Fierce Fighters, Caring Mothers: State-Sponsored Feminism in Early Republican Turkey and the Dersim Question

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In April of 1937, Sabiha Gökçen boarded her fighter jet and took off for Dersim, or, as it had been newly renamed, Tunceli province. A little over a month later, she would receive a medal for her services, though the authorities remained suspiciously vague regarding what precisely it was that she had done.[1] Gökçen was celebrated as Turkey's first female pilot, a "Daughter of the Turks, Daughter of the Skies, Daughter of Atatürk"[2] Finally, in June 1937, news of what Gökçen had done to receive such high honors finally spread: as part of the Turkish Republic's military operation in Dersim, she had participated in airstrikes against the revolting Kurdish populations there.[3] Hailed as a feminist icon, a "Turkish Amelia Earhart." Gökçen was meant to show the world how much Turkish women could and had achieved under Mustafa Kemal (Atatürk)'s new statist project.[4] As Turkey's first female combat pilot, she was emblematic of modernity itself, the new, emancipated daughter of the Republic, in contrast to the inhabitants of Dersim, those backwards mountain people, Turkey's last feudal remnants.[5] Using Gökçen and Sıdıka Avar, headmistress of the Elaziğ Girls' Institute, as its case studies, this paper will explore this symbolic juxtaposition, investigating how women fit into the early Turkish Republican Project, what political goals state-sponsored feminism served, and how the state's feminist tropes were deployed with regards to the Kurdish population. In the pages that follow, I argue that the state-sponsored feminism of the Early Republican Regime was deployed as a pacification and domination tool within the context of statist modernism in the Kurdish regions. Gökçen, for one, was held up as a symbol of what women could achieve, a fighter pilot that was to lead the way for all Turkish women, yet her image was predicated on the violence perpetrated against the civilians of Dersim in 1937; as a symbol of state feminism, she promoted an image of Turkish women that was intimately linked to militarism and the violence

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[1] Ayse Gul Altinay, *The Myth of the Military-Nation* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), 40.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid, 45.

[4] The title "Turkish Amelia Earhart" comes from an interview that appeared in an American magazine in 1996. See "Sabiha Gokcen— Turkish Amelia Earhart," in *Woman and Earth: Global Eco-Network* 4, no.1 (March 8, 1996): 12.

[5] The term "feudal" was used to refer to the Kurds by the daily newspaper *Tan*, on June 15 1937. Quoted in Mete Kalman, *Belge ve Tanıklarıyla Dersim Direnişleri* (Istanbul: Nujen Yayınları, 1995), 271.

of Turkification. Avar, on the other hand, more directly deployed state feminism as a domination tool, taking Kurdish girls away to her Institute in order to train them in Turkish, thereby creating the foundation for Turkish-speaking families within Kurdish majority areas.

Historiographical Background

The traditional Kemalist approach, of course, has long ignored the connection between the state-sponsored feminism of the early Republican period and the state's authoritarian political agenda. In 1962, Ayşe Afet-İnan wrote that "[t]oday, in Turkey, men and women are equal in the eyes of the law. The many social reforms introduced during the presidency of Kemal Atatürk (1923-1938) always took account of women's position; many legal rights and duties were freely conceded to them."[6] In an analysis characteristic of Kemalist propaganda, Afet-İnan, an anthropologist and historian who was one of Atatürk's adopted daughters and was responsible for many of the texts propagating the Turkish History Thesis, discussed the great advancements Turkish women had made in the Republican Period, contrasting their new and improved position with the patriarchal period of Ottoman rule, when Persian and Byzantine influences had led to the confinement of women in the harem and the deterioration of their social position.[7] This narrative holds Atatürk personally responsible for advancing women's rights, portraying him as a just statesman who "wanted his people to progress and prosper according to advanced ideas and the principles of modern civilization."[8] It is characterized by a belief in the notions of modern civilization and the Turkish nation as absolute, unchanging values, and has persisted in scholarship despite criticism.[9]

Starting in the 1970s, significant challenges to this approach began to appear, led primarily by feminist scholars within Turkey. Most prominent among them was Şirin Tekeli, a professor in the Faculty of Economics at Istanbul University, who resigned from her position in protest of the board of Higher Education established in 1981.[10] Tekeli rejected the model of the Kemalist career woman, and focused instead on the private and personal problems that the public expectations laid out

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[6] Ayşe Afet-İnan, *The Emancipation of the Turkish Woman* (Amsterdam: UNESCO, 1962), 50.
[7] Ibid, 25-26.
[8] Ibid, 61.
[9] For example, see Emel Dogramacı, *Atatürk and the Turkish Woman Today* (Ankara: Atatürk Kultur, Dil ve Tarih Yuksek Kurumu, Atatürk Arastirma Merkezi, 1991).
[10] Yeşim Arat, "The Project of Modernity and Women in Turkey," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 95.

during the Early Republic had created for women.[11] Other feminist scholars like Şule Torun wrote about the repression of female sexuality, the emphasis on professional identity or education, and the pressure to promote the community over the individual, discussing them as markers of the circumscribed identity the republican project assigned female citizens.[12] In this interpretation, the state was necessarily patriarchal, and continued to demarcate women's roles even as it claimed to be liberating them. The feminist authors of the 1970s and 1980s provided the groundwork for a critical re-appraisal of Kemalist feminism, turning to the political aims that underpinned it and highlighting its authoritarian, patriarchal roots. At the same time, they mostly considered the implications of Kemalist gender politics on the personal lives of women without expanding the critique to the project of Turkish modernity as a whole.

This question was first taken up in the 1990s by Deniz Kandiyoti and Nilüfer Göle, who questioned the binary between Turkish modernity and tradition and suggested context-specific interpretations that allow us to consider how gender was constructed within broader nationalist projects and social policies.[13] Kandiyoti has written about the fact that "the political project of the state can act as a major source of discontinuity in the experience of women," and while this is meant as commentary with regards to the class-stratified nature of Kemalist feminism, which addressed mostly upper-middle class, urban women, we can extend it to include other groups marginalized by the Turkish nationalist project, such as the Kurdish populations of the Southeast. The more theoretical work of Kandiyoti and Göle has now begun to be applied by scholars like Ayşe Gül Altinay, Hale Yılmaz, and Zeynep Türkyılmaz, who examine the specific roles women of different ethnic and socio-political backgrounds played within the modernity project, and their characterization as either modernizers or feudal "others" throughout the Early Republican Period. Gül Altinay situates women within the military nation, juxtaposing them against militaristic nationalism and its cultural

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[11] Arat, 105. Tekeli lays out her argument in Şirin Tekeli, "Tek Parti Döneminde Kadın Hareketi de Bastırıldı," in *Sol Kemalizme Bakıyor*, ed. Levent Cinemre and Ruşen Çakır (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1991).

[12] Ibid.

[13] Nilüfer Göle, "The Quest for the Islamic Self Within the Context of Modernity," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997); Deniz Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 317-338.

implications, and questioning the resulting gender differentiation.[14] Türkyılmaz, on the other hand, turns her lens towards the maternal colonialism implemented by women like Sıdıka Avar, an archetype for "national heroines" who coopted the violence-ridden educational policies in Dersim and transformed them into "affectionately" carried out civilizing missions.[15]

The projects of Gül Altinay and Türkyılmaz provide us with a model for linking the top-down gender reforms of the Kemalist regime with the politics of the often-violent Turkification of the Eastern provinces. As women became symbolic of the state's modernizing efforts, they were also juxtaposed against Turkey's new internal "other" — the Kurds of the Eastern Provinces. State-sponsored feminism and portrayals of the modern woman were therefore intimately connected to the state's broader political goals, including its desire to Turkify the Eastern provinces and break tribal authority there. If we are to fully understand what Kandiyoti has termed the "discontinuity in the experiences of women," we must investigate this link, contextualizing the experiences of the (typically) urban, upper-middle class women who profited from the Kemalist reforms by linking them to those of more marginalized groups.

Modernization, Nationalism, and the Kurds in the Early Turkish Republic

Following the Turkish War of Independence, and the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal instigated a series of reforms with the aim of pushing Turkey to make a "modernization leap, [in order to] compete with the national states of Europe."[16] These reforms were guided by the so-called "Six Arrows" (Altı Ok), the fundamental tenets of Kemalism: republicanism (cumhuriyetçilik), nationalism (milliyetçilik), reformism (devrimçilik), statism (devletçilik), laicism (laiklik), and populism (halklık). Of special interest to us here are milliyetçilik, devletçilik, and devrimçilik. The former had its roots in the ideas of Yusuf Akçura, who in 1904 had considered *Three Kinds of Politics* (*Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset*), and concluded that the most effective vision for the future of the Ottoman Empire (and later, the Turkish Republic) was "a political Turkish nationalism based on

[14] Gül Altinay, 2; 34.
[15] Zeynep Türkyılmaz, "Maternal Colonialism and Turkish Woman's Burden in Dersim: Educating the 'Mountain Flowers' of Dersim," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 162-186.
[16] Erik Jan Zürcher, Turkey: A Modern History (London: IB Tauris, 1994), 175, 181.

race."[17] Devletçilik was connected to the attempt to create a strong national economy, which would mean the participation of all classes, and by extension would give the state the ability and permission to intervene in socioeconomic life.[18] Devrimçilik, finally, has been much debated as a term; I follow Zürcher's interpretation of it as an "orderly transformation from above."[19] It is important to note that devrimçilik was closely linked to the project of Turkish modernity, which Göle describes as a voluntary shift towards westernization, rooted in ideological positivism and rationalism.[20]

It was in this context that Atatürk began to implement a variety of modernizing reforms affecting, but not limited to, Turkish women. The 1925 Hat Law obligated men to swap their fezes for western-style hats, but the veil itself was never directly banned, though a number of decrees were issued regulating the çarşaf and peçe.[21] Yılmaz Hale has written extensively on the regulation of women's clothing, discussing the variety of decrees that were issued at the local level, such as in Eskişehir in 1927, when following the failure of the mayor's call for the voluntary change of women's dress, the municipal council banned peçes and peştemals instituting fines and authorizing the police to intervene in cases of noncompliance.[22] A series of educational reforms were also passed: a variety of new girls' technical schools were opened, and a 1927 decree integrated female students into co-educational secondary schools.[23] The regulation of women's clothing and their education were given particular importance due to their symbolic power, which is readily observable in state propaganda from the 1930s, such as in the review *La Turquie Kemaliste*, which showcases the regime's achievements by featuring a multitude of girls' educational institutions and displaying rich photographic material depicting young female students in uniform, hard

[17] Yusuf Akçura, *Üç Tarz-ı Siyaset* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1976), 23. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
[18] Niyazi Berkes, *The Development of Secularism in Turkey* (London: Hurst & Co, 1998), 462.
[19] Erik Jan Zürcher, "Ottoman Sources of Kemalist Thought", in *Late Ottoman Society: The Intellectual Legacy*, ed. Elizabeth Özdalga (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2005), 19.
[20] Göle, 83.
[21] The çarşaf is a loose-fitting robe traditionally worn over a woman's clothing and similar to the abaya, while the peçe is a smaller veil used to cover the face. A third type of garment, the peştemal, refers to a traditional towel used in a bathhouse, but also draped over a woman's body in order to ensure coverage when she went outside.
[22] Yılmaz Hale, *Becoming Turkish: Nationalist Reforms and Cultural Negotiations in Early Republican Turkey, 1923-1945* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2013), 89-90.
[23] Yucel Gelişli, "Education of Women from the Ottoman Empire to Modern Turkey," *SEER: Journal for Labour and Social Affairs in Eastern Europe* 7, no. 4 (2004): 121–35, 128.

at work with their studies or participating in physical education activities.[24]

Reforms often took an even more obviously nationalistic tone, actively promoting the notion of milliyetçilik. The ideological process of Turkification was advanced through the Turkish Historical Society (Türk Tarih Kurumu), and the Turkish Linguistic Society (Türk Dil Kurumu); the former formulated the Turkish History Thesis, according to which the Turks had originated in Turkistan (not Mongolia) and had been responsible for advancing Neolithic civilization as well as developing civilizations like those of the Hittites and those in Mesopotamia and Egypt.[25] The latter was responsible for cleansing the Turkish language of all Persian and Arabic words while propagating the Sun Language Theory, according to which the Turkish language was amongst the oldest languages, having formed the basis for Sumerian and Hittite alike.[26] Organizations such as these advanced an ahistorical, narrow definition of Turkish nationalism, which excluded populations like the Kurds, Laz, and Circassians, while simultaneously casting them as Turks who had forgotten or denied their origins, and needed to be brought back into the nationalist flock. Etatism followed: the state was to intervene in favor of these lost brothers, reminding them of their Turkishness and integrating them into the paternalistic order.

It was in this ideological context that administrative restructuring began, with the aim of breaking the autonomy of the tribes and sheikhs in the Dersim area. The late Ottoman period had empowered a variety of Kurdish elites, especially following their integration into Sultan Adbülhamid II's Hamidiye Corps and the events of the Armenian Genocide.[27] The resulting tribal autonomy was a thorn in the side of the centralizing, internally expansionary Kemalist state, which sought to pacify local tribal and religious elites by eliminating their independence.[28] To this end, the authorities sought the re-organization of Dersim with the view of "integrat[ing] its physical and human landscape into the imagined nation-state via whatever means necessary."[29] In 1934, a Resettlement Law was briefly considered, according to which Dersim's

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[24] "Le Visage Turq: Étudiantes, Students, Studentiennen," *La Turquie Kemaliste* 28 (December, 1938), 20-28.
[25] Gül Altinay, 22-23.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Hamit Bozarslan, "Les Révoltes Kurdes en Turquie Kémaliste (Quelques Aspects)," *Guerres Mondiales et Conflits Contemporaines* 51 (July 1988): 121-136, 123.
[28] Nicole Watts, "Relocating Dersim: Turkish State-Building and Kurdish Resistance, 1931-1938," *New Perspectives on Turkey* 23 (Fall 200): 5-30, 8.
[29] Watts, 8.

population would be incorporated into the fabric of the nation through resettlement according to "cultural and religious groupings."[30] Local tribal and religious leadership were increasingly portrayed as outlaws and bandits, and the state no longer made an effort to collaborate with them, much to the detriment, as Senem Aslan has noted, of the national project they were promoting.[31] Finally, in 1935, the Tunceli Law was passed, replacing the Dersim region with a more defined vilayet named Tunceli and granting its Governor General "extraordinary" power.[32] The Law was the government's solution to the Dersim problem, a way to militarize the region and break tribal autonomy.

The Republican State's handling of the Dersim situation provides fascinating insight into the ways in which it put the arrows of milliyetçilik, devletçilik, and devrimçilik into practice. As a minority group accustomed to living in a difficult terrain with a high degree of autonomy, the Kurds made Kemalist reformers uncomfortable. They were a threat to the state-building project not only because they resisted assimilation but also because in doing so, they called to mind the Ottoman past, challenging Kemalist authority both in Dersim and Turkey as a whole. Göle has argued that the Kurds functioned as an internal "other" for the authorities, the embodiment of a pre-modern, "uncivilized" people juxtaposed against the modernity of the reforming state.[33] It is easy to see how this might have been the case: not only did the population of Dersim inhabit a mountainous, rural area without any developed industries, but they were also organized into kinship-based societies, consisting of clans where political power was tied to familial relationships. They belonged to the groups of lost brothers who had forgotten their Turkish origins, and violated the arrow of laiklik (laicism), another of Kemalism's main tenets, by virtue of their religious beliefs. The majority of Dersim's population was Alevi, and the ulema remained especially influential within local society.[34] The importance of religious custom contradicted the state's vision of a secular society where religion was depoliticized and confined to private life. Indeed, Nakşibendi Sheikhs helmed many of the resistance movements that appeared in Dersim throughout the early twentieth century. Most notable among these was the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925, during which Kurdish forces

[30] Ibid, 14.
[31] Senem Aslan, "Everyday Forms of State Power and the Kurds in the Early Turkish Republic," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011), 75-93, 81.
[32] Watts, 15.
[33] Göle, 85.
[34] Bozarslan, 129.

managed to gain control in various cities before being crushed in Diyarbakir by the forces of İsmet İnönü.[35]

When the Tunceli Law was passed in 1935 the ground was ripe for another major rebellion. In 1937, Seyit Rıza, a 75-year old Alevi cleric, succeeded in organizing many of the local tribes with the aim of resisting the government's increasing efforts to curb tribal autonomy and bring Dersim (now Tunceli) under Ankara's authority, though the different groups were divided in their approaches and particular aims.[36] On Newroz of 1937, the rebels destroyed a bridge on the Tunceli Erzincan road and sparked the Dersim Rebellion.[37] The Turkish military quickly mobilized around 25,000 troops, utilizing modern military tactics and technology against them; as we have seen, Sabiha Gökçen was one of the fighter pilots deployed to the region, participating in air strikes against villages where rebels were said to be hiding.[38] The rebels' guerilla tactics were no match for the modernized Turkish military: fighting continued throughout the summer, but Seyit Rıza was ultimately captured and executed along with his son and other fighters.

Sabiha Gökçen: Daughter of the Turks, Daughter of the Skies, Daughter of Atatürk

Flying in her airplane alongside all male pilots, Sabiha Gökçen was part of the military effort to suppress the uprising, though she was slated to become much more, an example of the heights that the modern, patriotic Turkish woman could reach through sheer willpower and love of country. For the state, Gökçen personified Turkish modernity, which had emancipated women and allowed them to demonstrate that

> Turkish women have a large place in public life, [and] they are very reputable. They are hardworking. They are honorable. They are strong-willed. Above all, they are successful in bringing to completion the missions given to them, no matter their profession, with at least as much seriousness as men.[39]

This type of woman, the successful careerist who, with the help of the state, had attained an education and proceeded to prosper in male-dominated fields, was presented as the inverse of Kurdish women, at least before they were taken in by schools such as Sıdıka Avar's. The

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[35] Ibid, 126.
[36] Watts, 18.
[37] Ibid, 21.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Behçet Kemal Çağlar, "Türk Kızı, Gök Kızı, Atatürk Kızı," summarized in Sabiha Gökçen, *Atatürk'le Bir Ömür*, ed. Oktay Verel (Istanbul: Altın Kitaplar Yayınevi, 1994), 152-153.

constructed contrast between the modern Turkish woman and the still pre-modern Kurds was a marked one, and though this might not have been explicitly called to notice in Gökçen's case, the irony of the task that Atatürk's daughter, the role model for all Turkish women, was entrusted with during the Dersim Rebellion is overwhelming. Turkish modernity was a double-edged sword: for all the talk of women's emancipation and their hardworking nature, the newfound empowerment of female citizens masked, at least in Gökçen's case, a dark underbelly of minority repression, and a violent process of Turkification in the southeast.

Sabiha Gökçen was born in Bursa in May of 1913, in the foothills of Uludağ (the Great Mountain).[40] Not much is known about her childhood, other than that she lost both of her parents when she was quite young as a result of warfare and instability.[41] In 1924-1925, when her memoirs start, she was living with her older brother and sister, dreaming of attaining an education despite her family's poverty. It is not entirely surprising that Gökçen's memoirs, titled *Atatürk'le Bir Ömür*, *A Life with Atatürk*, are bookended by Atatürk's life rather than Gökçen's. The book's first chapter is devoted to the two visits, in 1924 and 1925, that Atatürk paid Bursa. Fascinated with the Gazi Paşa's persona, Gökçen was determined to "meet him, speak with him, hear his voice."[42] She managed this in 1925, when Atatürk stayed in a neighboring house.[43] He initially inquired about her family, at which point Gökçen replied that she was an orphan, and that she wished for an education.[44] Impressed with the girl's resolve, Atatürk offered to adopt her, taking her with him to Ankara so she could "become valuable to your country and your people."[45] Atatürk's biographers have not paid much attention to his personal life, and not much is known of his adopted children, of which there were seven daughters and one son, all from similarly disadvantaged backgrounds. We do know that these adoptions were legal, though we must contrast the case of Gökçen, who was twelve at the time, with that of Ayşe Afet-İnan, who was eighteen with a living family (in the latter case, adoption enabled Atatürk to support the girl's education).

The young Sabiha traveled to Ankara, where she was first assigned a tutor in the Presidential Manor alongside Zehra and Rukiye,

[40] Gökçen, 28.
[41] Ibid, 16.
[42] Ibid, 14.
[43] Ibid, 21.
[44] Ibid 20-22.
[45] Ibid, 24.

two of Atatürk's other daughters.[46] She was sent to two American colleges for girls in Istanbul, and then to Vienna and Paris, to improve her ailing constitution.[47] In 1934, following the introduction of the Surname Law, Atatürk gave her the name Gökçen, "of the skies." According to Gökçen, "many people assume that I took this surname after starting to fly… Actually, it was a approximately a year after [he] gave me the surname Gökçen that I encountered the skies and began my career as an aviator."[48] About a year later, in May of 1935, at the opening ceremony of the Turkish Bird (Türk Kuşu), the newly established Turkish Aviation Society, Gökçen expressed an interest in flying. Atatürk smiled and replied: "I like your courage… Indeed, aviation would really match your surname of Gökçen."[49] For a few months, Gökçen received training in basic aviation and parachuting at the Turkish Bird, and was then sent to Koktebel, near Odessa, for further training along with seven male students.[50] Following the end of the program, Atatürk approached her and revealed his plans: "You have made me very happy…[Y]ou might even become the world's first female combat pilot."[51] Gökçen soon departed for the Eskişehir Military Air Academy (Eskişehir Askeri Tayyare Okulu), where she was to receive training from the Turkish military. It was here that she was first to hear of the Dersim Rebellion.

On a spring day in 1937, while returning from a maneuver, Gökçen observed a group of her (male) classmates animatedly discussing something.[52] After pressing them, she learned that they had received orders to fly out in the morning in order to assist with the suppression of a small rebellion in Dersim.[53] When she expressed her desire to join, her commander told her: "this is an important operation, Gökçen… […] and you are a girl…"[54] He deferred to Atatürk, who as the President of the Republic had the ultimate decision making power; he agreed to let Gökçen go, declaring that

> she is no longer a young girl, but a young fighter… […] She knows the extent of [the mission's] danger. But I am of the opinion that in the event that we do not send her on this mission, such

[46] Gul Altinay, 36.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Gökçen, 77.
[49] Ibid, 81.
[50] Ibid, 98-99.
[51] Ibid, 109.
[52] Ibid, 115.
[53] Ibid, 116.
[54] Ibid.

> discrimination may be the reason for her rupture from aviation, her most beloved profession.[55]

In her memoirs, Gökçen spends considerably more time discussing her desire to fight for her country and her conversations with Atatürk and her commanding officers than the operation itself; not much is said about Dersim other than a description of dangerous flight that almost necessitated her to make a risky emergency landing. The violent suppression of the uprising is curiously absent, and Gökçen stays silent about the civilians killed by the bombs dropped by the Air Force and herself. Gul Altınay has examined a variety of interviews, wherein Gökçen professes her aversion to violence, affirms that no civilians were killed by the bombs she dropped, emphasizes the fact that "this was for my country," and refers to the primitive living conditions of the region's Kurdish inhabitants, alongside the fact that they were displaced for "a better life."[56] These affirmations notwithstanding, military reports from the period describe Gökçen's successful dropping of a 50kg bomb on the village of Kecizeken with heavy casualties, and list her as having bombed Seyit Rıza's house.[57]

Atatürk's comments, quoted above, emphasize Gökçen's professional identity as a fighter over her identity as a woman, and bring us to a particularly fascinating point, Gökçen's own understanding of herself as a female combat pilot. Throughout the Dersim chapter of her memoirs, Gökçen focuses on her struggle to convince her superiors that as a woman, she was every bit as capable as her male counterparts of participating in the operation. Yet, there is little critical reflection on her position as the only female, or on the particular challenges she faced, with the exception of one telling moment. When attempting to convince her adoptive father to let her participate in the operation, Gökçen is told that

> Just never forget this, you are a girl. The mission you have taken on will be hard. You might be tricked and come face-to-face with a band of brigands (eşkıya). And they will have several weapons at hand. If your plane malfunctions you will have to make an emergency landing and you will find yourself their prisoner. […] Have you thought about what you are going to do in this event? [58]

Gökçen readily replied: "You are right… […] Do not worry, I will never be taken alive as their prisoner."[59] The exchange is particularly interesting by virtue of what is left unsaid. Gul Altınay has commented that it was

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[55] Ibid, 118.
[56] Gul Altınay, 43-44.
[57] Watts, 22.
[58] Gökçen, 117.
[59] Ibid.

sexual violence, rather than death, that would be the ultimate danger for Gökçen as a female combat pilot.[60] Though neither Atatürk nor Gökçen mention this explicitly, the veiled reference to sexual violence as one of the weapons the bandits might use, and the underscoring of Gökçen's gender identity certainly point to the conclusion that the loss of honor was the greatest threat of all, calling to mind Joan Nagel's description of the nation-state as a male-headed household wherein the symbolic importance of women (even fighters like Gökçen) casts them as the embodiment of national honor.[61] The exchange indicates that even this most modern of Turkish women was to remain sexually pure, guarding her honor with her life if need be, and offers an illuminating view into Turkish modernity's delineation of gender roles in service of its larger project of nation-building. The conversation ends with Atatürk giving Gökçen his own Smith &Wesson, with the hope that she not hesitate to aim it against others or, in case of capture, to raise it to her own temple.[62]

Gökçen only contemplated an emergency landing once, when the weather was particularly treacherous, but was ultimately lucky in that she never had to use the Smith & Wesson. Upon returning to Ankara, she was hailed as a heroine and given medals for her service, though as Gul Altınay comments, little was actually disclosed given that the Dersim Operation was still ongoing and classified.[63] The Commander-in-Chief of the Turkish Air Force, Fuat Bolca, described Gokçen as "the first female pilot of the Turkish Bird, a hero who has been rewarded like no other Turkish girl before her. […] This young girl is a symbol of great importance for bringing about a big transformation in the Air Force. […] She is a peerless example for all of our girls."[64] The transformation, of course, was that as a brave young girl Gökçen had courageously broken the glass ceiling to become the first female combat pilot, despite the fact (not mentioned here) that, as a woman, she was not officially allowed to become a member of the Turkish Air Force. An essay written around the same time commented:

> Haven't our women, our mothers, our sisters, stayed in second, or even third place for years, or, rather, centuries? Haven't men always been sent on ahead of them, and women themselves kept

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[60] Gul Altınay, 39.

[61] Joane Nagel, "Masculinity and Nationalism: Gender and Sexuality in the Making of Nations," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 242-269, 254.

[62] Gökçen, 117.

[63] Gul Altınay, 40-41.

[64] Gökçen, 143-4.

> behind? Weren't they convicted to decay amongst çarşafs, peçes, darkness, and ignorance? As if they were second-class citizens.[65]

Gökçen, the essay claimed, had changed all of that, showing that in the new Turkish Republic, women would no longer suffer the fate of being second-class citizens. She had demonstrated a remarkable work ethic, and the ability to excel at her profession of choice in exactly the same way as her male counterparts. But what of those women that still had to be reminded of their Turkishness?

Sıdıka Avar: "To you our beloved creator/ Has entrusted everything"

As one of the state's most prized examples of Turkish modernity, Gökçen, the celebrated female combat pilot, was deployed to violently suppress the unruly and pre-modern internal "others" inhabiting Dersim. Though she did not target women specifically, the symbolism here is equal parts astounding and fascinating. In the case of headmistress Sıdıka Avar, the relationship between state-sponsored feminism and the repression of minority populations was not quite as symbolic. Avar, an "Istanbulite divorcée in her thirties, who had spent all her life west of Ankara," and who had been educated as a Turkish language teacher, was sent to Elaziğ to work at the recently opened Elaziğ Girls' Institute (Elaziğ Kız Enstitüsü).[66] Impressed with her performance after only a short period of time, her superiors described her as "a Turkish missionary" who was to carry out her work silently lest she give offense to "our citizens there."[67] Traveling to the villages in the Dersim mountains, Avar was tasked with recruiting young Kurdish girls to the cause of Republican, Turkish-language education, taking them with her to her boarding school and training them to be modern Turkish citizens. Here, then, is a much more direct link between the regime's gender and Turkification policies, which were both applied to the Kurds as a way of breaking their traditional autonomy and socio-religious networks.

Avar was born in the Cihangir neighborhood of Istanbul in 1901, to Mehmet Bey, an official in the city council, and his wife Emsal Hanım.[68] She lost her parents as a teenager, and went to live with an aunt, taking care of her younger siblings in the process.[69] She graduated from the Çapa Teachers' Institute for Girls (Çapa Kız Öğretmen Okulu), found employment at the Beşiktaş Circassian School (Beşiktaş Çerkez Mektebi)

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65 Çağlar, quoted in Gökçen, 153.
66 Türkyılmaz, 162.
67 Sıdıka Avar, *Dağ Çiçeklerimi (Anılar)* (Ankara: Öğretmen Yayınları, 1986), 104.
68 Avar, 5.
69 Ibid.

in 1922, and after marrying, gave birth to a daughter in 1924.[70] After moving to Izmir with her husband, she worked at the Jewish School (Müsevi Mektebi), and the Izmir American Girls' School (Izmir Amerikan Kız Koleji), while volunteering at the local prison and the Children's Welfare Association as a Turkish teacher.[71] After getting divorced in 1937, she applied to be sent to the Elaziğ Girls' Institute, where she was finally appointed after a series of rejections.[72] She left in 1939, leaving behind her biological daughter in what Türkyılmaz has called a curious reversal of the regime's gender policy, which emphasized the nuclear family as the basis for a successful nation.[73] In 1942, she was appointed as Assistant Director of the Tokat Girls' Institute (Tokat Kız Enstitüsü), and in 1943 she returned to Elaziğ Girls' Institute as the Director, a position she remained in until 1959.[74]

The schools Avar was appointed to in the Eastern provinces were an integral part of the administrative re-organization of Dersim described above. In 1937, following the outbreak of the rebellion, a classified circular sent by Minister of Interior Şükrü Kaya decreed that children over the age of five were to be sent to boarding schools in districts neighboring Dersim.[75] The hope was that by sending the children to districts where Turkish-speaking populations were the majority, by educating them in Turkish, and by encouraging them to marry each other after returning to their native villages, "Turkish homes" would be established in Dersim, thereby facilitating the state's process of Turkification.[76] It was particularly important to ensure that women learned the Turkish language, given that most Kurdish women did not speak Turkish, and that the new model for the nuclear family as the basis for the state necessitated engaged, patriotic mothers, who would transfer linguistic skills and feelings of patriotism alike to their children, facilitating the erosion of more traditional networks and the perpetuation

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[70] Ibid.
[71] Ibid, 5-6.
[72] Türkyılmaz, 162.
[73] Ibid, 163. As part of its reforms and project of "female emancipation", the young Republic had emphasized the nuclear family, comprised of a husband, wife, and their children. This was, of course, meant to contrast against a more kinship-based household containing multiple generations and different family members, and to underscore the fact that polygamy was now associated with an older, pre-modern form of life, and therefore frowned upon.
[74] Avar, 6.
[75] Türkyılmaz, 166.
[76] Ibid, 167.

of the centralized nation-state in their place.[77] Elaziğ was chosen as the location for this particular school because in contrast to Dersim, it had become primarily Turkish-speaking and Sunni following the Armenian genocide. In 1937, with the Dersim Rebellion in its beginning stages, the need to recruit students became very obvious, and the line between the state's educational mission and military operation were increasingly blurred, with soldiers often carrying away girls as retribution for their families' actions.[78] Student life was hard; the girls were forced to give up their traditional clothes, disparaged as "Kurds with tails" and "mountain bears," and constantly disciplined.

The process of modernizing the village girls began immediately upon their arrival at the Institute. When first meeting her students, Avar noticed their shaved heads.[79] Later, when describing the process followed upon the arrival of new students at the Institute, Avar reveals the traumatic act of "cleaning" the girls:

> After five, when it became apparent that the girls' cleaning was about to start, they begged for their hair not to be cut, and I tried to appease them. In the last class, everyone was clean except for one person. H.U's hair, which was waist-length, was clipped from her ears to the back of her neck because there were nits in it; the gap was covered by combing back the hair at the front of her head. I was happy with this, because it was a big step in the struggle against lice. Amongst those who were joining the second class, there were some dirty ones. Among those who had been brought to join the first class by being taken by the military, almost every head was a nest full of lice. [80]

The cleaning process was an important and certainly difficult part of joining the Institute, and often involved the loss of students' hair, which was typically long, curly, and thick, and a sign of beauty back home. When live lice were found, students' hair was washed with water mixed with petrol, and then shaved.[81] The girls often cried and begged for their hair not to be cut, and also pleaded that they not be sent back to their

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[77] Ibid. The idea of the nuclear family as the basis for the nation state is discussed, in its relation to gender, in Nira Yuval-Davis, "Nationalist Projects and Gender Relations," *Nar. Umjet.* 40, no. 1 (2003): 9-36, 12-17, and also in Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 227-230, in respect to secularism.

[78] Türkyılmaz, 171. A in-depth overview of the ways in which the Institutes functioned can be found in Elif Ekin Akşit, *Kızların Sessizliği: Kız Ensitülerinin Uzun Tarihi* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2005).

[79] Avar, 23.

[80] Avar, 64.

[81] Ibid, 66-67.

villages while it was still short. Avar emphasizes the marked difference in the girls' appearances when they were first brought to her Institute versus after a year there, and finally during graduation. She remarks:

> Our girls' village clothing was both original and tattered. Their eyes were full of fear, the expressions on their faces sulky, insecure, and rigid. A week or two of school life changed this to an astonishing degree. The Undersecretary was very pleased by the pictures I took in order to demonstrate this change, [showing the girls] in their village clothing upon their arrival at the school and then again at the end of their first year in their school clothing.[82]

These pictures are scattered throughout Avar's memoirs and are indeed fascinating to behold: they depict the girls first in traditional clothing, long-haired, and scared, and then in uniform, their heads uncovered and their hair cut short and pulled back, posing confidently. By sending them to the Undersecretary, Avar was able to demonstrate the ways in which the state had succeeded in modernizing the girls and transforming them from pre-modern villagers living in purported primitive hygienic conditions, to clean-cut, well-groomed, educated Turkish women. It was perhaps no surprise, then, that Avar was seen as a "Turkish missionary." Many of the girls initially spoke very little Turkish; indeed, the memoir renders their speech in an (often heavy) accent. The mission was to secure the cooperation of their families, convincing the villagers to hand over their daughters to the Institute, and then returning them to their homes upon graduation (and Turkification). Avar was sent out to various villages every year with the aim of recruiting new students. As she told some distrustful peasants:

> The government has sent us out to you, so that we can explain. I will personally teach your daughters; there are a few more female teachers at my school right now, as well as more than 520 students. Our mission is to teach them to read, to educate them, and then to deliver them back to you […] The Government will pay for everything.[83]

A government report circulated at the end of 1949 described how first-rate Institutes like Avar's were, and discussed how persistent the government needed to be in inspiring Turkishness in its charges, even in the face of adversity and considerable resistance on the part of students and parents alike.[84] Avar was resolute in this goal, and seems to have

[82] Ibid, 17.
[83] Avar, 146-147.
[84] Avar, 255.

succeeded: her students asked her repeatedly whether Turkey was the greatest and strongest country in the world, wrote poems (one of which has been used as the sub-header for this section) reifying her, and made her proud when President İsmet İnönü came to visit the Institute.[85] During this visit, İnönü requested that "we go to my school, so that I can see my girls," implying a symbolic close connection between the government and the project being carried out by schools like Avar's.[86] Once at the school, he inquired about the girls' villages, families, and ability in Turkish, and was treated to a reading of a student poem, where one of the girls had replaced Gazi Paşa with İsmet Paşa, transforming a poem thanking Atatürk for Turkish independence into one about İnönü.[87] The government clearly saw a close connection between itself and schools like the Elaziğ Girls' Institute. As an intermediary, Avar recruited girls, inspired love of country in them, taught them modern hygiene practices, clothed them in Western attire, and returned them to their villages so they may continue the process. The projects of modernization and Turkification were tied to education, the mark of an enlightened government; this was a softer kind of domination than that practiced by Gökçen but an oft-violent assimilation project nonetheless.

As with any such project, it is hard to assess Avar's success; after all, as Aslan has argued, the administrative reorganization and increased state presence in the Dersim region were constant processes of negotiation.[88] Avar does not offer any examples of explicit student resistance, though the persistence of the Kurdish language amongst the girls is certainly a sign that Turkification was not always successful. In 1945-1946, Avar once again set out on a village tour, but upon arrival was informed the villagers believed the government was planning to give the village daughters away to the English and Russians in an effort to "break the Kurdish seed."[89] Avar started to give her usual explanation, detailing how she would educate the girls at her school, only to receive the response, from men and women alike, that their daughters were gone, and that there were none left in the village.[90] As Avar continued to press the villagers, a young man shouted at her: "And why does the government want to educate our daughters?" [91] Tensions eventually subsided, with the villagers declaring to Avar that "if we had daughters

[85] Ibid 201, 102, 226-227.
[86] Ibid, 226.
[87] Ibid, 227.
[88] Aslan, 76.
[89] Avar, 139.
[90] Ibid, 140.
[91] Ibid.

we would give them to you."[92] The episode illustrates that the villagers were very aware of the link between the government push to educate their daughters and the attempt to disempower them, and they often resisted the process, both actively (by refusing to give their daughters to Avar and lying to her) and passively (by not revealing the location of the village girls). They were certainly suspicious of state-sponsored feminism as a tool of colonial domination, and with good reason, given that many of Avar's students went on to become teachers themselves, returning to their villages in order to actively pursue the dissemination of the Turkish language.

Conclusion

Many parallels can be found between Gökçen and Avar's narratives. Both women represented the new, modern Turkish woman, who was educated, hardworking, and eager to place herself in the service of her country. Both were defined by their professional identities, and wrote memoirs reflecting on their careers. These memoirs are framed by a general feeling of anxiety about Dersim, its inability to cleanly fit into the project of Turkish modernity, and its inhabitants' defiance of state authority and Kemalist nationalism. The fact that the work these women are known for was carried out in and around Dersim suggests that there is a link between state-sponsored feminism and the violent Turkification of Kurds in Dersim. The state cast the Kurds as its internal others, a pre-modern remnant of the Ottoman period living in squalor. The girls that joined Avar's institute were said to have been saved from illiteracy, marriage at a young age, and a life of continued patriarchal domination.[93] Gökçen, the woman who supposedly had brought a transformation to the Air Force, was meant to inspire such girls. Ironically, in this case, the fearless pilot whose skill and hardworking attitude knew no bounds was also an instrument of the state's violent policies of repression. Avar had a much more active role in disseminating state feminism: as a Turkish missionary, she promoted "maternal colonialism," and was on the frontlines of both casting the Kurds as backwards noble savages, and trying to imbue them with Turkish values they could pass on to their future children and students. The case studies of Gökçen, Avar, and the countless girls that attended the Elaziğ Girls' Institute allow us to consider the broader place of women within Early Republican Turkey, and reflect on their incorporation into the state narrative, the tasks they were given, and the ways in which their roles continued to be

[92] Ibid, 143.
[93] Avar, 266.

circumscribed despite the mantle of state-sponsored feminism. The concept of modernization was a key component of Turkish nationalism as it was developed in the Kemalist period, and women formed a key symbolic part of this broader project, as modernization's agents (Avar) and symbols (Gökçen), or as evidence of its necessity and recipients of its blessings (Avar's pupils).

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