their names before my next visit, I pulled out a small notepad to jot them down. As soon as the group saw me writing down their names, they became visibly agitated. One young woman warned me that they were nervous because they did not know what I intended to do with the information. I immediately realized my mistake and tucked my notebook away. Unfortunately, the anxieties of these young people were not unfounded. Shortly after that episode, the democratically elected Kurdish mayor of Van was removed and replaced with an appointee of the central government, and the Kurdish cultural center was closed down. In the following months, the government began to crack down on Kurdish cultural organizations across the country as hotbeds of terrorist activity, and one by one, they were shuttered by official decree.

During this time, I heard stories and read reports of foreign journalists and researchers coming under suspicion, being detained, questioned, and deported. Local acquaintances recounted to me how, while commuting home from school or work, they had been stopped on a street corner by the police, who confiscated their backpacks and laptops. I worried that I, too, might be targeted and have my materials seized, and so I was careful not to carry anything that could raise suspicion when I left the house. I no longer carried a notebook or a digital camera with me for fear of being searched by security officials.

Instead, I found other ways to document what I saw and heard. Smartphones were already ubiquitous in Turkey, and no one was surprised to see someone of my generation engrossed in composing text messages or talking on the phone. While in public, I relied on my phone to snap photos, jot down brief notes, and record voice memos to transcribe later. Once back at home, I typed up field notes and saved them to a cloud platform in a password protected file, so that if I lost my computer and my notebooks my archive would remain safe.

In the first few months of the war, while many people were terrified into silence and uninterested in talking to a foreign researcher about sensitive topics, I focused my energies on visiting sites of ruined Armenian monuments in the countryside—dilapidated chapels in distant villages and the ruins of monumental, medieval monasteries atop hills among



**Figure 1.** Author photographing the ruins of an Armenian chapel—the Church of Saint Hripsime—in the village of Goghpants (Armenian)/Kopanis (Kurdish)/Sarmaç (Turkish). Photo courtesy of Akin Arslan, March 2016.

remote mountains (Fig. 1). Triangulating between Armenian, Turkish, English, and French written sources on Armenian history, art history, and architecture, and accounts from local acquaintances about the Armenian churches in and near their villages, I would choose a certain building and set off with local friends by car to locate the site, and then document the place with photographs. If any villagers or shepherds were nearby, we would informally chat about the place, their memories of it, and any stories they knew about it.

Notwithstanding the ongoing war, this kind of excursion entailed its own perils. In the remote countryside, sheepdogs who aggressively guarded their flocks posed a threat, and hunters carrying rifles and treasure hunters toting pickaxes and shovels posed another. Certain villages, usually those with inhabitants sympathetic with the leftist Kurdish movement, presented a more welcoming stance toward someone like me who was passing through and asking directions to a nearby Armenian church. Other villages patrolled by village guards (local villagers armed and salaried by the state in their fight against the PKK) were less hospitable and more likely to report suspicious foreigners to local authorities. Many villagers assumed that my companions and I were ourselves treasure hunters, for why else would we be traipsing around the mountains looking for the ruins of an old church?<sup>6</sup>

While setting off into remote areas and unknown towns and villages, my journeys were always filled with both anxious anticipation and an ever-present sense of vulnerability. On one occasion, I traveled with friends to the remote mountain town of Bahçesaray (Miks in Kurdish; Moks in Armenian). It was far from Van city, so we stayed overnight at the local *öğretmenevi*, or teachers' hostel. In the morning, when we entered the cafeteria for breakfast,

<sup>6</sup> Anoush Tamar Suni, "Historical Alchemy: Buried Gold, Buried Pasts," *Anthropological Quarterly* 96, no. 2 (2023): 335–60.

we realized that the only other guests were a group of heavily armored military police, their semiautomatic weapons casually lying on the tables next to their plates of toast and cups of tea. On a separate trip to a village two hours away from Van to visit a medieval Armenian church that had been converted into a mosque, we were surprised to find that an army barracks occupied the center of the village, and the streets were clogged with armored vehicles. After an abbreviated visit to the repurposed church, we hastily left the village to avoid unwanted attention.

On another excursion, while traveling north from Van on an intercity road, we came upon an impromptu highway patrol checkpoint. A heavily armed military policeman peered in the window of our vehicle and then waved us on. Twenty minutes later, when we arrived at the entrance of the next town, three police vehicles suddenly surrounded our car. A plainclothes policeman, a policeman from the counterterrorism force, and a third from the narcotics force had been waiting to intercept us at the next intersection. It was late afternoon in February and darkness was falling early. The sky grew black as we stood shivering in the snow on the roadside while the policemen checked our IDs and searched our car. As they handed my American passport back to me, they smiled, and said “Don’t worry, madam, we are nice Turkish police.” These words provided little reassurance however, as I watched the policemen disapprovingly study my companion’s Turkish ID card, which identified his hometown as Yüsekova, the majority Kurdish city well-known as a political hotbed. Many possible scenarios raced through my mind as we waited for what seemed to be an eternity in the freezing cold, in a place far from anyone we knew. Fortunately, after an hour, they let us go.

After a year of fieldwork under wartime conditions, I had become somewhat accustomed to the new lay of the land and had figured out strategies for navigating daily life and research methodology in a time and place defined by insecurity and unpredictability. Or so I thought, until a new political crisis shook the country.

## Coup

One sunny July morning in 2016 I flew from Van to Ankara, and from there to Munich, where I planned to spend a week visiting family for a brief vacation from fieldwork. After I arrived in Germany, a few hours passed before I connected my phone to Wi-Fi and learned that, in the meantime, an attempted coup had begun in Turkey. Again, violence, fear, and insecurity gripped the country. Flights were grounded and travel in and out of Turkey was restricted. My weeklong visit stretched first to two weeks, and then to three weeks as I waited and wondered if I would be able to return or be forced to cut my research short.

When the political climate finally stabilized, I boarded a plane back to Turkey, but I was gripped with fear and anxiety. I was almost certain that I would be stopped, questioned, detained, and deported. During the three-hour flight, I imagined the possible scenarios that I might encounter while trying to return to Van. Upon arriving in Ankara, I was surprised that no one questioned me. I then boarded my flight to Van, noting that I had a row to myself on an otherwise full plane. When everyone had boarded, a uniformed man came to my row with a clipboard and walkie-talkie and asked me for my last name, which I told him: “Suni.” He studied his clipboard and walked back to the front of the plane, speaking into his walkie-talkie. Without checking any other passengers, he spoke with officials at the front of the plane before exiting. I began to feel nervous and texted a friend who was going to pick me up at the airport in Van. I was relieved when the plane took off, but throughout the flight I wondered what awaited me upon arrival.

When the plane landed, the crew made the usual announcements about deplaning, first in Turkish, followed by English. At the conclusion of the English announcement, I heard the following: “Passenger Suni, special assistance, you are kindly requested to stay on board.” I said to myself, “I knew this was going to happen.” I texted my friend, who contacted his uncle, a lawyer in Ankara, in case I needed legal advice. I decided that my best option

was to cooperate, so I waited in my seat as all other passengers disembarked. When the plane was empty, two male flight attendants approached my row. I thought to myself, “Now they will escort me to the police to be questioned.” Instead, they politely queried, “Madam, why didn’t you get off the plane?” Attempting to stay calm, I replied, “They told me to stay in my seat.” The flight attendants appeared confused, “Who told you to stay in your seat?” “They made an announcement!” I insisted, repeating the announcement that I had heard. “No, that’s not what we said. We said, ‘Passengers who need special assistance, you are kindly requested to stay on board.’” Surprised and more than a little embarrassed, I sheepishly collected my bags while the two flight attendants looked on with amused befuddlement.

This last episode was the crescendo of the anxiety and stress that I experienced during over two years of continuous fieldwork in Turkey. It was, in the end, a figment of my imagination, which eventually, once I was safely home, became a humorous tale about how my subconscious conjured a scenario so vivid that I felt it to be real. Of course, this imagined danger did not spring wholly out of my imagination but rather was the culmination of all I had seen, heard, and felt over the previous year—the escalating violence, the government crackdowns, the arrests, detentions, destruction, and death. For many activists, academics, journalists, dissidents, and others caught up in the political turmoil, such a scenario is not only an imagined fear but an ongoing lived reality. Following the coup attempt, I spent another year in Turkey and completed my research in September 2017. In the subsequent years, I returned periodically and watched as the political landscape shifted and the space for dissent tightened.

Much is lost in times of war. Lives, livelihoods, communities, and homes are destroyed. Although it may be possible for an ethnographer to carry out fieldwork in a war zone, such work is essentially structured and restricted by the conflict. I was able to remain in the field through a period of unexpected war and continue my research, although the war fundamentally circumscribed my project. Unable to carry out the fieldwork that I had imagined, I developed new tactics and methods to remain in my fieldsite, and ultimately much of my research focused on the unfolding conflict itself. I had originally intended to study the material legacies of violence against Ottoman Armenians in 1915 and Kurdish communities in the 1990s. The war that erupted again in southeastern Turkey during my time in the field became a tragic new chapter of the story that I was already trying to tell.