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Palimpsests of Violence:

Ruination and the Politics of Memory in Anatolia

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Anthropology

by

Anoush Tamar Suni

2019

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2019

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Palimpsests of Violence:
Ruination and the Politics of Memory in Anatolia

by

Anoush Tamar Suni

Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2019

Professor Suzanne E Slyomovics, Chair

This dissertation explores the overlapping histories over the past century of state violence against both Armenian and Kurdish communities in the province of Van in southeastern Anatolia, with attention to the politics of memory as well as the material environment. It addresses the repeating cycles of violence against minority communities and the effects of these histories on the landscape through an ethnographic exploration of physical spaces of ruins. Through an attention to the persistent effects of violence on both local memory and the built environment, this dissertation complicates the categories of victim and perpetrator, and shows how Armenian and Kurdish histories, often understood disparately, are fundamentally intertwined. The ethnographic attention to shared spaces of material ruins in which overlapping histories of state violence are congealed serves to demonstrate how buildings and landscapes are not simply static reflections

of a bygone time, but are dynamic spaces in which understandings of the past, politics in the present, and possible futures are negotiated, imagined and enacted.

Chapter One introduces the region of Van and the main questions and research methods of the dissertation. Chapter Two addresses the afterlives of Armenian churches and monasteries in the Van region one hundred years after the 1915 Genocide of Ottoman Armenians, with a focus on the alternating state policies of either destruction and erasure, or restoration and appropriation. Chapter Three discusses one particular ruined Armenian monastery which local Kurds visit as a pilgrimage site and outlines the way in which some Kurds narrate the Armenian past through a discourse of parallel victimhood. Chapter Four explores the widespread practice among local Kurds of digging for legendary buried Armenian gold and conceptualizes this treasure-hunting as at once a material interaction with a taboo past, an embodied practice through which the Armenian history of the area is animated in the present, and an enactment of a desired future. Chapter Five addresses how representatives of the central Turkish government and local municipal authorities aligned with the oppositional Kurdish movement compete over the representation, commemoration, or erasure of the local past through the building of monuments and the marking and naming of public space. Chapter Six outlines the repeating cycles of violence over the last century by focusing on the parallel histories of the destruction of the family home of an Armenian family in Van in 1915 and of a Kurdish family in Yüksekova in 2016.

Through an in-depth ethnographic exploration of local memories and narratives in relation to the afterlives of spaces of ruination, this dissertation demonstrates how catastrophic histories of violence and destruction are not only reflected and embodied in the material world, but how the landscape continues to shape the way that those histories are narrated and negotiated in the present. These sites of ruins are not only places where the past is remembered and

contested, but also vibrant spaces in which lives are lived, new understandings of the past are activated, radical political possibilities are enacted, and alternative futures are imagined.

The research for this dissertation consisted of twenty-six months of ethnographic fieldwork (twenty months in Van, six months in Istanbul, and three weeks in Armenia), which included long-term participant observation; informal, semi-structured, life-history, and walking interviews; detailed fieldnotes; documentary photography; and visits to sites of historic and more recent ruins. This dissertation contributes to anthropological and historical scholarship on state violence against minority populations, memory studies, cultural heritage, and materiality studies, both in the context of the post-Ottoman territories, the Middle East, Europe, and beyond.

The dissertation of Anoush Tamar Suni is approved.

Akhil Gupta

Andrew Apter

Laurie K Hart

Sebough David Aslanian

Suzanne E Slyomovics, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2019

For my mother,
Armena Pearl Marderosian

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on the bright side, to listen to everyone, and to find joy in small things, and it is to her that I dedicate this dissertation. In 2015, just after I had started fieldwork, my paternal grandmother, Arax (Titi) Kesdekian Suny, passed away. Titi was an incredible role model, with her sharp sense of humor, fierce independence, and determined open-mindedness. Last summer, Denbêj Gazin, a Kurdish singer who had welcomed me into her home when I first came to Van to study Kurdish, passed away suddenly from a stroke. She had treated me as one of her daughters and I always knew that her door would be open whenever I came to visit and that she would be ready for a hug and a song. Finally, last fall, Vilena Margossian, who I called “Tatig” (Grandma, in Armenian), and who hosted me in her home in Yerevan just after I had graduated from college, passed away. I spent six months living with Tatig, during which time she treated me like her granddaughter and patiently listened and corrected me as I tried to tell her stories in my rudimentary Armenian as we sat together for over hours around her kitchen table, drinking tea or making dolma. These four women were many things to me—mothers, grandmothers, teachers, mentors, and models of energetic, passionate, positive, and loving spirits. Though I feel their great absence, I continue to be inspired by their examples and they have each had a powerful imprint on my dissertation project.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Before attending the University of California, Los Angeles, Anoush Tamar Suni earned an undergraduate degree in 2009 from Pomona College, in Claremont, California, where she majored in Middle East Studies with a minor in Gender and Women's Studies. Her undergraduate education included one semester abroad at the American University in Cairo (Spring 2008) and two summers in Sana'a, Yemen (2007 and 2008), where she studied Arabic and carried out ethnographic research for her senior thesis, funded by the Pomona College Summer Undergraduate Research Program. Following graduation, Anoush was awarded a Thomas J. Watson Fellowship from the Watson Foundation, with which she spent twelve months traveling between Armenia, Jordan, and Turkey, studying language and folk music on the oud. Anoush completed her M.A. in Turkish Studies at Sabancı University in Istanbul in 2012. For her M.A. project, she carried out research in a Kurdish village in Elazığ province regarding the restoration project of two Armenian fountains.

While at the University of California, Los Angeles, Anoush was the recipient of Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowships for the study of Armenian (2013-2014) and Kurmanji Kurdish (Summers of 2013 and 2014). Anoush also received funding from the Social Science Research Council, including a Dissertation Proposal Development Fellowship (Summer 2014) and an International Dissertation Research Fellowship (2015-2016), which supported preliminary research and the first year of her dissertation fieldwork. During her second year of fieldwork, Anoush received a Ph.D. Research Grant from the Orient-Institut Istanbul. Anoush also received funding through an Armenian Studies Ph.D. Scholarship from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, as well as funding from UCLA Graduate Division.

Anoush has presented her research frequently at conferences in the U.S., Europe, and Turkey, including at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association and the annual meetings of the Middle East Studies Association. In 2015, her paper “The Ruin as Archive: Landscape and Memory in Anatolia” won the Sakip Sabancı International Research Award from Sabancı University.

Beginning in Fall 2019, Anoush will be a Manoogian Post-doctoral Research Fellow in the Armenian Studies Program and the Anthropology Department and at the University of Michigan.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: Palimpsests of Ruins

Palimpsests of Violence

The geography of the region of Van in southeastern Turkey is marked by violence, war, and destruction. Travelers to the area can still see crumbling stone churches dotting the landscape, which are remnants of the destruction wrought by the Genocide of 1915 in which the Ottoman government massacred and deported approximately ninety percent of its Christian Armenian subjects (Akçam 2004; Hovannisian 2007; Kevorkian 2011). Alongside the ruined churches left abandoned after 1915 are the burned-out shells of Kurdish villages, testimonies to the Turkish army's anti-insurgent policies of the 1990s, in which Turkish soldiers forcibly evacuated thousands of rural Kurdish communities from their homes (Darici 2011; Gambetti and Jongerden 2011). The story told by the ruins visible on the landscape today is complicated by the shifting positions of victims and perpetrators over the past century. In 1915, many Muslim Kurds participated in the massacres and deportations of Christian Armenians that were orchestrated by the central government, while today in Turkey, the Kurdish minority continues to suffer repression and forced dislocation as a result of state and military policies. Recognizing the tragic parallels between their current situation and that of the Armenians of 1915, in recent years many Kurdish groups, including the militant and leftist PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party, Kurdish: *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê*), have apologized for Kurdish participation in the Genocide and called on the Turkish government to do the same (Galip 2016). However, most historical accounts of the Ottoman Armenian community end with the First World War, thus eliding the continuation of violence, the transformation of the Kurdish community from perpetrator to

victim, and the intimate overlaps between the experiences of the Kurdish and Armenian communities.

These landscapes of destruction and the repeating cycles of state violence over the past century were the primary focus of the dissertation research that I conducted for twenty-six months in the province of Van between July 2015 and September 2017. This dissertation is about specific spaces in the Van region marked by ruins and the histories of ruination that produced them. I focus, however, not only on ruins as inert material representations of bygone times, or as archives of past experience waiting to be read and interpreted, but as both reflections of and products of histories of violence, as well as vibrant spaces in which lives are lived and stories are told in the present, and futures are imagined and sought after. I argue that these are not simply negative spaces representing layers of violence, repositories for evidence of past crimes, or sites of melancholia, but rather, that the ways—complex and conflicted—that local people have engaged with these spaces reveals their potential to create new possibilities for alternative understandings of histories and new imaginations for the future.

I conceive of these landscapes as palimpsests of violence. Palimpsest originally referred to a medieval manuscript page that was reused for later manuscripts by writing over the original text. In such manuscripts, the earlier text or image was visible underneath and through the later image. I use the term here to denote the layers of material remnants of violence on the landscape, which both sediment one upon the other and become part and parcel of intertwined histories. These histories begin with the mass killing, deportation, expropriation, and forced assimilation of the Ottoman Armenian community in the last years of the Ottoman empire, including the massacres instigated by Sultan Abdülhamid II in the 1890s, urban pogroms in the city of Adana in 1909, and finally the Genocide of 1915 perpetrated by the Young Turk government (Suny

2015; Matossian 2011). Taking into consideration the context of continued state violence against minorities over the ensuing century, this dissertation focuses on the present day and recent past, and the current, ongoing suffering of the Kurdish community at the hands of violent and repressive government policies.

Considering these two periods, a century apart, as two layers in the palimpsest, this dissertation asks how they inform each other. How are these two periods of violence embodied and sedimented in the landscape? How are those material remnants manipulated, reframed, remembered, and forgotten? How are those histories narrated or silenced? Additionally, why do Kurds now identify with, sympathize with, and apologize for violence against Armenians? Given that Kurds were often the perpetrators of historical violence against Armenians, why do Kurds now talk about Armenians as brothers and portray life with Armenians in the past as harmonious? Considering these questions, this dissertation addresses the themes of historical memory and cultural heritage by exploring both the material archive of the remnants of histories of violence that persist on the landscape, as well as the oral history narratives that are told about and around them.

Anthropologist Yael Navaro has described the term “remnants,” both broadly and also particularly in the case of the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide in contemporary Turkey, as “shards accidentally left behind in the aftermath of cataclysmic violence, discarded as rubbish, serendipitously found and valued as a memory object or incorporated in the new material order of things by being reconfigured, transfigured, or amalgamated” (Navaro 2017). This dissertation explores such remnants of the Armenian community of Van one hundred years after its destruction. It details the afterlives of the ruins of Armenian churches and monasteries that have survived to the present day and explores the meanings of both the built and destroyed

manifestations of these remains on the landscape (Figure 1.1). It also explores how contemporary residents of Van, who are not Armenian but Muslim Kurds and Turks, interact with, remember, and narrate the Armenian past of the region, and how the legacy of the Armenian community remains a present factor in the local political and local historical consciousness. I highlight how this continued relevance of the Armenians' past presence and present absence has been shaped by the prevalent material remains of the departed community and the efforts of the Kurdish movement to change discourses about contemporary politics and minority histories. Through exploring the complicated constellations of embodied social, material, and historical intercommunal interactions, this dissertation goes beyond accounts that focus on a single community in isolation from the multi-ethnic polities in which it existed. Additionally, this work questions victim-perpetrator binaries by exploring the often contradictory, everyday realities in which communities and individuals live.



Figure 1.1. The fifteenth-century Garmaravank Armenian Monastery near the town of Gevaş in Van province. Photo © Anoush Tamar Suni (all photographs are by author unless otherwise stated), November 23, 2015.



Figure 1.2. The tenth-century Church of the Holy Cross on Akhtamar Island in Lake Van, restored in 2007. September 10, 2016.

For many of the Muslim Kurds and Turks who live in contemporary Van, the history of the Van Armenians has become invisible and mute, a distant past that is manifest only on postcards displaying the restored tenth-century church of Akhtamar (Figure 1.2). For others, the Armenian past represents future possibilities, as they hope to discover the fabled riches that they believe to have been left behind as the Armenians fled. Such treasure hunters interpret the crosses carved on gravestones and the walls of churches as enigmatic symbols pointing to buried gold (Figure 1.3). For still others, especially those sympathetic to the leftist Kurdish movement, the Armenian past represents both a shameful history requiring recognition and atonement, as well as a site through which to confront and deconstruct the nationalist, denialist, and exclusionary official history dictated by authorities of the central government. Thus, in Van, the history of the Armenian community represents palimpsests of violence, in which the century-old violence of the Genocide has been overlaid by more recent stories of repression.



Figure 1.3. The remnants of an Armenian graveyard that had been dug up by treasure hunters, in the village of Şuşanis (Kevenli), east of Van city center, on the western slopes of Ereğ Mountain. December 3, 2016.

Erasing the Past

The place-name “Van” refers to multiple and overlapping spaces. Today, Van is the name of a province in eastern Turkey, bordering Iran to the east. The capital of the province is the city of Van, which is located on the eastern shore of the large, Van Lake. During Ottoman times, Van was also the name of one of the easternmost Ottoman provinces, and Van city was an important administrative hub for the Ottoman authorities (Figures 1.4-1.6).



Figure 1.4. Map of contemporary Turkey with Van Lake circled. From CIA, *The World Factbook*, 2004, via Wikimedia Commons. From https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkey-CIA_WFB_Map.png.



Figure 1.5. The provinces of the Ottoman Empire on the eve of WWI. Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From: <https://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire.html>.

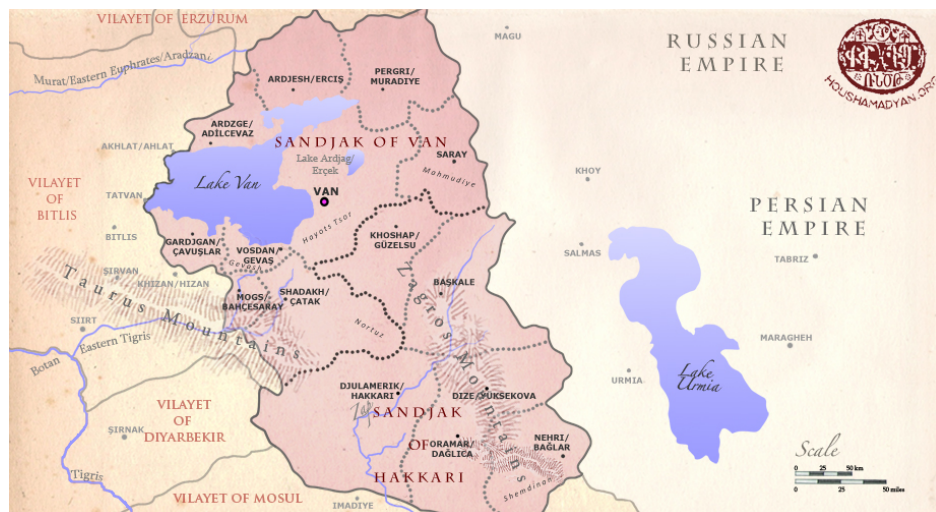


Figure 1.6. The regions of Van and Hakkari on the eve of WWI. Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From: <https://www.houshamadyan.org/en/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van.html>.

Before the Genocide of 1915, Van Province (*vilayet*) was one of the most important centers of Armenian religious and cultural life in the Ottoman Empire, with nearly 300 churches and monasteries and over 400 Armenian villages (Hovannisian 2000). Official historical discourse in Turkey today regarding the Armenian Genocide of 1915 continues to be based in denial: denial of the violence against the Armenian communities in the last years of the Ottoman

Empire, denial of the ongoing destruction of Armenian architectural heritage in the area, and denial of any Armenian claims to the land. The Kurdish community of Turkey has been faced with another set of denialist state policies since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey: denial of their existence as a separate ethnic group; denial of cultural, political, and language rights; and denial of their experiences of state violence in recent decades, including mass arrests, torture, and disappearances.



Figure 1.7. The fourteenth-century Armenian Monastery of Surp Tovmas (Saint Thomas) near the town of Gevaş in Van province. August 18, 2014.

Both the Armenian community and the Kurdish community of Anatolia have experienced large-scale destruction and ruination at the hands of the central government over the past century. For the Armenian community, the massacres of the 1890s, 1909, and the Genocide of 1915 loom large in the tragic history of their community. Since the Genocide of 1915, there has been an ongoing process of expropriation, destruction, and erasure of the material legacy of the Armenians of Anatolia. Countless churches, monasteries, homes, and schools have been seized by the state and military authorities, converted to mosques, used as barns and stables for animals,

or simply dismantled to be used to build new houses or garden walls (Figure 1.7). In some areas, such as the Gevaş district of Van, locals describe how, in the year 1950, the regional governor ordered that all of the nearby Armenian churches and monasteries be destroyed so that there would be no material trace of an Armenian claim to the land.

In many parallel ways, the Kurdish community of Turkey has also suffered heavily at the hands of the government. A century of rebellions and repressions, such as the Sheikh Said Rebellion in 1925, large scale massacres such as the 1938 Dersim Massacre, and finally the ongoing war with the PKK, has left the Kurdish community with tens of thousands of casualties and hundreds of thousands more displaced from their homes. In the 1990s, the military employed a policy of evacuating and in many cases burning villages in the southeast of the country as a counter-insurgency tactic. In 2016, the army largely destroyed a dozen cities in the southeast, again producing a new layer of ruins on the already scarred landscape.

While I underline the common points between the human rights abuses and repression suffered by both Kurds and Armenians over the last century in Anatolia, it is also important to note the essential differences between the experiences of the two communities. Though both communities suffered mass killing, deportations, assimilation, and the loss and destruction of homes and property, the scales, objectives, and outcomes of the violence were different. While the 1915 Genocide was a state-led campaign that aimed to physically eradicate the entire Ottoman Armenian community, the massacres, forced migration, and assimilation of Kurdish groups never amounted to an attempt at wholesale extermination. Instead, the policies aimed towards the Kurds sought to deracinate and incapacitate the Kurdish community as a political force, while culturally assimilating Kurds into Turkishness through such policies as banning the use of the Kurdish language and forcibly dispersing the Kurdish population.

Before the 1915 Genocide, approximately two million Christian Armenians lived in the Ottoman empire. By the end of the First World War, ninety percent of the Armenian population had disappeared (Suny 2015, xviii–xxi). Today, unofficial numbers place the Armenian population of Turkey (now almost exclusively located in Istanbul) at between fifty and seventy thousand (Uras 2015). The Kurdish community, on the other hand, while it suffered considerable ethnic cleansing and population engineering, is still the largest ethnic minority in Turkey, representing a majority of the population of the southeast and including considerable communities in the west of the country as well, especially in Istanbul. According to the World Factbook, as of July 2018, the Kurdish community made up approximately nineteen percent of the total population of Turkey of about eighty-one million, which would be a total of approximately fifteen million people (World Factbook 2019).

Considering the history of violence that has shaped both the Kurdish and Armenian communities of Turkey nearly continuously over the last century, Van represents an important point of intersection of these violent trajectories, past and present. Van occupies a geography that both communities claim as an ancestral homeland, and where both have suffered and sacrificed greatly. A well-known saying about Van, with versions in both Turkish and Armenian, is “Van in this world and paradise in the next” (Turkish: *dünyada Van, ahirette iman*, Armenian: Վերևը՝ դրախտ, ներքևը՝ մեր Վան: *Verev drakht, nerkev mer Van.*) The traveler H. F. B. Lynch, who visited Van a century ago, commented on this proverb, saying “The comparison might be justified under happier human circumstances, the perversity of man having converted this heaven into a little hell” (Lynch 1901, 38).

Indeed, the natural beauty of Van is a delight to behold: a clear blue lake ringed by snowcapped mountains, golden fields, rolling hills, and bountiful orchards. However, both

during Ottoman times and since, Van was not an easy place to live, especially for the Christian Armenian population, which was subject both to the laws of the central government and to the whims of local Kurdish chieftains and landlords. Regarding the relations between the Kurdish and Armenian communities during the Ottoman period, historian Ronald Suny writes that, “relations between Kurds and Armenians ranged from coexistence and tolerance to the most vicious cruelty” (Suny 2015, 19). While many contemporary Kurdish inhabitants in Van narrate the past relations between Kurds and Armenians as characterized by brotherhood and peaceful living together, scholarly accounts often highlight the prevalent tensions and recurring conflicts that historically existed between the two communities, including competition over land and resources. In some areas, a semi-feudal and exploitative hierarchy existed between Kurdish landlords and both Armenian and Kurdish peasants. In other cases, nomadic and armed Kurdish groups periodically raided and plundered unarmed and vulnerable Armenian settlements (Suny 2015, 19).

For Armenians, Van holds a special historical significance as the site of the medieval Armenian kingdom of Vaspurakan, and in Ottoman times, the only province with a majority Armenian population. As Suny writes, “the *Van vilayet* housed the largest and most compact population of Armenians in Anatolia; nowhere else in the empire were Armenians a majority of the inhabitants. Some 450 towns and villages dotted the sparsely populated province, inhabited by between 110,000 and 200,000 Armenians” (Suny 2015, 254). Van also holds a unique place in the history of the Ottoman Armenian community because it is one of the few sites where Armenians successfully defended themselves from attacks by the Ottoman Army during the First World War. A group of Van Armenians managed to hold out in parts of the city under siege by the Turkish governor’s forces until the Russian army arrived and the Ottomans retreated. During

this resistance, the governor of the province, Cevdet Bey, oversaw the slaughter of thousands of Armenians in the surrounding countryside (Suny 2015; Hovannisian 2000).

During the fighting between Ottoman forces and Armenian fighters in 1915, the subsequent Russian occupation and eventual retreat, and finally the return of the Ottoman army, the old city of Van, which was home to a vibrant Armenian community a century ago, was destroyed (Figure 1.8). The contemporary city of Van stands in stark contrast to the nearby site of the old city, which today remains an empty field dotted with the shells of ruined churches and mosques, manifesting the absence of its previous inhabitants (Figures 1.9 – 1.10). The violence of the First World War and the Genocide, in which the majority of the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire were massacred or deported, resulted in a landscape of ruins throughout the region. In the century since, the hundreds of churches and other material remains of the Armenian community have been abandoned, spoliated, partially or fully destroyed, appropriated for other uses, or left to the mercy of treasure hunters hungry for legendary Armenian gold (Figure 1.11).

In Van, the material legacy of the Armenian community and the palimpsests of violence are visible on the landscape. Today, in almost every village one can find the remains of Armenian churches, monasteries, homes, and cemeteries (Figure 1.12). Many have been completely or partially destroyed, and those that have survived to the present day have been repurposed as storehouses, mosques, and barns. In most villages, if you look carefully at the walls of homes and barns, you will find stones carved with crosses or Armenian inscriptions, taken from Armenian churches and cemeteries, and recycled as building material. In many villages, locals have told me of the wonders of Armenian craftsmanship and praised Armenians as a hardworking people who built sturdy buildings and were experts in stonemasonry. The large,

well-hewn stones that were cut by hand and were used in building churches hundreds of years ago are still prized today as valuable building blocks for the foundations of new houses.

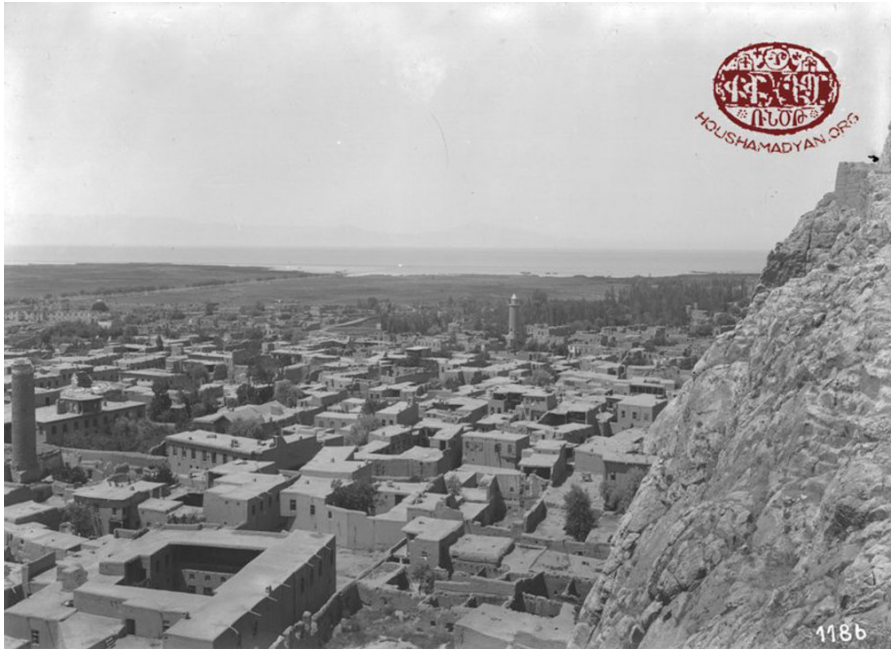


Figure 1.8. “The Old City of Van, viewed from the fortress (Source: History Museum of Armenia, Yerevan; photograph: A. Vruyr, 1916).” Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From: <https://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van/kaza-of-van/religion/churches-and-monasteries-1.html>



Figure 1.9. The ruins of the Old City of Van viewed from atop the Van Castle. July 20, 2014.



Figure 1.10. The new city of Van against the backdrop of Erek Mountain. August 2014.



Figure 1.11. The ninth-century Armenian Convent of the Miracles near the town of Adilcevaz on the north shore of Lake Van. February 1, 2016.



Figure 1.12. Remnants of a cemetery in the now-abandoned Armenian village of Varents near the town of Gevaş in Van province with the Van lake in the background. September 15, 2016.

The State and the Kurdish Movement

Throughout this dissertation, I address how local Kurds and Turks in Van interact with the material remnants and memories of the historic Armenian community, as well as how state actors represent, negotiate, appropriate or silence such spaces and histories. When I discuss state actors, I am referring to authorities representing the central government of the Republic of Turkey. At the time of the First World War and the 1915 Genocide, the central government of the Ottoman Empire was based in Istanbul, and the ruling party was the Committee of Union and Progress, also known as the Young Turks. Since the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the central government has been located in Ankara, and Turkey has had a unitary state structure in terms of public administration. The judiciary, legislature, and executive branches are all controlled by the central administration in Ankara, and local provincial and municipal administrations are subordinate to the central government. Provincial governors (*vali*) and town governors (*kaymakam*) are appointed by the central government and represent the central state at the local level. While municipal mayors (*belediye başkanı*) are elected locally, their powers are extremely limited due to the highly centralized structure of governance. This hierarchical organization causes tension especially in the majority-Kurdish southeast, where local Kurdish mayors fight to gain more autonomy in their local administration—such as in the areas of education—efforts that the central government often sees as a threat to its sovereignty and strives to crush.

During the period of my fieldwork, the ruling party in Ankara was the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) lead by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. The other main opposition parties were the secular and Kemalist CHP (*Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi*,

Republican People's Party), the ultranationalist MHP (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*, Nationalist Movement Party), and the progressive, pro-Kurdish HDP (*Halkların Demokratik Partisi*, Peoples' Democratic Party), which is linked to the broader leftist Kurdish movement. In the majority-Kurdish region of the southeast, during my fieldwork, in place of the HDP, the Kurdish movement was represented in local elections by the DBP (*Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, Democratic Regions Party). In Van and much of the rest of the southeast, the DBP won a majority of mayoral elections in 2014, but after the 2016 coup-attempt, the AKP administration forcibly removed most of the democratically-elected DBP mayors by decree (imprisoning many), and appointed an AKP trustee (*kayyum*) in their stead.

During my fieldwork, many of my Kurdish interlocutors would refer to “the state” (Turkish: *devlet*), as a singular entity that wrought violence and destruction upon both the Armenian and Kurdish communities. This ahistorical “state” might at times include the Ottoman government of Sultan Abdülhamid II that instigated the 1890s massacres against the Ottoman Armenian community or the Ottoman government under the CUP that carried out the Armenian Genocide in 1915; it also may refer to the Republican government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and later administrations that suppressed Kurdish uprisings and carried out multiple massacres of Kurdish civilians, such as in 1925 and 1938; it may refer to the Turkish military that forcibly evacuated and burned approximately three thousand Kurdish villages in southeastern Anatolia in the 1990s during the height of the war between the PKK and the Turkish army; and finally it may refer to the current administration of the AKP under President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. In the narratives that I heard during my fieldwork, these diverse periods, actors, and administrations were often collapsed under the shorthand of *devlet* (the state). Though the Turkish government is indeed a strong unitary state with most power resting in the hands of the central administration in

Ankara, the shorthand of “the state” blurs the specificity of the various bureaus and agencies of “the state” that carry out policies on the ground and with which ordinary citizens interact on a daily basis. These may be military personnel such as soldiers and gendarmes (*jandarma*) or police, who are all direct employees of the central administration. It may also include the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, which is in charge of local museums and heritage sites; public schools which are under the auspices of the Ministry of Education; public hospitals tied to the Ministry of Health; or courts tied to the Ministry of Justice.

Just as my Kurdish interlocutors often would refer to “the state” as a singular actor, they would also often refer to the Kurdish movement as more or less a coherent entity, usually positioned as an oppositional force in a perpetual struggle with “the state.” The Kurdish movement that they refer to is also a dynamic conglomeration of various groups and organizations, some legal and some illegal, and with various degrees of connection and agreement in terms of ideology and political aims. There are the illegal, militant PKK and its offshoots, as well as legal political parties, such as the HDP and the DBP, which face constant attacks and censure from the AKP administration. In addition, there are cultural establishments such as Kurdish language associations, media organizations, and other groups that strive to promote and protect the cultural, political, and social rights of the Kurdish minority and which are frequently condemned by the ruling party and often forcibly closed down.

Thus, it is essential to emphasize that both “the state” and “the Kurdish movement” are not singular, uniform entities and that both terms incorporate dynamic and diverse groups of organizations, agencies, people, and ideologies that have changed over time. Throughout my analysis, I strive to detail the historical specificity of the agencies and groups that I am discussing, but it is also important to note how many of my interlocutors employ these terms to

outline a deeply oppositional binary between what they identify as “the state,” framed as Turkish, nationalist, violent, and intolerant, and the Kurdish movement, framed as democratic, progressive, and a champion of oppressed minorities.

2010: First Encounter

In July of 2010, I traveled to Van for the first time to see the birthplace of my mother’s maternal grandparents, Levon Kazanjian and Prapion Shakarian. I was in my early twenties, and it was the first time in over a century that anyone from my family had visited the area since the young Armenian couple had emigrated from the Ottoman Empire to the United States in 1905 to seek a more secure life. All I knew of the area were the nostalgic stories that my mother had told me, passed on to her from her mother and grandmother. I knew little of the contemporary political and social tensions in the region, of the ongoing war between the Turkish army and Kurdish militants that had already spanned three decades and resulted in thousands of casualties, or of the present concerns of the Kurdish locals who lived on that land today.

When I arrived at the modest Van airport, situated on the edge of the Van Lake, I was greeted by an acquaintance of an Armenian friend from Istanbul, who picked me up and drove me to the boarding house where I would be staying. As we pulled out of the airport parking lot, he said to me, “I am Armenian too, you know.” Innocently, I replied, “Oh! Do you speak Armenian?” He chuckled at my ignorance and explained that his great-grandmother was one of many Armenian children who had somehow survived the massacres and deportations in 1915 and had been adopted into a Turkish Muslim family. “I don’t know much about her story,” he said, “but I recognize my roots. There are many people like me, but most of them won’t admit it.” This was my first encounter with one of the many descendants of the converted Armenians

who survived the Genocide of 1915 and assimilated into Muslim Turkish, Kurdish, or Arab communities.



Figure 1.13. The Van Castle. July 10, 2019.

In my first few days in Van, I visited the famous tourist sights – the Van Castle with its three-thousand-year-old history stretching back to Urartian times (Figure 1.13), the restored tenth-century Armenian Church of Akhtamar, and the Old City of Van, destroyed during the violence of the First World War. On the third day of my visit, a local contact whom I had found through friends in Istanbul, Ali, offered to take me to see the picturesque Muradiye Waterfall, one hour north of Van. On the way, we stopped in a village just off of the main road to visit one of Ali’s relatives, who was the local *muhtar*, or village headman. Ali was proud to show off his foreign guest, and I, still quite naïve about the local politics of the history in the area, announced that I was Armenian and that I had come to Van to visit my great-grandparents’ birthplace. The *muhtar* and his companions listened intently, served us tea, and then sent us on our way again. After we had been on the road for ten minutes, we were suddenly overtaken by a large gray van,

which honked as it passed us and then pulled over to the side of the road, the driver motioning out of his window for us to follow.

Ali recognized the driver as one of the men who had just served us tea in the village and pulled over behind the gray van, wondering aloud why they had come after us. As we got out of the car, six men of various ages excitedly exited the van and crowded around us. Pointing to me, they asked, “You are Armenian? Can you read Armenian?” Confused, I responded, “Yes, I can, though not perfectly.” The oldest of them was a middle-aged man, neatly dressed in a gray and white plaid button-up shirt, with straight black hair turning to silver, thick black eyebrows and mustache and graying stubble on his chin. He handed me a piece of thick white paper, on which a line of symbols had been carefully written in bold blue marker. He asked me, “Can you read this? What does it say?” I peered at the writing, the meaning of which was not immediately clear, and asked them where this had come from and what its significance was. They explained that they had found these symbols carved on a rock on the side of a nearby mountain. They assumed it to be Armenian writing and believed that it marked the site of buried treasure. Some of the letters looked similar to Armenian letters, but the combination did not spell out any clear words or phrases. I explained to the men that it was unintelligible to me and their expressions showed their immediate disappointment. I found this situation bewildering. Why would these men think that I would have any idea about some obscure writing on the side of a mountain? And why would they think that a random inscription would lead them to buried treasure?

This was to be the first of many times that I encountered villagers in the Kurdish regions of Turkey who saw me as the key to finding buried Armenian treasure. At that time, I could not have known how often this scene would replay itself in different villages all across the Van region. During my two years of continuous fieldwork between July 2015 and September 2017,

there were many occasions on which I, along with local friends, would pass through a village on our way to look for a certain remotely located ruined Armenian monastery or church, and we would stop to ask local villagers where we could find the church. Oftentimes, the villagers would ask us directly whether we were looking for treasure and if we had a map, and if so, they would be happy to help us out and split the findings fifty-fifty. On other occasions, especially if we had addressed them in Turkish, they would eye me and my companions suspiciously and, assuming that we did not understand, say to each other in Kurdish, “*Ew bo zêr hatine* (They came for gold).”

In my first visit in 2010, I knew very little about the contemporary dynamics in Van, and, like many other Armenian heritage tourists—or pilgrims, as they sometimes call themselves—I had traveled to Van to see the place from which my ancestors had come a century ago. I did not know what I would find, and like the many other Armenian tourists who venture there, I had been primed by iconic photographs of lonely churches standing on a hilltop, as if sentinels watching over a lost and empty homeland. It did not take long for this romantic vision to dissipate. While walking through the city center of Van, visiting its villages, and talking with locals, I came to the realization that this territory, which Armenians tend to talk about as “Western Armenia,” today, in many senses, is Kurdistan. Though the region is not recognized as Kurdistan in any official way and is located within the boundaries of Turkey, the majority of the contemporary population are Kurds and speak Kurdish. It is Kurds who now have become the everyday custodians of the Armenian monuments, of the tenth-century churches and monasteries, and who have interacted with these spaces in myriad ways, alternately through reusing, transforming, destroying, or protecting them.

After this first visit, I became curious about the ways in which Armenian and Kurdish pasts and presents are intertwined, and what role those monumental ruins of Armenian churches mean to those Kurdish villagers who live alongside them today. With these questions in mind, after a few other short visits, I returned to Van in July 2014, this time not as a tourist, but to take Kurdish language classes and to carry out two months of preliminary dissertation fieldwork on questions of the politics of memory and material cultural heritage.

2014: Telling the Tale Backwards

During the summer of 2014, I was able to more thoroughly delve into the recent history of the Kurdish community in Van and the repeating cycles of violence that have historically affected both the Armenian and Kurdish communities of the region. Van has had a Kurdish majority since the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, and in the last thirty years the city has grown immensely, as villagers sought refuge there from the three-decades-long civil war between the Turkish army and the PKK, the leftist Kurdish guerilla organization fighting for autonomy in the Kurdish regions. The military policy of burning villages as a counter-insurgency tactic during the 1990s produced new layers of ruins that are visible on the landscape. This was demonstrated to me in 2014 by a local friend, Seyit, who gave me a tour of his former village outside of the city of Yüksekova, three hours south of Van. The village, which had been burned by Turkish soldiers in 1993, was now just a pile of rubble by the side of a dirt road (Figure 1.14). I walked with Seyit through the ruins of his former home, which today is nothing but its foundation and a few stones marking what used to be walls. As we walked, he pointed to the spaces between the lines of stones: “This was a room, this was a room, this was the living room, this was the kitchen.” He pointed out his uncle’s home, which was now simply piles of melting mud, and looked more like

a row of sandcastles then a former house. Seyit explained that a century ago the place had been an Armenian village, but the Armenians were driven out. The village then lay empty for years until Kurds settled there and stayed until they, in turn, were violently forced out.



Figure 1.14. The remains of Seyit's home, which his family was forced to abandon during the conflict in the 1990s. July 12, 2014.

Another Kurdish friend in Van, Nazdar, further underlined for me the parallels between the Armenian past and the Kurdish present in Van during an interview that we carried out by email in the fall of 2014, after I had returned from Van to the United States. In her written responses to my questions, she emphasized that Kurds in Van remembered the Armenians and what happened to them and continued to interact with the material objects that they left behind:

With the 1915 deportation of the Armenians, the non-Muslim subjects were torn away from their ancient lands during the genocide. After the genocide, the emptied houses and lands were seized. For years, these houses, barns, and holy places were used. Muslims, who had lived together with Armenians for hundreds of years, and who had turned a blind eye to the Armenians' departure and death, continued their lives where they had left off. The legends of the departed were not erased from social memory. Why and how they were killed was discussed. It was always said that they were a very hardworking people. As the remaining houses of those who left were preserved, as wheat continued to be ground in their stone mortars, prayers were whispered for the souls of the departed. People gave thanks as they drank water from their fountains. Yet they feared what would happen to the plunder that they had obtained if those who had departed were one day to

return. Their fears continued, as they wondered what would happen if they wanted their fountains back. Some began to search for the things that were hidden by those who departed. Every Armenian village became a holy site of mythologized treasure. The new people who lived in such holy places became experienced treasure hunters. They began to search for that which those who departed had collected, had won with the sweat of their brows, and had hidden with the hope that one day they would return. People were happy when something was found. Everywhere where this happened myths were created. The curses, spells, magic, and ghosts of the departed came after them for one hundred years.

Nazdar's narrative illustrates how the material remains of the Armenians are a medium through which people in Van today interact with and imagine the past. She continued her narrative, explaining how the central government actively denied the violence against the Armenians, and how the Kurdish movement and the PKK began to change local historical understanding in the Kurdish regions:

The tale of genocide began to be recounted backward. [...] It was said that "Armenians carried out a genocide against Muslims. The infidels killed the Muslims." As this was proclaimed by the official instruments of state ideology, the oral history narratives in Kurdistan told the opposite story. [...] In the 1980s, when the seeds of the Kurdish independence movement were being planted, all of the historical realities were brought to the surface. This time it was another people of these ancient lands, Kurds, who were facing massacre and attempted destruction. [...] Kurds, who had seen what destruction meant for their closest neighbors in 1915, began to defend themselves. [...] This time the state policy was to produce media reports that stated that the PKK was actually a product of foreign powers, that PKK members were really Armenian, and that they were just a handful of rogues who wanted to divide the country. PKK members who were caught and killed were said to be uncircumcised and thus proven to not be Muslim. It was said that "At best they might be Armenian."

These intimate relationships and narratives of parallel victimhood were expressed frequently during my time in Van, as many individuals recounted stories about Armenians who had lived in their villages before them, and many drew connections between the past violence against Armenians and the present suffering of their own community. Nazdar's narrative also demonstrates the importance of oral history, both within the Kurdish community in general, and also specifically in terms of keeping alive the memory of what happened to the departed Armenians. As demonstrated by other scholarship, for instance, in Leyla Neyzi's work on

teaching oral history in Turkey and Andrew Shryock's work on oral tradition and historiography in tribal Jordan, oral history can play an essential role both in undermining exclusionary official narratives, as well as in developing local historiographical understandings (Shryock 1997; Neyzi 2019).

2015: Return to War

When I carried out my preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2014, the situation in southeastern Turkey was peaceful, as there was a ceasefire and negotiations for a peace deal were underway between the Turkish military and the PKK. This peace process came to an abrupt end one year later in July 2015, just days after I arrived in Turkey to begin my long-term fieldwork, when Turkish warplanes began bombing PKK positions in Northern Iraq. Subsequently, fighting resumed and began to take on a new, massively destructive dimension not before seen in this conflict – urban warfare. While during the previous height of the conflict in the 1990s the majority of the fighting and displacement of civilians was focused in rural and mountainous areas, where the PKK guerrillas were concentrated and active, in this new phase, clashes began to intensify in the majority-Kurdish urban centers of the southeast, where nascent movements for local autonomy were developing. In these cities, both guerilla fighters and local politicized youth began to dig trenches and build barricades to wall-off their neighborhoods from Turkish security forces. The police and army responded with overwhelming force, declaring 24-hour curfews that went on in some cities for months. During these curfews, in places such as the Sur district in Diyarbakır, Cizre, Nusaybin, Silopi, Yüksekova, and others, many neighborhoods were relentlessly shelled and buildings were burned, so that residents returning after the curfews were lifted found smoldering rubble in place of their homes.

Because of this political upheaval in Turkey, when I began dissertation research, I found myself in a volatile and violent situation that no one had expected just a few months prior. Before the onset of this renewed conflict, I had planned to include both the province of Van and the province of Hakkari, just south of Van on the border of Iran and Iraq, in my research. Whereas Van represented a geography visibly marked by the violence of the Armenian Genocide, with crumbling remains of ancient churches and monasteries in many villages encircling the Van Lake, their presence a visible reminder of the absent Armenian community, the province of Hakkari represents the more recent state violence against the Kurdish community of eastern Turkey. In Hakkari, in the early years of the ongoing conflict between the military and the PKK, the Turkish army had employed a policy of evacuating, and in many cases burning, villages in the southeast of the country as a counter-insurgency tactic. During the 1990s, approximately three thousand Kurdish villages were evacuated in eastern Anatolia, thus producing new layers of ruins, the remnants of which are still visible on the landscape.

In my original formulation, I had planned 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 in eastern Turkey. Due to the end of the ceasefire and the renewal of fighting, however, I was unable to visit Hakkari during the time of my fieldwork. Part of the province, the city of Yüksekova, was under a two-month-long curfew and was all but razed to the ground. Other parts of the province were declared off-limit military zones and there were intermittent clashes on the intercity roads between militants and soldiers. The conflict restricted my mobility in many ways, and though no curfews were imposed in the city of Van itself, there were frequent firefights between armed Kurdish youth and militants and the Turkish police, as well as roadside bombings of Turkish military vehicles by PKK militants.

At the beginning of my research in July 2015, when the war abruptly 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 simply an obstacle to my research, but a tragic and unexpected new chapter of the story that I was already trying to tell. I realized that while I had planned to focus on two layers of ruins—the remnants of the violence of 1915 and the 1990s—this new state violence was producing a third, contemporary layer of ruins that was emerging before my eyes. Thus, unexpectedly, I had to revise my formulation from examining two layers of historical violence to incorporate a third layer of ruins that was newly being etched onto the landscape by the tanks and warplanes of the Turkish military. During my 26-months of continuous research between 2015 and 2017, I was unable to visit Yüksekova because of security concerns, but I followed the developments from a distance and carried out interviews with some of the thousands of internal refugees who fled the city and took refuge in Van. I was finally able to visit the destroyed town only in the summer of 2018 after the military had somewhat relaxed its stranglehold on the city, a visit which I address in Chapter Six.

Scope of the Dissertation

This dissertation investigates questions of materiality, temporality, memory, and space and place through an exploration of ruins of state violence in the region of Van in contemporary southeastern Turkey by pursuing three main areas of inquiry. First, I trace the afterlives of the architectural heritage of the Armenian community that was destroyed during the 1915 Genocide. Second, I explore how the majority Kurdish residents of contemporary Van remember and narrate the violent displacement of the Armenians one century ago in relation to their own

experiences of state violence in the present. Finally, I examine the moments of contradiction between official narratives of history and local understandings, and how these ruptures manifest in everyday negotiations over space, landscape, and public memory.

This dissertation contributes to conversations regarding materiality, temporality, violence, and space by demonstrating how layered histories of past and present violence are experienced, remembered, denied, and negotiated through the material world. This research also contributes to the study of multi-ethnic and post-imperial societies in the Middle East and Europe, as it provides a way to rethink the historical legacy of the late Ottoman Empire in contemporary Turkey. With its integration of both historical and contemporary contexts, this dissertation presents an alternative approach to conceptualizing the intertwined histories of minority communities in Turkey today. Through this dissertation, I investigate the relationship between histories of violence, the politics of memory, and material ruination in Anatolia over the last one hundred years. I examine the connections between the 1915 Genocide of Ottoman Armenians, the destruction of Kurdish villages in the 1990s by the Turkish army, and the recently reignited conflict between the Kurdish guerrilla fighters of the PKK and the Turkish military, in relation to the material ruins produced by these histories of violence.

In Turkey today, official history denies both the Genocide of the Armenians as well as ongoing violence against the Kurdish community. Much historiography of Armenian communities, on the other hand, ends with the Genocide and does not address the lived realities in this area historically inhabited by Armenians post-1915. Finally, a commonly heard historical narrative in Van today, as expressed through oral history narratives, identifies the 1915 Genocide as a unique episode of injustice framed against a nostalgic past in which Muslim Kurds and Christian Armenians lived together in brotherly harmony; a narrative that largely elides the

participation of many Kurdish groups in the systemic violence and expropriation against Armenians. My project charts the intersections between Armenian, Turkish, and Kurdish pasts, which are often narrativized as if separate and oppositional. In contrast, my research approaches these pasts as part of a shared historical story through an exploration of common spatial experiences of ruins, ruination, and palimpsests of violence. Through an investigation of how particular ruins are being reimagined, I mobilize questions of political subjectivities, spatial belongings, and contemporary historical understanding.

By focusing on material remains as well as how memory is narrated and performed, my research transcends both narrow ethnonational histories and state denialism, as well as romanticized views of the past as an era free of conflict and competition. Instead, through examining material ruins as both products of political violence as well as spaces that enable alternative senses of history, this research deconstructs and complicates both official and dissident historical understandings, and demonstrates the ways in which past and present are co-constitutional. I argue that studying the social lives of ruins elucidates the contradictions and fissures between national and local histories, exposing their silences and elisions, and revealing a more deeply textured historical understanding that includes those pasts that have become fetishized and occluded. This alternative approach to the history of the multi-ethnic Ottoman province of Van and its legacy in the present points to not one simple historical story, but to many stories that include coexistence and conflict, violence and dispossession, and aspiration and enchantment.

Methodology

The primary questions that guided my research were the following: 1) What are the lasting effects of histories of violence in everyday life and individual and collective memory in Van today? 2) How do ruins produced by political violence shape the present social world and understandings of the past? 3) How is past violence, particularly the 1915 Armenian Genocide, read through recent and contemporary violence experienced by the Kurdish community? Beyond these research questions that are specific to my fieldsite, my research is guided by larger theoretical questions regarding memory, materiality and violence, such as: How do ruins of empire—that is the physical, material, charred landscape of history—resonate in and help create historical memory in ways that can be potentially emancipatory and capable of connecting the histories of communities otherwise severed by a history of violence and genocide? How do the social lives of material objects shape collective memory?

My dissertation is based on a total of two years and six months of ethnographic fieldwork. The majority of my fieldwork was carried out during a continuous period of twenty-six months between July 2015 and September 2017, and consisted of twenty months of ethnographic fieldwork completed in the province of Van, Turkey as well as six months in Istanbul, Turkey and three weeks in Yerevan, Armenia. Additionally, I spent two months carrying out preliminary fieldwork in the summer of 2014 and two months carrying out follow-up fieldwork in the summer of 2018.

During my fieldwork, I combined several methodologies, including life histories; informal, unstructured, and semi-structured interviews; participatory mapping and walking interviews; analysis of media, song, traditional poetry and material culture; and participant observation. I documented my findings through detailed daily fieldnotes, audio and video

recordings, documentary photography and drawings of daily life and the built environment. I conducted the majority of my research in Van, a province with a population of over one million, including Van city as well as the surrounding villages and smaller towns. Additionally, I spent six months in Istanbul, the contemporary center of the Armenian community as well as the Kurdish diaspora in Turkey, where I conducted background research regarding the history of the Armenian and Kurdish communities in Van. Finally, I spent three weeks in Yerevan, Armenia, exploring the memories and experiences of the descendants of Armenians who left Van in 1915. Before beginning my fieldwork, I had already studied the languages necessary for carrying out this research—Modern Turkish, Kurmanji Kurdish, and Eastern and Western Armenian. Because I could speak and understand these languages, I was able to carry out my interviews and textual research without a translator and could move between various groups and learn firsthand about diverse experiences, lifestyles, and points of view. During my fieldwork, I conducted over 50 recorded interviews with Turkish and Kurdish residents of Van, migrants from Van, Armenians with roots in Van, as well as tourists and visitors to Van, in Kurdish, Turkish, and Armenian. I also collected in-depth photographic documentation of sites of material ruins as well as the changing markers of public space in Van.

In order to address questions of violence and memory today, I conducted formal and informal interviews in which I asked questions about individual life history, family history, local history, and memories passed down by older generations. In my analysis, I focused on how interviewees discussed the history of the Armenian community and sites of violence and massacres. I focused also on how interviewees draw parallels between the Armenian and Kurdish communities, noting narratives of shared victimhood of state violence, forced migration, and assimilation. I also conducted musical interviews with traditional singers (*dengbêj*) who sing

epic poems that recount historical events, including many that describe tragic historic episodes of massacres of both Armenians and Kurds.

In order to approach questions of materiality and the social life of ruins, I explored why a few select churches have been renovated and advertised as tourist destinations while others are left to be destroyed by treasure hunters and the ravages of time. I visited the sites of over fifty ruins throughout the region and conducted interviews and background research on their histories. In order to understand how locals interact with ruins and the landscape, I conducted walking interviews, in which I asked people to describe a specific site and their memories and understanding of it while we were walking through the space. In this way, ruins were both a methodology and a subject of inquiry.

In order to understand how the contemporary Kurdish political movement is shaped by the memories and experiences of past and present violence, I explored how the 1915 Genocide is read through the lens of present Kurdish politics and within the context of the continuing conflict between the Kurdish community and the central government. I conducted interviews in which I asked about understandings of contemporary political issues, and I analyzed broadcast and print media relating to current political and social issues. In order to further engage with everyday politics, I attended Kurdish language and music classes and cultural events at the Association of Women Musicians, Kurdi-Der (the Kurdish Language Association in Van), and a Kurdish cultural center. I frequented these politically charged spaces, which were centers of political discussions and activity, until they were shut down by a government decree following the attempted coup in July 2016.

The data that I produced during my field research falls into three main categories: (1) interviews: including in-depth, semi-structured interviews, informal interview, life history

interviews, walking interviews and musical interviews; (2) fieldnotes: including detailed daily accounts of observations of the changing social and political landscape in Van, descriptions of visits to sites of ruins, reflections on interviews, transcriptions of lyrics and poetry, and documentation of contemporary print media; and (3) visual material: including maps, sketches, documentary photographs, short video documentation, and historical photographs.

In the writing of my dissertation, I have changed all personal names of my interviewees and acquaintances in Van because of the sensitive nature of the topic and the ongoing threat of political repression and censorship in Turkey. In recent years, many individuals in Turkey have been persecuted and even imprisoned for their writings and statements on social media, and thus I use pseudonyms to protect the identity of all of those who have generously shared their time and thoughts with me. However, I use the real names of well-known political officials and public figures or those individuals who are quoted in already-published news articles.

From Empire to Republic: The Politics of History

In *Silencing the Past* (1997), Michel-Rolph Trouillot highlights the politics of the writing of history of contested pasts and draws our attention to the deliberate silences that make up any historical narrative. Trouillot writes, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation required to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly” (Trouillot 1997, 27). Trouillot also emphasizes that all histories leave behind material and other traces:

The production of traces is always also the creation of silences. Some occurrences are noted from the start; others are not. Some are engraved in individual or collective bodies; others are not. Some leave physical markers; others do not. What happened leaves traces, some of which are quite concrete—buildings, dead bodies, censuses, monuments, diaries, political boundaries—that limit the range and significance of any historical narrative. This is one of many reasons why not any fiction can pass for history. (Trouillot 1997, 29)

Following Trouillot, this dissertation seeks to follow the traces and uncover the silences of the contested history of state violence over the last century in southeastern Turkey. In order to do so, I build on the work of historians and anthropologists who have already begun the work of deconstructing the silences that erase and obscure the experiences and lives of marginalized minority communities that lived and continue to live on that territory.

This dissertation is in conversation with the recent work of other scholars who have explored histories of violence and their afterlives, particularly in the Armenian case. However, rather than focusing on the Armenian case in isolation, this dissertation contributes to the effort to move beyond an insular scholarship on the Armenian Genocide and to studying the histories, memories, and experiences of Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish, and other communities in concert. In this way, this dissertation builds on previous work done by historians and other scholars that work to break down the barriers of nationalist ways of seeing the past and the present. For instance, Sebouh Aslanian has critiqued the insularity of Armenian studies and suggested that we imagine Armenian history not as autonomous history but as an area of interactive histories and one shaped by mobility (Aslanian 2018). Other recent scholarship has also emphasized the importance of approaching Armenian history with an attention to intercommunal interactions and mobility (Sipahi, Derderian, and Cora 2016; Kathryn Babayan and Pifer 2018). The blurriness of communal boundaries has been especially highlighted in studies of Armeno-Turkish literature, which demonstrate how languages and the borders of ethnic communities have historically been porous and dynamic (Cankara 2018; Aslanian 2016).

Anthropologist Hakem Al-Rustom has suggested that considering the history of the Anatolian Armenian community that remained in the Republic of Turkey after the Genocide facilitates the deconstruction and problematization of orientalist and nationalist historical and

ethnographic perspectives (Al-Rustom 2015). Al-Rustom points out the necessity of analyzing the histories of victimized and marginalized groups within a national polity in conversation and relation with one another. Particularly, he calls attention to the overlaps and echoes between the histories of the Kurdish and Armenian communities that shared the same territories. Building on Edward Said (Said 1994, 72), Al-Rustom writes the following:

Said's oppositional criticism invites us to write against the nationalist rendering of borders and boundaries, and to bring to the foreground the "overlapping territories, and intertwined histories" between peoples that became enemies in post-imperial nationalist politics. Armenian and Kurdish histories testify to the ways in which they were excluded from the body of the Turkish state with the formation of a Turkish ethnic majority by Turkish nationalists. The exclusion of both populations was for different reasons, as was also instituted in the Lausanne Treaty: Armenians could not become full Turkish citizens because they were non-Muslims, while Kurds could not be anything but "Turks" because they were Muslims. (Al-Rustom 2015, 470)

Al-Rustom suggests that examining the history and experiences of Ottoman Armenians sheds light on the processes of victimhood and oppression of other marginalized communities in the post-Ottoman space, such as Kurds, and he asserts that "one cannot possibly write the history and ethnography of one without the other" (Al-Rustom 2015, 471). In this dissertation, I attempt to follow this call and write the history and ethnography of Anatolian Armenians and Kurds together, through exploring their "overlapping territories and intertwined histories." While Al-Rustom, in his own ethnographic research, explored the lives and histories of Anatolian Armenians who had left Anatolia and migrated to Istanbul and France, I come to this question from another angle, by exploring the memories and everyday experiences of the mostly Kurdish community that lives in the Van region of southeastern Anatolia today.

New scholarship has already begun the important task of uncovering and documenting the histories and memories of those marginalized communities that until recently was silenced and omitted from the historiography of the post-Ottoman territories (Sipahi, Derderian, and Cora

2016). My dissertation builds on such scholarship that explores the contests over memory and history over the last century in Turkey that resulted from the state-led effort to write a national history that would separate the newly founded Republic of Turkey from the Ottoman Empire and serve the task of homogenizing the newly defined Turkish nation (Ahıska 2011; Altınay 2005; Ergener 2009; Mardin 2002; Neyzi 2008; Özyürek 2007). Recent scholarship has shown that despite state-mandated policies of forgetting, the materiality of the past serves as a reminder to local communities of a history that has been erased in official narratives, yet lives on in individual memories and in the material landscape (Mills 2010; Öztürkmen 2003; Biner 2010; Parla and Özgül 2016). Along these lines, a recent volume edited by Nicholas Argenti proposes the concept of “post-Ottoman topologies” to suggest a focus on the changing, dynamic, and mutable aspects of collective memories and their relation to space and place, rather than on a fixed, empirical history (Argenti 2019; Hart 2019). Additionally, much scholarship regarding conflicts over memory in Turkey explores the histories of religious minority communities as particular sites of tension, such as the Armenians and Syriac Christians, Sabbateans, Jews, and Alevis, who face overlapping experiences of discrimination, exclusion, and assimilation (Ege 2011; Brink-Danan 2011; Tambar 2014; Neyzi 2002, 2013).

This dissertation builds on the work of historians of the genocide of the Ottoman Armenian and Assyrian communities in 1915, who have documented the way in which the deportations, massacres, forced assimilation, and appropriation of property was planned and carried out systematically by the Young Turk Government of the Ottoman Empire, and fits the criteria of genocide as set out by the United Nations (Suny 2015; Suny et al. 2011; Kevorkian 2011; Akçam 2004, 2006; Hovannisian 2007; Bloxham 2007; Göçek 2006; U. U. Ungor 2012; Cheterian 2015). This dissertation also addresses the continuing denial of the Genocide on the

part of the Turkish government (Dixon 2010a; Göçek 2015; Hovannisian 1998). This ongoing denial has led to a polarization of discourse in both Armenian and Turkish historiographies, resulting in parallel accusations of atrocities and claims of inevitable, absolute, and trans-historic innocence and victimhood, leaving little room for historical nuance (Hovannisian 2007; Suny et al. 2011). As a consequence of this polarization, survivors of the Genocide, mainly women and children, who were assimilated into Muslim communities (the descendants of which are estimated to be approximately 2.5 million), were either ignored or counted among the dead in the historiography, since their existence did not fit into the dominant narrative of either side of the debate (Altınay and Turkyılmaz 2010; Deringil 2009; Ekmekcioglu 2013).

This dissertation also seeks to bring into conversation literature on Kurdish history and contemporary politics and the Armenian past of Turkey through attending to the tangled relationships between past experiences of violence and contemporary political struggles (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011; Yegen 2009). The so-called “Kurdish Question” and the ongoing political struggle of the leftist Kurdish movement in Turkey continues to be a site of political contestation, which sheds light on the broader issues of contested places, forced migration, political and ethnic identification, and struggles over memory and meaning of spaces and places (Darici 2011; Gambetti 2009; Grabolle-Çeliker 2013; Leupold 2017; Hamelink 2016; Jamison 2015; Neyzi and Darici 2013, 2013; Van Bruinessen 1992).

Already in recent years, the historical silences regarding the taboo subjects of Islamized Armenians and the intersecting histories of Armenians and Kurds have begun to be studied and written about by scholars, journalists, and memoirists. A marked change in the contemporary discourse regarding the history of Turkey can be traced to the year 2005, which saw the first academic conference held in Turkey on the subject of Armenians at the end of the Ottoman

Empire, an event which drew considerable negative reactions in Turkey. In 2007, the assassination of the outspoken Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, who was the founder of the Istanbul-based Armenian-Turkish newspaper, *Agos*, drew an overwhelming outcry of support from across Turkey and provoked an outpouring of expressions of outrage and anger, and further helped to change the public discourse around the question of the Armenian community in Turkey (Öktem 2012). Hrant Dink's legacy of fighting for a more democratic and inclusive Turkey has lived on through his newspaper, *Agos*, and the Hrant Dink Foundation, which was founded in his memory. The Hrant Dink Foundation has continued this task tirelessly, from carrying out an ongoing oral history project documenting the experiences of Armenians hailing from various regions in Anatolia (in *The Sounds of Silence* series) to documenting the cultural material heritage of non-Muslims communities across Anatolia (Balancar 2012).

In the years since Hrant Dink's murder, memoirs of Turkish citizens who are descendants of converted Armenian survivors of the Genocide, such as lawyer Fethiye Çetin's *My Grandmother*, and other oral history projects and publications have further helped to dismantle the public taboo on discussing the topic of the legacy of the Armenian Genocide in Turkey (Çetin 2008; Hadjian 2018; Sivaslian 2013; Altınay, Çetin, and Libaridian 2014). Additionally, work on the memories of Kurdish communities regarding the Genocide and the Ottoman Armenian community have begun to tell the story of how this history lives on in Anatolia (A. Çelik and Dinç 2015; Tekin 2013; von Bieberstein 2017; Bellaigue 2010; Ege 2011). Additionally, recent work on the Armenian community in Turkey in the aftermath of Genocide, especially in Istanbul, sheds light on a community that had, until recently, been largely silent in the historiography (Ekmekcioglu 2016; Suciyan 2016; Özgül 2014). The year 2015, the centennial of the Genocide, saw the publication of a number of important works by journalists

that explored the legacy of the violent history of the Genocide in contemporary Turkey, that which Marchand, Perrier, and Blythe call “The Armenian Ghost” (Marchand, Perrier, and Blythe 2015; De Waal 2015; Toumani 2015; Cheterian 2015).

This dissertation builds on this body of scholarship on the disputed past of southeastern Anatolia as a contested geography (Leupold 2017). The region of southeastern Anatolia is today part of the Republic of Turkey but is claimed also by Armenians as Western Armenia and by Kurds as Northern Kurdistan. Each of these names carries with them political and historical claims. In this dissertation, while I refer to these various names throughout, I chose for the title of the dissertation the geographic term “Anatolia,” which, though also carrying its own historical connotations, does not necessarily imply that the territory in question is the natural property of one ethnic group while excluding others. Scholars Patricia Blessing and Rachel Goshgarian describe the term “Anatolia” thus:

Today, the term Anatolia is most commonly used to describe the area roughly defined as mainland Turkey, extending from the Sea of Marmara in the west to the eastern borders with Armenia, Georgia, Iran, Iraq and Syria, and from the Black Sea coast in the north to the Mediterranean in the south and southwest. [...] During the late medieval period, the regions that constituted what is today considered Anatolia were defined in different languages and cultural contexts by a range of terms. These include Rum, Anatolia, Trebizond, Nicaea, Armenia, Georgia, Turkey, Mesopotamia and Kurdistan, terms that were both dynamic and coexistent. [...] Because the region of Anatolia can be considered a self-contained area (albeit problematic), we embrace the term ‘Anatolia’ as a representation of an amalgam of spaces that share a geohistory in the medieval period and constitute a conceived space whose borders are grainy and fluid. (Blessing and Goshgarian 2017, 4–5)

Of course, no term is perfect or objective and each comes with its own historical and political connotations. According to the Encyclopaedia of Islam, the area was known as Asia Minor in antiquity, and the term *Anatoli* (“rising” of the sun in Greek), was first used by the Byzantines to refer to the territories east of Constantinople. During the Ottoman period, the Turkish version of the term, *Anadolu*, was used as the name of a large province in western Anatolia until the middle

of the nineteenth century, when it was reorganized into smaller provinces. Since that time the term has been used not as the name of a specific province, but to refer to the whole geographical area of the Anatolian plateau, which today forms the large part of the Republic of Turkey (Taeschner 1960). It is important to note that the term *Anadolu* is also not value-neutral and contains within it its own history of nationalist and homogenizing efforts. As Umit Uğur Ungor demonstrates in his study of the making of modern Turkey, in the late Ottoman period, many maps labeled parts of the eastern regions of the empire as “Armenia” or Kurdistan.” Beginning with the nationalist movement of the Young Turks in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century, state elites rigorously attempted to erase and displace these names from maps and memories by labeling those areas as “Eastern Anatolia” (U. U. Ungor 2012, 242). Thus, while considering the history and present use of the term, in this dissertation I employ the term “Anatolia” because it avoids sharing the title of one of the ethnic groups that claim it as a national homeland.

Memory of Violent Pasts

Beyond the post-Ottoman context, this dissertation builds on scholarship that has explored legacies of violent histories, and the ways in which those histories are remembered, contested, narrated, and embodied in the present. For instance, this research builds on anthropological studies of Cyprus and Israel and Palestine, and Turkey that have approached questions of contested territories, population movements, and nationalism (Sa’di and Abu-Lughod 2007; Slyomovics 1998a; Bryant 2012; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Cassia 2007). Such work illustrates how historical processes of violence, assimilation, and exclusion are played out on the individual and local level, and how everyday life can represent a political struggle over space, memory, and

meaning. Additionally, these contexts demonstrate how divergent narratives are inscribed upon and read into the landscape, the architecture, and the archeological record of discrete localities, as well as the territory as a whole (El-Haj 2002; Weizman 2017).

In exploring the memories of violence and trauma, persecution and assimilation, I find particularly productive Marianne Hirsch's notion of "postmemory" and Rosalind Shaw's formulation of "palimpsest memories" (Hirsch 2012; Shaw 2002). Hirsch's "postmemory" serves as a valuable concept for understanding the legacies of violent conflict and the ways in which experiences of violence continue to shape the lives of communities who experienced such traumas for generations after the event. Shaw's notion of "palimpsest memories," on the other hand, describes the ways in which layers of historical temporalities, conflicts, and events continue to inform the way in which later events are remembered and understood.

My work also builds on scholarship that explores how the past lives on in the present, not only in archives and in memories, but also through ritual and embodied practices. For instance, Paul Connerton, building on Maurice Halbwach's formulation of collective memory, emphasized the importance of bodily practices, rituals, and performances in the processes of remembering (Connerton 1989; Halbwachs 1992). The question of performance, ritual, and memories of violent pasts has been further considered by other authors, such as Paul Stoller (1995), who explored how colonial pasts in Niger live on through embodied practices of spirit possession, and Jennifer Cole (2001), who developed the idea of "memoryscapes" to characterize the various forms through which people remember and the historical processes that have shaped such memories and enabled them to be narrativized in the present. The question of embodied memory is further explored by Andrew Apter and Lauren Derby, who consider the ways in which hidden histories are congealed in ritual objects, and pasts are activated through ritual embodiment (Apter

and Derby 2010). Finally, my work is informed by the work of Diana Taylor (2003), who discusses the relation between memory and materiality through the notions of the “archive” of the material world and the “repertoire” of embodied practices.

Ruins and Ruination

The question of how the past is remembered in relation to the material world, and specifically in the case of the ruins of the Ottoman Armenian past, has been discussed by David Kazanjian, who critiques the Armenian diaspora’s discourse on the Genocide and obsession with the ruins—both physical and metaphoric—of a lost Armenia (2018). Kazanjian describes this obsession as “what in German is called *Ruinenlust*, or the melancholic love of ruins and the manic efforts to recognize, restore, and repair them” (Kazanjian 2018, 223). He elaborates on this approach as follows:

In the Armenian diasporic context, [...] *Ruinenlust* is more than just a passion for literal ruins from Armenia’s presumptive golden age of church building; it is a persistent political ontology. The diaspora’s frequent fascination with the ruins of Armenian culture’s distant past scattered throughout Turkey, Armenia, and the wider Mediterranean world carries a capacious presumption about Being in the wake of a catastrophic history: that one can only be fully human once what was shattered by genocide is made whole. (Kazanjian 2018, 223)

Kazanjian acknowledges that this fascination with ruins is not universal among the Armenian diaspora, but points out that it is pervasive, often embraced uncritically, and enables a nationalist celebration of the past. He writes, “Armenians in the North American diaspora often burn with a particular mode of *Ruinenlust*: the repetition of images of ruined churches and fortresses designed to invoke a great past, its genocidal destruction, and the desire for its restoration” (Kazanjian 2018, 227). Kazanjian’s critique of the Armenian diaspora’s nostalgic view of the ruins of Armenian churches that remain today in Turkey speaks to a recent scholarship that has

advanced a critical reading of ruins and ruination, and which inform my approach to the ruins that mark the landscape in eastern Turkey.

Ruins have long been approached as a window to the past and have been contemplated romantically as sublime inspiration for art and literature (Woodward 2010). However, recent scholarship has demonstrated that far from being simply mute remnants of past civilizations, ruins, as part of the material world, are active things that exist in lively relationships with humans (Latour 1993; Miller 2005). Recent work on ruins and processes of ruination has opened up new possibilities of exploring recent, unglamorous urban ruins as the ruins of modernity and empire in order to investigate the material effects of processes of violence, capitalism, and colonialism (Dawdy 2010; Hell and Schönle 2010; Stoler 2013).

Such authors who have turned away from studying ruins and the material landscapes as static objects, but rather as formations produced through active processes of negotiation and destruction. Studying ruins as products of economic processes sheds light upon the destructive effects of capitalist expansion (Marx 2006), as well as the ways in which ideas of progress are necessarily linked with ruination and the production of debris (Benjamin et al. 2002). Adopting a spatial lens to approach processes of ruination illustrates again the way in which capitalist expansion produces destruction, in the sense of ruined landscapes, communities, and the “destruction of space” (Gordillo 2014). The attention to space and place also illustrates the centrality of narrative, the relationships between past and present, and the importance of power dynamics and gender in shaping landscapes, spaces and places (Basso 1996; Lefebvre 1992; Massey 1994). Approaching the question of ruins through an analysis of commodification allows for an attention to the way in which objects are fetishized and the human relationships and labor through which they were created are obscured (Marx 2006). Additionally, such an analysis

allows us to investigate the social lives of ruins, and how they may take on new life as commodities in different phases of their cultural biographies (Appadurai 1988). Drawing on a new materialist approach to studying ruins illuminates the liveliness or agency of ruins as objects that produce their own effects in the world, and brings our attention to the way in which humans and ruins, as non-human agents, co-create the world as parts of active networks and assemblages. Such an approach demonstrates how ruins, as objects that people make, also make people, as they enable, constrain, and enchant humans (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2007).

Such scholarship allows a move away from approaching ruins as static material objects, and toward approaching ruins as lively actants that both produce and are produced by the social world; as nodes around which lives are lived and stories are told; as effects of violence, war, and empire; and as products of processes of capitalism, empire, and nation. Moving beyond the classical view of ruins allows scholars to explore ruins in the form of scarred and decimated landscapes, dead and tortured bodies, destroyed communities and ruined buildings, and to explore such varied and multiple forms of ruins within larger processes of nationalist government policies, violence, and war.

Particularly informative for my focus on ruins and ruination is the work of Ann Stoler and Walter Benjamin. In *Imperial Debris* (2013), Stoler proposes new approaches to the study of ruins of empire. Stoler focuses on *ruination* as an inherently political process and on ruins as social nodes, in and around which lives are not only destroyed but also lived and made possible. With a focus on ruins, Stoler proposes two interventions into the study of the ways in which colonial and imperial pasts bear on the present and the tangible ways in which these histories are lived. First, she emphasizes ruination as a verb: “our focus is less on the noun *ruin* than on “ruination” as an active, ongoing process that allocates imperial debris differentially and *ruin* as

a violent verb that unites apparently disparate moments, places, and objects” (Stoler 2013, 7). Secondly, she proposes that we examine “imperial formations” rather than “empire” in order to “register the ongoing quality of processes of decimation, displacement, and reclamation” (Stoler 2013, 8). With an emphasis on the persistence of imperial formations and an attention to the questions of temporality inherent in an examination of ruins, she approaches “ruins as sites that condense alternative senses of history, and [...] ruination as an ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future” (Stoler 2013, 9). Stoler also emphasizes the ways in which ruins can become politicized as the battlegrounds on which histories are contested and shaped. Finally, Stoler highlights the violence inherent in many spaces of ruins as she illuminates the ways in which ruins are violently produced, often through strategic policies of nation-building orchestrated by state actors.

Benjamin, in his study of the Paris arcades in *the Arcades Project* (2002), written between 1927 and 1940, builds on and develops Marx’s formulation of the ruination produced by capitalist production. By examining material objects such as the arcades, which had gone out of fashion, Benjamin shows how, within the system of consumer capitalism, production and destruction go hand in hand, as producers and consumers constantly seek ever newer forms and discard what has become outdated. In this sense, capitalism by definition creates ruination. In his critique, Benjamin rejects the idea of progress inherent in bourgeois conceptions of history. He connects this critique of progress to the process of ruination, as the narrative of progress itself depends on the production of ruins, which are positioned as the relics of a bygone era or an outdated fashion. In this way, the bourgeois idea of progress, including capitalist expansion, inevitably creates ruination in its wake.

As part of his attack on progress, Benjamin emphasizes the critical idea of discontinuity. He confronts the idea of historical progress that depends on the teleological concept of continuity and instead proposes a method based on historical disruption. Benjamin's non-linear approach to the past, especially in relation to questions of ruins and ruination, is expressed in the often-quoted passage in which he interprets Klee's painting "Angelus Novus." Benjamin describes the angel of history as turned toward the past and watching, his eyes wide and mouth open, while "he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. [...] A storm is blowing from Paradise; [...] This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress," (Benjamin 1968, 257). Here Benjamin is offering a historical approach that, rather than looking forward at an inevitable future, focuses on the destruction and debris of the past. Additionally, rather than presenting progress as a linear and positive process, he characterizes it as a violent and destructive storm. Looking backwards towards the past, Benjamin sees, instead of a history of progress, a history of destruction that is blowing the Angel of History against its will. Benjamin's reading, with its focus on the growing pile of debris, encourages an analysis of a destroyed landscape along with a focus on the objects and spaces that represent the discarded trash of history.

Structure of the Dissertation

Chapter Two focuses on the way in which state agencies approach and interact with the material heritage and built environment of the Armenian past in the Van region today through policies of destruction or restoration of churches. It gives an overview of the Armenian history of the Van region through an exploration of the life-histories of a few material spaces of ruin and

investigates how ruined Armenian monuments become a material interface between state actors and a history that is officially denied. The chapter describes the varied and often contradictory relationships between state agencies and actors and Armenian material heritage over the past century through a comparison of the concerted destruction of the Monastery of Narek in 1950 with the restoration of the most famous church, Akhtamar, in 2007. This chapter demonstrates how official policy towards Armenian material cultural heritage reflects and reveals the politics of memory and the troubled history of the region, as well as the ongoing official denial of the 1915 Genocide.

Chapter Three focuses on how locals in Van today interact with the spaces of Armenian ruins outside of the purview of officially sanctioned restoration or destruction. These spaces of ruin, neither curated and narrated officially by signs and guides nor deliberately erased, take on a life of their own within the communities and environments that they inhabit and that inhabit them. This chapter traces the “afterlives” of these spaces of ruins, long after they have ceased functioning as a church or a monastery and after the Armenian community has gone from the area. The chapter explores one example in-depth – Der Meryem (or Church of Mary), which is a ruined monastery nestled in the mountains in a remote area south of Van. This church has become a popular pilgrimage destination for Kurdish families who go to pray and sacrifice a rooster in order to ensure the health of their young children. This chapter explores the stories and legends that locals recount in relation to this church and discusses how this space shapes their understanding of the local past and present politics.

Chapter Four examines how treasure hunters in Van today approach the Armenian material heritage of the area and explores the widespread practice of treasure hunting as an embodied and material interaction with the past. This chapter explores the search and digging for

mythical buried treasure as a metaphor for a parallel local search for and “unearthing” of a taboo and officially denied past – that of the violent destruction of the Armenian community. This chapter discusses the material and symbolic ways in which treasure hunters seek out Armenian gold, as they try to “read” the landscape through cryptic treasure maps and complicated lexicons of symbols which they find on rocks, walls, caves, churches, and gravestones. This chapter also deals with the spells and enchantments that locals identify as an obstacle to reaching the treasure. These discussions serve to complicate both official denial as well as a nostalgic vision of the past, as it shows another mode of engaging with a violent history, that of a continued process of material appropriation. This chapter highlights the narratives of a number of amateur treasure-hunters from Van, which illuminate how treasure hunting is one of the principal ways in which locals interact directly with and interpret the Armenian material past.

Chapter Five examines how representatives of the central government and the Kurdish movement compete over local sovereignty by marking the landscape through naming and building monuments in relation to the Armenian legacy of the region. This chapter highlights how Van is a contested geography, a region that is claimed by three competing nationalist imaginaries as either Northern Kurdistan, Western Armenia, or Eastern Turkey. This chapter details the politics of naming and name-changes over the past century, as a majority of village names were changed from the original Armenian or Kurdish (deemed “foreign”) names to new Turkish names. In recent years, there have been efforts to reclaim the “original” names and local Kurdish municipalities have installed their own signs at the entrance to villages displaying both the Kurdish/Armenian and Turkish names. Since the 2016 coup-attempt, local officials appointed by the central government have begun removing Kurdish signs and replacing them again with Turkish signs. This process of “Turkifying” or nationalizing the landscape is also mirrored in

efforts to mark space with monuments representing the officially sanctioned understanding of local history. This chapter discusses multiple places in which representatives of the ruling party have established monuments to Turkish martyrs killed by Armenians. This process is contrasted with one instance in which Kurdish municipal officials built a commemorative monument to a famous Armenian artist born in Van, which was later partially dismantled by local representatives of the central government. In this way, this chapter demonstrates how contemporary political conflicts are negotiated locally through practices of marking, naming, and labeling space and place.

Chapter Six, the Conclusion, explores the resonances and parallels between past and present state violence on the built environment in Van between 1915 and 2016. This chapter discusses the materiality and temporality of state violence over the past century through looking at palimpsests or layers of ruins, and temporal cycles of repeated acts of destruction. This chapter analyzes how state and military actors inscribe exemplary violence not only on the bodies of those that it marks as “terrorists” but also through destroying the material landscape. State actors employ violence not only to “neutralize” “terrorist” bodies, but also to “domesticate” “terrorist” spaces. This chapter tells the parallel stories of state-sponsored destruction of space in 1915 and 2015 through two specific examples. The first is the 1915 “Defense of Van” or “Van Revolt” in which Armenian civilians barricaded the Armenian quarter and resisted Ottoman forces that held them under siege for two months until the Russian army arrived. The result of this fighting, including the shelling of the quarter by the Ottoman army, was the complete destruction of the Old City of Van, which was never rebuilt and remains in ruins today. The second story is that of the 2016 Yüksekova “Resistance” or “Operation” in which Kurdish youth and militants barricaded certain neighborhoods and fought against Turkish military forces, which held the city

under siege for two months until they crushed the resistance. During the fighting, state forces intentionally burned large parts of the city and after the fighting ended, they seized and razed large areas with the intention to rebuild it as a military zone. Embedded within these larger stories of state-driven destruction of space, this chapter tells the stories of two families, one Armenian in 1915 and one Kurdish in 2016, whose homes were confiscated and destroyed. It details these histories of violence through the materiality of their houses and the transformation from home to ruin.

CHAPTER TWO

The Politics of Ruination and Restoration

Introduction

In southeastern Turkey, in the province of Van, just off of the southern shore of Lake Van near the town of Gevaş, there is a small island on which stands the tenth-century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross, or Akhtamar. The population of this region today is majority Kurdish and the once-vibrant Armenian community of Van has been absent since 1915 when Armenians were massacred and driven out during the violence of the First World War. What is the significance of this Armenian church that exists now in a region where its Christian Armenian caretakers are long since gone and the local population is now predominantly Muslim? What does this medieval monument signify within Turkey where the violence against the Armenian population one century ago continues to be officially denied by the government?

For the past century, since the violence of the 1915 Genocide, the architectural remains of Armenian churches, monasteries, homes, schools, and cemeteries have remained a material reminder of the absent community. While most Armenian churches were left abandoned, some were deliberately destroyed by state actors, while a few were eventually restored and renovated. In addition, since the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the government has denied the history of the Genocide of 1915 and rejected any Armenian claims to the land of eastern Anatolia. Considering this long-standing official policy of erasing history and denying claims, the destruction of material remnants of the absent community may seem to be a logical on-the-ground enactment of an official ideology. Why then are some churches renovated while others are destroyed, and still others left in legal limbo or simply abandoned? I argue that the example of Armenian material heritage in the Van region demonstrates that within the state-led efforts to

nationalize and Turkify the landscape of southeastern Anatolia, ethnic and religious difference is only tolerated when it can be assimilated into state-approved narratives, otherwise, spaces representing unwelcome difference are destroyed and erased.

This chapter introduces the Armenian history of the Van region through an exploration of the life-histories of two historically significant churches, Akhtamar and Narek, and investigates how both ruined and restored Armenian monuments become a material interface between the central government, locals, and a history that is officially denied. The chapter describes the varied and often contradictory relationships between state policies, local actors, and Armenian material heritage over the past century, ranging from the concerted destruction of some churches in the 1950s, such as Narek, to the well-known restoration of the church of Akhtamar in 2007. My examples demonstrate how changing official policies towards Armenian material heritage reflects and reveals the politics of memory and the troubled history of the region, as well as the ongoing official denial of the 1915 Genocide. Through an examination of the built environment and a foregrounding of interactions between state officials, local residents, and material ruins, my analysis reveals both the ways in which official state historiographical ideology is materialized on the ground and how local understandings and memories contest officially dictated understandings of the past

In Van, as in most of Turkey, the Armenian community has been absent in the region since the Genocide of 1915, yet the abandoned churches remain visible on the landscape to this day. In this chapter, I focus on the ways that representatives of the Turkish state have interacted with the material heritage and built environment of the Armenian past in Van through policies of destruction or restoration. I explore in detail the histories of the restored Church of Akhtamar and the destroyed Monastery of Narek in order to illustrate the fraught relationship between the

Turkish central government and the material remains of the Armenian community. I suggest that state representatives have attempted to perform and construct Turkish state sovereignty both over the contested territory of eastern Anatolia as well as over the contested history of the region through alternatively destroying and restoring Armenian material heritage. At times ambiguous and contradictory, state policies towards the Armenian cultural heritage reflect the internal contradictions, silences, and dilemmas that are inherent in the contested history of the region.

Beyond the official policies and procedures by which state officials interact with such buildings, I also explore the ways in which locals interpret and negotiate the politics and histories of these material spaces. Through ethnographic examples from my fieldwork, I illustrate how local Kurds use and imagine the ruined and restored spaces of Armenian material heritage around them, and often contest official historical narratives. Through a nuanced ethnographic analysis of local understanding in conversation with government propaganda, press releases, and official pronouncements, I thus complicate the simple binary story of either state-led destruction or renovation and demonstrate the interstices and inconsistencies between official histories and local memories.

In my discussion of how the government of Turkey over the past century has engaged with the contested material heritage of the Armenian community, I draw on the work of scholars who have elucidated how architecture and archeology become politicized sites through which individuals, states, and military actors stake their claims. Scholars writing on Israel and Palestine, in particular, have demonstrated the ways in which architecture is politicized in conflict zones. In *Hollow Land* (2017), Eyal Weizman examines the politics of architecture in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and how the state of Israel builds the material infrastructures of control and occupation into the landscape. Highlighting the inherently material

nature of occupation, Weizman suggests that, “the architecture of the frontier could not be said to be simply 'political' but rather 'politics in matter’” (Weizman 2017, 5). Similarly, in southeastern Turkey, the very matter of the ruined Armenian architectural heritage embodies the politics of the past and the present.

Susan Slyomovics, in *The Object of Memory* (1998b) offers another nuanced understanding of the politics of architecture in Israel and Palestine, as she traces the history and material transformation of a former Palestinian village into a Jewish artists’ colony. Slyomovics describes how the Israeli artists who inhabit the village imagine the relatively recent ruins of former Palestinian houses that were produced by the foundation of the state of Israel in 1948 as representing an ancient history of the village, while they simultaneously ignore and deny the history of the still-living Palestinians who built those houses. In like fashion, in Turkey, the architectural remnants of Armenian churches sometimes become tourist attractions and are represented as examples of ancient and aesthetic ruins on the landscape, but with no mention of the people who built them. Such practices and narratives, like in Palestine, erase Armenian people and history while appropriating Armenian architecture as timeless and depoliticized art objects.

Another aspect of the relationship between the built environment and the politics of the past is elucidated by Nadia Abu El-Haj, who, in *Facts on the Ground* (2002), describes how in Israel, the physical landscape and the material world are intimately tied to, and consciously shaped by, state-directed historical narrative and archeological practice. Abu El-Haj’s work highlights the way in which Israeli archeology, in service of a nation-building project, elides and obscures the histories and experiences of Palestinians while it also erases the material traces of their community from the landscape. While the case of Israel and Palestine represents the

possibilities of appropriating Palestinian architecture while negating Palestinian history, it also illuminates possible projects to preserve and reanimate the memory of a now-absent people. In the context of contemporary Turkey, scholars working on the history and politics of archeology have demonstrated how archeological studies have been used for political ends, and how they prioritized certain pasts and narratives while obscuring others, especially those of minority groups (Dissard 2011; Ozguner 2015).

This chapter focuses on both the politics of architecture and archeology but also introduces the question of sovereignty and the ways in which states exert control over territory, space, bodies, and life (Agamben 1998). Yarimar Bonilla outlines how sovereignty has come to be understood “as an uneven and fragmented performance, rather than a stable capacity (Bonilla 2017, 333). Bonilla engages with recent scholarship to illuminate how the notion of state power as sovereign, singular, and autonomous has been brought into question both in theory and in practice on the ground (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Geertz 2004; Rutherford 2012). The work of Yael Navaro in *The Make-Believe Space* (2012) further illuminates how contests over sovereignty play out on the landscape, as she points to the materiality and tangibility of practices of sovereignty. Drawing from her ethnographic work in the contested territory of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, Navaro argues that sovereignty is “the tangible reworking of a territory with political intention through the application of geographical expertise and technologies over land” (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 48). Her research on Northern Cyprus returns us to a long-standing Greek-speaking Cypriot community that was forcibly expelled in 1974 from their homes, making this conflict an even closer approximation to the context of the eradicated Ottoman Armenian community.

In a recent essay, Navaro further theorizes state power, territory, and sovereignty through the idea of “remnants.” She takes as her starting point the work of geographer Stuart Elden (Elden 2013), who, building on Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, writes about how states exercise sovereignty over their land through micromanaging socio-spatial relations in order to produce national territory. To complicate an all-encompassing idea of state power over its territory, Navaro suggests the notion of “remnants.” In Navaro’s formulation, “remnants refers to the residues of territory, to that which was unassimilable to nationalizing processes, and to that which remained and survived in spite of all efforts to eliminate, bury, curb, and control” (Navaro 2017). Navaro relates the idea of remnants directly to state violence thus: “As fact as well as metaphor, remnants capture that which is left over from state violence and reterritorialization; what could not be contained on one or the other side of a border marking sovereignty; things discarded, buried on purpose, cast away, or forgotten, but which insistently survive and come back to life” (Navaro 2017). For instance, relating the concept to her own work in post-Ottoman spaces, she explains that “remnants may be material, such as a broken piece of carved stone from an Armenian church in Turkey, left behind after the genocide of 1915 and used to build a new house or recycled in a mosque” (Navaro 2017).

Further delving into the example of the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide, Navaro explains that she draws the word remnants from the Turkish term *kılıç artıkları* (remnants or remains of the sword), which refers to the women and children who survived the Genocide and were assimilated into Muslim Turkish and Kurdish communities (Sivaslian 2013). Taking into account the violence inherent in the term, Navaro turns remnants “into a framework for the documentation of that which survived the violence. In this way, remnants as a concept evoke that which exceeds violence, that which remains against the grain, in spite of it” (Navaro 2017). In

this chapter, I build on Navaro's conception of remnants as I explore the ruined spaces of Armenian churches and monasteries in eastern Turkey—material remnants of the Genocide of 1915—as spaces that exceed the attempts of the government to assimilate and nationalize the landscape. As such, I explore various sites of Armenian architectural heritage, as remnants that are “out of place” within Turkish national territory, and interrogate the ways in which state authorities at different periods have tried to assimilate these sites into the national territory either through destruction and erasure, or renovation and appropriation (Cresswell 1996).

The work of the above scholars attends to the material practices of sovereignty with a focus on Eastern Mediterranean contexts of both historical and contemporary violent conflict and occupation in Cyprus, Israel-Palestine, and Turkey. In turn, I compare the often fragmented and contradictory ways in which representatives of the government in Turkey attempt to lay claim to both the landscape and the history of the region of Van in eastern Anatolia through engaging with the architectural heritage of the Armenian population destroyed through the state-driven genocidal violence of 1915. At times through concerted destruction and at other times through restoration, the interactions between the government of Turkey and Armenian material heritage are always politically charged as sites through which sovereignty is contested, claimed, and inscribed on the landscape. In the context of Van, an attention to the material practices of sovereignty performed by the Turkish state highlights the ways in which state efforts at erasure, though often violent, are never fully complete, and are continually contested and complicated by the everyday interactions, narrations, and memories of locals who inhabit these borderlands.

Anthropologists Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson have problematized the idea of borderlands in relation to notions of fixed cultures that correspond to territorially fixed spaces. They argue that “The fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete

spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 7). Instead, they show how borderlands, both literal and figurative, are places of “incommensurable contradictions,” and they specify that “the term does not indicate a fixed topographical site between two other fixed locales (nations, societies, cultures), but an interstitial zone of displacement and deterritorialization that shapes the identity of the hybridized subject” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 18).

The area of Van represents a borderland in multiple senses of the word. For centuries it was at the borders of large empires – most recently between the Ottoman, Russian, and Persian Empires. As such it was often overrun by invading armies and has changed hands multiple times (Hovannisian 2000). Today, it is located in far southeastern Turkey, within a few hours drive from the international borders of Iran to the east, Armenia to the northeast, Iraq to the south, and Syria to the southeast. Beyond the question of internationally recognized borders, there is the politically charged question of claims over the land and history in various nationalist imaginaries. While Turkey claims it as part of the indivisible Turkish homeland of Anatolia, many Kurds consider it part of the unofficial Kurdistan, the territory both historically and contemporarily inhabited by Kurdish populations, which stretches across recognized borders between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. For instance, in Van, the majority of my interlocutors were ethnically Kurdish and would consider the area to be part of a broader Kurdistan, while to Turkish state officials, the area is singularly Turkey and any public mention of Kurdistan might be interpreted as seditious behavior. In contrast, based on conversations with Armenians in Armenia, the United States, and with Armenian tourists who visited Van, many Armenians still consider the area of Van, along with a large section of what is eastern Turkey today, to be Western Armenia, Historic Armenia, or the Armenian Highland (Karanian 2015). It was from

Western Armenia that Ottoman Armenians were expelled from their homes in 1915 and scattered across the globe, making up the foundation of the Armenian diaspora today. These divergent claims over who is the rightful owner of the land, territory, and history in Van and southeastern Turkey continue to be politically salient today and highlight the significance of the symbolic and material actions of state actors in relation to local cultural heritage.

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the question of destruction or preservation of historic Armenian and Turkish sites of architectural heritage through the discussion of two cemeteries near Gevaş. I then introduce the Armenian church of Akhtamar and discuss the history of the region and the transformation of the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey through the question of place-name changes. Following this, I discuss the contemporary state of the restored church of Akhtamar and the politics of the state-led 2007 restoration, as well as the subsequent yearly church services. I elaborate on the history of the church prior to 2007 and introduce the issue of state-driven destruction. To do so, I draw on ethnographic material from interviews that I carried out with Kurdish locals in the Gevaş region regarding the history of Akhtamar and the other destroyed churches. Finally, I describe the history and current state of the destroyed monastery of Narek in order to illustrate a comparative case of the destruction of an Armenian site by Turkish state authorities.

A Journey into History

It is early April 2017 in Van, a time when winter and spring exist side by side. The weather is sunny and cool. The fields around the city are beginning to turn green. The trees are showing signs of fresh new leaves and the first pink and white buds of new blossoms are beginning to emerge. Winter is long in Van, and even in early April the ring of mountains around the lake are

capped with white, from Artos Mountain on the southern shore to the magnificent Süphan Mountain just opposite on the northern shore. An Armenian-American friend has come to visit for a week, and on the first morning of his visit, together with a Kurdish friend from Van, Azad, we set off from the Van city center west along the lakeshore in the direction of the small town of Gevaş, an hour away from Van city, and the island of Akhtamar, where we will visit the restored, tenth-century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross.

The first stop on our drive is a breakfast restaurant on the edge of the lake just outside of Van city. The traditional local breakfast is famous throughout Turkey, with chic “Van Breakfast” restaurants popular in the most expensive neighborhoods in Istanbul. In Van, enjoying extensive, leisurely breakfasts, especially on weekends, is a cherished ritual, and on this Sunday in April the restaurant is packed with multi-generational families, groups of friends, and couples, spending time together over tables laden with small plates of local delicacies – freshly baked flat bread, the local dry white cheese with wild herbs, eggs fried with preserved meat, olives, and thick cream with honey and walnuts. Photos of the rich Van breakfast spread are included in every tourist publication and advertisement for the city, alongside other icons of the city. One of these icons is the Van Cat, a white cat that often has one blue and one yellow or green eye, and which is an internationally recognized cat breed native to the city. There is the Van Fish, the pearl mullet, which is the only species of fish that has evolved to live in the Van Lake because of the unusual quality of its water as both salty and carbonated. The next ubiquitous symbol of Van is the Van Castle, a citadel left from the Urartian civilization (860 BC–590 BC), which was built upon a huge natural rock formation and continued to be an important fortress through Ottoman times.

More than the breakfast, cat or fish, the most recognizable and iconic symbol of the city, and the one most commonly found on postcards, magnets, and tourist maps, is the tenth-century Armenian Church of the Holy Cross on the island of Akhtamar. The church of Akhtamar, which was restored by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2007, is often the first stop on the itinerary for tourists visiting Van, and it is our destination today. After breakfast, we drive the thirty minutes from the city center of Van to the small town of Gevaş. There we pick up two friends, Evin and Murat, who will join us for the day. Evin and Murat are both Kurdish and born in Gevaş. Though Evin moved to Istanbul with her parents when she was young, she eventually returned to Gevaş when she became a teacher, and there she met and married Murat, who is a talented woodworker and painter.

As we continue driving west along the lakeshore from Gevaş, Murat, who has taken a liking to our guest, assumes the role of the guide and begins to narrate points of interest along the way. As we pass a stand of tall birch trees and a sign advertising a lakeside restaurant and boat-tours, Murat points out that this establishment was built on an Armenian graveyard. When he was young, he explains, this area was just a field with large gravestones carved with crosses. “We called this place *Xaçan*, which means ‘crosses’ in Kurdish.” If Murat had not shared his memories of such local places and names, I would never have known about the cemetery. Directly across the road from the restaurant, as Murat pointed out diligently for our guest’s benefit, we can see the *Selçuklu Mezarlığı* and the *Halime Hatun Kümbeti*, the Seljuk cemetery full of large, intricately carved headstones and the mausoleum of Halime Hatun, built by Melik İzzeddin in the year 1335 for his daughter (Figure 2.1). The Seljuk graveyard had been enclosed with a low wall, and new picnic tables and benches had recently been installed just outside the

entrance by the Gevaş municipality, which advertised its efforts with a sign that read “*Gevaş Belediyesi Çalışıyor*” (Gevaş Municipality is at Work).



Figure 2.1. *Halime Hatun Kümbeti* (Mausoleum of Halime Hatun). August 4, 2017.

In the official history of the region promoted by the Turkish government, this Seljuk cemetery has been embraced and protected as a site of historic significance for Turkish national heritage and also one that materially demonstrates Turkish claims of sovereignty over the land. The Seljuks, along with other Turkic groups that had originated in Central Asia and ruled parts of Anatolia between the eleventh century and the beginning of Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century, are celebrated within the nationalist historical narrative propagated by the government in Turkey. This narrative emphasizes origins and cultural contributions that are considered by state authorities to be Turkic or Turkish—such as Seljuk or Ottoman mosques and gravestones—while silencing, suppressing, and oftentimes erasing what government authorities interpret as non-Turkish elements such as Kurdish and Armenian sites that are deemed out-of-place within the Turkish nation (Aktar 2009).

The contrast between those histories and historic sites that are acceptable and those that are disposable was starkly visible between the two sites on either side of the road. On one side of the road, the Seljuk cemetery was a clearly demarcated and protected historical site. On the other side of the road was a touristic restaurant, with no sign or recognition of the Armenian cemetery that had once stood in its place. One hundred years ago, the carved stones of the Christian Armenian cemetery stood just a few hundred meters away from the Muslim Seljuk cemetery. Today, one has become a historic heritage site while the other has been physically erased from the landscape. If not for our local guide, Murat, who brought to life the Armenian site through the retelling of his memories, there would remain no trace of it.

In many cases like this, it is the Kurdish locals who become the guardians of the Armenian past of the region, preserving the memory of the departed Armenians and the spaces that they left behind. The question of whether this is a paradox or not also propels my research. It is Kurds today, who in some cases are the grandchildren of those who participated in the massacres and expropriation of Armenian victims of the Genocide, who, through oral history and storytelling, take on the role of enlivening the Armenian spaces of memory that would otherwise be forgotten. Within the Kurdish community of Turkey generally, orality and storytelling play a paramount role in preserving local history and Kurdish cultural heritage, both because of a rich tradition of epic poetry recounted by *dengbêj* and *çîrokbêj* (traditional singers and storytellers) (Hamelink 2016; Schäfers 2015), and because of the severe repression and censure of writing, printing, or teaching the Kurdish language or propagating material about Kurdish history (Jamison 2015). In many cases, there is no official information available about certain historic sites, especially regarding Armenian sites, but local Kurds continue to recount and remember the local history of the area. For instance, in the case of the Armenian graveyard mentioned by

Murat, such a cemetery is not listed in the register of archeological or historical protected sites (*sit alanı*) compiled by employees of the Van Museum (an institution under the umbrella of the central government's Ministry of Culture and Tourism), as some cemeteries are (like the Seljuk cemetery along with some Armenian cemeteries). However, this same cemetery was recounted by another Gevaş local, as mentioned below, thus suggesting that this site holds an important place in local memory.

Even in such seemingly stark instances of commemoration versus erasure, remembering versus forgetting, there exist elements of contradiction and cracks in the official narrative. The Seljuk cemetery is one of the most celebrated symbols of the “Turkish” heritage and history in the Van region and is particularly prized because it provides a material basis for Turkish autochthonous claims to the land, as Turkish forebears lie physically in the earth, as demonstrated by their monumental headstones. Yet, despite its significance, the site is rather unkempt, with tall grasses and prickly purple thistles growing thick between the stones and the path that had been built of wooden planks along the middle of the site already beginning to rot. This state of disrepair was not out of the ordinary when compared to other heritage sites generally in the Van region. While across Turkey there are problems with heritage management relating to funding, upkeep, and maintenance, and even in the heavily trafficked tourist areas of western Turkey there are visible deficiencies regarding preservation, the lack of care is especially observable in the economically underdeveloped southeast. In Van and the surrounding areas, even sites of national significance are often left unprotected, and even when they are partially restored, they are often then left without a caretaker and are vulnerable to decay.

Some months prior, I had visited the Seljuk cemetery and come across a local man who was returning to his home after tending the bean vines in his garden on the other side of the road.

We began to chat, and I asked him if there were any caretakers in charge of the site. He explained that there no caretakers, custodians, or guards, and, thus, the place was constantly being damaged by treasure hunters. The base of the mausoleum had to be renovated last year, he explained because treasure hunters had significantly damaged some of the foundation stones, but, he continued, with no guards there they can easily come and dig again. He pointed to the foundation stones, some of which had been recently replaced with machine-cut stones that were clearly newer than the original stones. Then he bitterly added that what used to be a picturesque view of the mausoleum against Artos Mountain had been destroyed by a new, five-story, pastel pink, cinderblock high-school dormitory that had been built immediately behind the mausoleum (Figure 2.2). Indeed, this stark juxtaposition of a boxy, square, pink building towering behind the fourteenth-century mausoleum, with its intricately carved windows and cone-shaped dome, has been a topic of heated criticism in the news media since it was first built by the Ministry of Education in 2007 (Kuyucu 2014).



Figure 2.2. The Halime Hatun Kümbeti against the new dormitory. August 4, 2017.

Though the conservation of the Seljuk site is riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies, it still maintains a semblance of care, with the base of the tomb restored, and a wall around the exterior. On the contrary, the Armenian cemetery across the road was completely erased, with no attempt made to preserve or demarcate the site. This is the common fate of Armenian cemeteries across the region. During my two years of fieldwork in Van, I came across only four Armenian cemeteries that were still discernable, with their carved headstones still recognizable. These were in the villages of Şuşanis (Kevenli) and Lezk (Kalecik), the town of Bahçesaray (Miks), and the abandoned village of Varents. Besides these four, it is possible to see scattered and toppled gravestones in the vicinity of remote monasteries, but in large part village and town cemeteries have all been erased from the landscape.

However, despite the physical erasure of the Armenian cemeteries, in many cases, the memory of the now destroyed sites live on in the stories of locals who continue to recount them, such as in the site of the Gevaş cemetery. For instance, our narrator in the Seljuk site, echoing what Murat had told us, recounted that the area across the street where the restaurant now stands used to be an Armenian graveyard and was known as *Xaçan* or *Xaça Filan*¹ meaning “Crosses of the Christians (Armenians)” in Kurdish, referring to the headstones marked with crosses. This man may have been twenty years older than Murat, thus representing the memory of a slightly older generation, who shares the same story as Murat, with slightly more details. Though the stones have disappeared, and former material traces of the graveyard have been erased, locals

¹ In Kurdish, the word *fileh* (plural *filan*) (with many possible alternative spellings) is used to denote the local Christian indigenous community. In Van, *fileh* usually refers to Armenians, while in Hakkari, it is more likely to mean Nestorians or Assyrians, and in other areas might include Chaldean Christians. In his exhaustive English-Kurdish dictionary, linguist Michael Chyet lists three definitions for the entry for the word *file*: 1) Christian (Armenian or Assyrian); 2) Armenian; and 3) Assyrian or Chaldean. He also notes the alternate spellings *fele*, *fileh*, *fillah*, and *fille*. He notes that in Arabic, *fallah* means “peasant, farmer” and in Sorani Kurdish *fele* means “Christian villager” (Chyet 2003, 195).

continue to remember the site from their childhoods and reinscribe and reenact the memory through repeating the former name of the site, thus recalling the now-absent Armenian community. Even beyond the memory, the site in its new iteration as a touristic establishment also acknowledges the significance of Armenians to the region, and of the region to Armenians, through the large roadside billboard advertising their services. The sign, which advertises Van breakfast and boat trips to Akhtamar, is written in Armenian in addition to Turkish, English, German, French, and Arabic. The evident Armenian text on the sign is not so much a recognition of the violent history of the area, or of the expropriation of a cemetery to build the restaurant, but rather a part of the commercialization of the Armenian past for touristic purposes, which was one of the criticisms levelled towards the restoration of the church of Akhtamar, as described later in this chapter. Such critiques point out that the central government and local businesses take advantage of some aspects of Armenian cultural heritage as it suits them for the purposes of attracting tourists, but they stop short of fully acknowledging the history of the Genocide or the ongoing Armenian claims to land and buildings.

Back on the road towards Akhtamar with our friends Murat and Evin, we round the bend at the lookout point known as *Kaymakam Tepesi*, or Governor's Hill, and the island of Akhtamar slowly comes into view, with the honey-colored church just visible. We arrive at the dock just opposite the island where boats carry groups of tourists to the island. Akhtamar is the one destination that is invariably on every tourist's itinerary. It draws local tourists from the nearby region as well as from the western areas of Turkey, Armenians visiting from Armenia, Europe, and the United States, as well as Iranians who come overland through the border crossing just one hour east of Van. On this day there is a large extended Kurdish family from the city of

Yüksekova, three hours south of Van, who have come to spend their Sunday at Akhtamar, and who are waiting for the boat with us.

While we wait, we peruse the wares on display outside the small gift shop at the entrance to the dock. As our guest is examining the miniature plaster models of Akhtamar, Murat asks me, “Don’t you want to light candles?” I was initially confused at his question. “Light candles?” I queried. He replied confidently, “Yes, aren’t you supposed to light candles at the church?” “I suppose so...” I replied, a bit embarrassed that I had not thought of this myself and that I was clearly out of touch with the rituals that I, as an Armenian going to visit an Armenian church, was expected to perform. Murat takes matters into his own hands, striding into the small shop and asking the young man working there, “Do you have candles?” I was surprised to find that, indeed, he did, but the candles that he offered to us were not the thin, yellow, beeswax candles or the thick white candles common in the active Armenian churches in Istanbul, Armenia, or abroad. Instead, this vendor had stocked what he could find locally to meet the demand of candle-seeking tourists. He offered us two choices; the first was a small pack of rainbow-colored birthday cake candles; and the second was pairs of long, spiraled candlestick candles in blue, red, gold, and silver, and encrusted in glitter. I chose a pair of silver candlesticks, thinking that they most resemble the church candles with which I was familiar. Moments later, however, I regretted my decision when I realized that my hands and clothes had become covered with silver glitter.

As we wait for our boat to embark, our guest looks up over the dock and notices the arch bearing the words *Gevaş Akdamar Iskelesi*, “the Gevaş Akdamar Dock.” And just outside the dock, on the main road, there is a sign displaying the words “*Akdamar Adası / Akdamar Kilisesi* (Akdamar Island/Akdamar Church). “Why do the signs say ‘Akdamar’ instead of ‘Akhtamar?’” our guest asks. Indeed, concealed within the slight difference between writing “Akdamar” and

“Akhtamar,” the simple change of a “T” to a “D”, and omitting a “K,” is a long history of name-changes, Turkification, and the rewriting of history. Where do these names come from, and what do they mean?

It is unknown where the name of the island originates, but one widely recounted folktale offers a compelling explanation. This tale continues to be recounted in various versions both in the Van region and globally amongst Armenian communities. The celebrated Armenian poet, Hovhannes Tumanyan (1869 – 1923), who spent most of his life in the city of Tiflis in the Russian Empire, immortalized the story in verse in 1891 under the title “Akhtamar” (Tumanyan 2018). In one variant that I have heard frequently in Armenian diasporan communities, a beautiful Armenian princess named Tamar falls in love with a commoner. Her father, the king of Van, disapproving of this affair, sends her to live on an island in the lake of Van. When night falls, the young man swims towards the island, guided by a light that Tamar is holding at the edge of the water. They meet in secret, and before daybreak, the youth swims back to the shore. They meet like this each evening, until one night, Tamar’s father discovers her waiting on the shore for her lover, and, in a rage, extinguishes the light. The youth, unable to find his way in the dark water, drowns, and as he sinks into the water he shouts, “Akh, Tamar!”

In Van today, the same story is widely recounted to explain the name of the island, though the local variant has produced structural substitutions: Tamar’s father is not a king but a Christian Armenian priest who lives on the island, and her lover is a Muslim Kurdish shepherd from a village just across from the island on the mainland, known in Kurdish as Pendekanis (Armenian: Badagants, Turkish: Dokuzağaç). While the Armenian variant of the story is along the lines of the classic Romeo-Juliet tale type of star-crossed lovers, the local version told in Van introduces the extra element of an interethnic, interreligious relationship. This variant fits within the

common theme of nostalgic stories regarding intercommunal relations between Kurdish and Armenian communities before the First World War (Neyzi 2013). It also echoes stories of romantic love between Kurdish boys and Armenian girls that are still recounted by *dengbêj* (traditional Kurdish singers) in the region. Such a match would be allowed according to Muslim religious precepts because a Muslim man can marry a Christian or Jewish woman without compromising his religion, while a Muslim woman cannot.

In Armenian, the name of the island is spelled and pronounced alternately as Aghtamar or Akhtamar. In Kurdish, it is spelled Axtamar and pronounced the same as in the Armenian. In modern Turkish the sound “kh” is replaced by “h,” and so the name is rendered as “Ahtamar.” Yet, since the restoration of the church by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2007, the name for the church was officially registered as “Akdamar,” which means “White Vein” in Turkish. This change from the older name to a new Turkified version is neither an accident nor an anomaly, but rather is an example of a long and systematic processes of changing names deemed to be “foreign” within the new Turkish nation after the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881 – 1938).

Over the past century, place names and village names, and even the names of cities that were originally in non-Turkish languages such as Armenian, Kurdish, Greek, and Assyrian were systematically changed to new Turkish names (Öktem 2008). Most of the place names that changed in the early years of the Republic had been used by locals for generations and were widely accepted and documented in both Ottoman and other maps. In his discussion of the politics of memory in relation to toponymical changes in Turkey, historian Umut Ungor writes the following:

Though geography and memory are two seemingly unrelated phenomena, in nationalist thought, they are closely linked. Nation-formation processes entail the nationalization of

territory, co-occurring with the changing of place-names. The attack on non-Turkish memory implied as a necessary accompaniment an attack on the memory of the space in which the non-Turkish peoples lived. To the Young Turks, non-Turkish place-names were constant obnoxious reminders of the region's diverse past (and present) and therefore needed to be tackled through large-scale Turkification of place-names. Enforcing new place-names would symbolically express Turkish nationalism in the face of the existing vista of multi-ethnic diversity. Both the Committee of Union and Progress and the Republican People's Party attempted to Turkify the political landscape of Turkey by forcibly changing place-names. (U. U. Ungor 2012, 240)

However, Ungor reports later after a detailed account of how this changing of place-names was carried out all across Anatolia, it was not as effective as its planners had hoped: "No matter how ambitious this campaign was, continuing deep into the 1980s, it did not produce the results the Kemalists had hoped for. The more the state pushed for Turkish names to be adopted, the more the tightly knit, rich local cultures persisted in using the 'old' or 'real' names, up to today" (U. U. Ungor 2012, 245).

This process of the renaming of Anatolia, as outlined by the Turkish-Armenian author Sevan Nişanyan, began slowly in the last years of the Ottoman Empire under the government of the Committee of Union and Progress in 1913-1916 after the Balkan Wars, when many Greek and Bulgarian place names were changed to Turkish names. In the early years of the Turkish Republic after its establishment in 1923, the names of a small number of provinces were changed following the idea of "Turkifying" the new nation. Nişanyan asserts that radical changes began in the second half of the 1950s when "Turkification" became an official state policy. In 1957, the "Commission for the Changing of Foreign Names," was established with the task of identifying non-Turkish names and suggesting replacements. In the four months following the military coup of 1960, the names of nearly 10,000 villages were changed. By 1965 one third of all place-names in Turkey had been changed, including approximately 12,000 villages and 4,000 settlements, along with thousands of streams, mountains, and other features of the landscape. As Nişanyan

demonstrates, southeastern Anatolia was the region most heavily affected by these name changes, where the majority of place-names that were changed originally had Kurdish and Armenian names (Nişanyan 2011, 13).

Nişanyan explains that in tandem with these name changes, official policies were enacted in order to encourage the forgetting of former place names. These policies included government censorship of maps and the banning of the use of old place-names. Nişanyan links the changing of place-names to broader historical and social processes of erasure, as he suggests that such prohibition coincided with a concerted effort to erase the traces of non-Turkish and non-Muslim communities in Turkish geography. By way of example, Nişanyan cites the systematic destruction of Greek and Armenian churches and graveyards (Nişanyan 2011, 14).

In southeastern Turkey, these efforts at “Turkifying” non-Turkish elements of the landscape, language and population have been particularly targeted at Kurdish and Armenian spaces, places, and names. According to Nişanyan, in Van, of a total of 731 place names, 552 were changed, totaling 76% individual locales. In Bitlis, the province bordering Van to the west, and which encompasses the western shore of Lake Van, 434 or 84% out of 519 place names were changed. In Hakkari, the province just south of Van, which was included in the province of Van for much of the Ottoman period, 144 out of 168 place names were changed, making a total of 86% (Nişanyan 2011, 51).

These changes in place names across Anatolia did not occur in isolation, but rather were part of the larger process of the Turkification of Anatolia, and the concerted attempt by the new republic to turn the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, multi-linguistic Ottoman Empire into a new homogenous nation that would be ethnically Turkish, Sunni Muslim, and Turkish-speaking (Akçam 2004; Aktar 2009). After the foundation of the republic in 1923, this process began with

the well-known reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, including, among others, the alphabet reform, which abolished the use of the Ottoman script based on Arabic and introduced a new Latin script; the language reform which attempted to purge the Turkish language of Arabic and Persian words and replace them with Turkic words or even new, invented, Turkish-sounding words; and the hat reform, which required men to wear Western-style hats instead of the Ottoman fez, which itself had been promulgated earlier as a mark of modernity against the earlier styles of Ottoman head-coverings deemed un-modern (Zurcher 2004). These reforms, enacted on the heels of the radical demographic changes that resulted from the Great War and its aftermath, paved the way for the transformation from the heterogeneous Ottoman Empire to the new Turkish nation-state.

Before the violence of the First World War, the subjects of the Ottoman Empire included people who spoke various dialects of Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian, Arabic, Assyrian, Greek, Laz, Georgian, Ladino, and Albanian, Bulgarian, and other languages. The majority of the population was Sunni Muslim, but large minorities of Christians, including Armenian Orthodox, Greek Orthodox, Chaldean, Assyrian, Nestorian, Protestant, and Catholic communities, in addition to Jewish, Yezidi, Alevi, and other religious communities coexisted across the empire. These communities lived side by side for centuries in a tense balance, with periods of relative calm punctuated by episodes of inter-communal and state-violence, often fueled by competition for land, resources, and control over territory. Despite tensions, the Ottoman Empire largely did not attempt to homogenize its population but rather administered its subjects through the *millet* system, which emphasized and institutionalized difference and hierarchy (Suny 2015). Through the *millet* system, the Ottoman government delegated the internal administration of religious minority communities to their designated heads—in the Armenian case, to the Armenian

patriarchate located in Istanbul, which was in charge of the internal affairs of Armenian communities, and most Armenian church, monastery, and school properties across the empire.

The centuries-old social fabric of the Ottoman space began to unravel during the Balkan wars of 1912-1913, when the Ottoman Empire lost a significant part of its European territory to the new predominantly Christian nations of Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Romania, and Montenegro, and as a result, tens of thousands of Muslim refugees streamed into the remaining Ottoman lands of Anatolia. Prior to World War I, eastern Anatolia was seen as a backward place compared to the Empire's European territories in the Balkans and Thrace. In the post-war period, however, out of necessity because of the loss of land, Anatolia was reimagined as the "Turkish homeland." During the First World War, the Genocide of Ottoman Armenians and Assyrians served to decimate the Christian population of the Eastern provinces of the Empire, and following the war, the Greek-Turkish population exchange of 1922 emptied the Western provinces of Greek Orthodox communities as the Muslim population of Greece arrived in their place (Mazower 2002; Hirschon 2003, 1998).

Thus, after the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, the fledging government, headed by its founder Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, set about the task of transforming what was left of the former Ottoman lands, with its majority-Muslim, but ethnically and linguistically heterogeneous population, into a modern, Turkish nation-state. This process played out differentially for various parts of the population. For non-Turkish Muslims, such as Kurds, Arabs, Albanians, and Laz, concerted efforts were made through the new public school system and mandatory military service to assimilate these "prospective Turks" into the nation (Altınay 2005; Yegen 2009). These processes of assimilation at times also took the form of large-scale episodes of state violence, especially in the Kurdish regions, such as the repression of the Şeyh

Sait rebellion of 1925 and Dersim massacres in 1938, as discussed in Chapter One (Beşikçi 1990; Van Bruinessen 1994). Non-Muslim citizens of the new Republic, including the few thousand Armenians, Greeks, and Jews who remained, mostly in large cities of Istanbul and a few other large western cities, were seen as “unassimilable” into the new Turkish nation, and as such were treated as foreigners, and their communities were given special legal statuses that served both to afford them a certain autonomy in inter-communal affairs as well as myriad restrictions along with heavy surveillance by the government (Ekmekcioglu 2016; Suciyan 2016).

Parallel with these processes of “Turkifying” the population was the process of assimilating the geography into the new nation through the changing of “foreign” place names into new, Turkish names that were deemed “appropriate,” as discussed above (Nişanyan 2011). This process is not unique to Turkey and similar attempts to bring the physical and symbolic landscape in line with an official onomastic ideology can be seen in many other places such as the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus and throughout the Balkans (Navaro-Yashin 2012). These strategies of using place names to claim, perform, and enact sovereignty over a certain territory are also not a relic of the past century, but continue to be relevant and called upon today, both in Turkey and elsewhere. Most recently, this has been visible in President Erdoğan’s emphasis on the importance of all aspects of life being *milli ve yerli*, that is “national and local,” and the renaming of many public spaces after the *15 Temmuz Şehitleri*, the martyrs of the July 15, referring to those citizens who died resisting the failed coup attempt to overthrow President Tayyip Erdoğan of July 15, 2016.

In the case of the Akhtamar church being rebranded as Akdamar, the name is slightly modified to fit in within a linguistically “pure” Turkish landscape. This change is not unique, but,

as described above, it is part of a broader state effort to recreate Anatolia as a Turkish national space. I argue that within this Turkified landscape, difference is tolerated only so long as it fits within a state-approved narrative of multiculturalism and does not threaten or contradict Turkish claims to sovereignty over territory and national history.

The history of the Akhtamar church demonstrates the ways in which one material space can be seen at times to threaten such claims and at other times can be appropriated to bolster these claims. For travelers to the island, especially Armenian visitors and Kurdish locals who know the island by its original name, Akhtamar, the “Akdamar” sign greeting them upon arrival is a first taste of the sometimes subtle, sometimes overt ways in which the Armenian past of the island and the site has been appropriated and rebranded. In this instance, the name is not erased or substituted wholesale for a Turkish name, only slightly modified, but this subtle change is not simply the innocuous result of difference in alphabets or spelling. Instead, it is part of a wider process of domesticating Turkey’s Armenian past, a process that involves both erasure and appropriation, assimilation and Turkification, and finally, presenting what is left, what is recognizably Armenian (such as a church), as a token representing the facade of Turkey as a tolerant, multicultural mosaic.

Back on the Akhtamar dock, I explain to our visitor the grammatical, political, and historical meanings inherent in the discrepancies between the difference in spelling that he pointed out on the road signs that read “Akdamar” instead of “Akhtamar.” Just as I finish my explanation, our small boat is ready to leave, and Murat, Evin, our guest, Azad, and I each pay the trip fee of ten Turkish Lira before we step onto the deck of the boat and then climb up the metal ladder onto the upper deck. Along with the large Kurdish family from nearby Yüksekova, we take seats on the wooden benches around the perimeter of the deck as the boat begins to pull

away from the dock and into the open water. As soon as we round the stone wall of the quay, the island comes into view, with the tawny stones of the church glistening in the sun. The view is breathtaking, and all hands reach into pockets and pull out cameras and cell phones to take photographs of the island, the church, and the majestic snow-capped Süphan Mountain rising up on the northern shore of the lake in the background. As we revel in the natural beauty of the blue lake ringed with snow-capped mountains on all sides, we cannot fail to see the ostentatious symbols of the Turkish state that have been placed at strategic points lest any visitor to Akhtamar Island forget who is sovereign over this territory. Turkish flags have been placed at the bow and stern of the boat. On the easternmost point of the island stands a towering flagpole with a massive Turkish flag that rises well above the height of the church (Figure 2.3). Looking back towards Gevaş and the dock from which we had just departed, we see the star and crescent of the Turkish flag that has been carved into the hillside and filled in with white chalk (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.3. View from the boat of Akhtamar Island. April 2, 2017.



Figure 2.4. View of the hillside inscription from Akhtamar Island. September 9, 2014.

Sovereignty as an abstract category is not always tangible, but in the case of Turkey's Kurdish regions, it is made legible, concrete, palpable, and symbolically obvious. The government exercises and demonstrates its power over the territory and the population by naming and labeling, and by inserting large, imposing logos and nationalist slogans into the ground. Especially in the case of white chalk inscriptions bearing nationalist symbols and slogans, which are common on hillsides across Turkey, but especially striking in the Kurdish regions, the sovereignty of the Turkish state is physically inscribed into the earth. Such inscriptions on the landscape displaying Turkish nationalist symbols or slogans are common in the Kurdish regions in Turkey, where state authorities (often the military) endeavor to provide the local population with visible reminders of the authority of the Turkish state and language.

Kerem Ökten, in his article on how the Turkish state has tried to assimilate both the territory and the history of the southeast of the country into the nation, explains this practice of inscribing the landscape with nationalist symbols as follows:

Throughout the republican era, hills have been inscribed with the crescent and star, the symbol of the Turkish nation, and slogans such as 'Happy, who calls himself a Turk' (*Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene*). During the Kurdish conflict (1980s), many hundreds of such

inscriptions and signs were installed all over the Southeast, especially in areas which were considered non-loyal to the state. (Ökten 2004, 569)

In Van, the most visible example of this type of nationalist inscription is on *Toprak Kale* (Earthen Castle), which is an Urartian fortress built on a naturally occurring massive rock formation. This site is situated on the northern edge of the city center and is now a military outpost. On the face of the rock that is visible for miles along one of the main thoroughfares, soldiers have inscribed the well-known Turkish nationalist slogan (mentioned by Ökten above), *Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene*, which translates to “Happy is the one who says I am a Turk.²” This phrase, coined by the founder of the republic, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881 – 1938), was recited by all schoolchildren across Turkey for decades (Yıldız 2001). It is one of the more ubiquitous slogans associated with Kemalism, Atatürk’s nationalist and homogenizing ideology that glorified the Turkish nation and largely denies the existence, history, and rights of ethnic minorities. This policy also promoted a “one nation, one language” policy, and as such attempted to mandate the use of Turkish while censoring the use of other languages. One well-known implementation of this ideology was the campaign known as “*Vatandaş Türkçe Konuş!*” (Citizen, Speak Turkish!), which was started by a group of law students in 1928 and in some areas took on the legal aspect of fining individuals for speaking languages other than Turkish in public (Aslan 2007; Kieser 2013; Toktas 2005; Suny et al. 2011).

This ongoing policy of attempting to assimilate a multi-ethnic, multi-lingual population into a Turkish-speaking unitary nation is at the root of the ongoing conflict with Turkey’s Kurdish minority, who have fought for decades for cultural, language, and political rights (Yegen

² Ökten (2004) translates *Ne Mutlu Türküm Diyene* as “Happy, who calls himself a Turk.” However, because in Turkish grammar verbs and pronouns are not gendered, the Turkish original is gender-neutral and does not imply that the subject is male. Thus, I translate the slogan as “Happy is the one who says I am a Turk.”

2009). Thus, in a Kurdish-majority city such as Van, the nationalist slogan, “Happy is the one who says I am a Turk,” inscribed on the prominent mountain of *Toprak Kale*, coupled with a large Turkish flag visible throughout the city, is a manifest sign of the continued attempts to Turkify and assimilate those minorities who do not fit properly within the Turkish-speaking, Sunni-Muslim nation.

After a twenty-minute ride, our boat finally reaches the island, where we disembark and then climb up the stone path that leads from the dock up to the small ticket kiosk. Next to the kiosk is a poster that reads, “*Tarihe yolculuk başladı!*” (The journey into history has begun!) and advertises the *Müze Kart*, or Museum Card, a card which grants access to over 300 museums across Turkey that are under the administration of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This poster highlights one of the main points of contention that arose during the restoration of the church — that the church itself and the property was not returned to the Armenian patriarchate, which was its proprietor before 1915, but instead, it remained the legal domain of the central government, revamped into a tourist site instead of a religious one. Parallel to this issue of ownership is the question of the legal status of the building. In 1915, it was an official church under the legal jurisdiction of the Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul. In 2007, the site was reopened not as a church, but instead it was designated as a museum under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, and the property deed remained in the hands of the state treasury. Here, there is a double confiscation at play. First, the property and building of the church were confiscated by the government, and secondly, it was reconfigured as a museum, a de-sacralized tourist destination.

A rich literature on heritage and tourism has elaborated the interplay between international heritage regimes, government policies, and the heritage sites themselves (Bendix,

Eggert, and Peselmann 2012). Other literature has explored the moments of encounter and interaction between peoples, places, and ways of life produced by heritage tourism (L. Smith, Waterton, and Watson 2012). Some scholars have scrutinized the unintended consequences of tourism on host societies (V. L. Smith 1989), while others argued for the potential for international heritage regimes such as UNESCO to promote peace and understanding on a global scale (Giovine 2008). Studies on tourism and consumerism have demonstrated how through processes of display, museums produce and market heritage as a consumable good (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998), and how tourism can become driven by consumption of curated spaces and experiences, what some have called the Disneyization or Disneyfication of culture (Bryman 2004). Other scholarship has explored the experience of tourism, the “tourist gaze,” (Burns, Palmer, and Lester 2010) and religiously motivated tourism (Timothy and Olsen 2006). Finally, scholarship on tourism to sites representing violent histories and sites of “dark tourism” explores how memory of traumatic history is performed and narrated through memorial sites (Sather-Wagstaff 2016; White 2004). For instance, Erica Lehrer’s study of heritage tourism in post-Holocaust Poland explores how the Jewish past is remembered and experienced by Jewish tourists and Polish locals, and how it is contested, represented, and commodified (Lehrer 2013). In Turkey, scholarship on the politics of heritage has shown how, for instance, the cultural heritage of Istanbul has been contested by different groups, each ascribing its own meanings to history as they debated which pasts should be preserved and for whom (Bartu 2001).

Like the contested heritage landscape of Istanbul, Akhtamar is a multivalent site with conflicting meanings and significance for the myriad groups that claim and visit it. For Armenian tourists, it represents not only a jewel of medieval Armenian architecture but also a monument to a destroyed civilization. Yet unlike the concentration camps visited by the tourists described by

Lehrer, Akhtamar is not a memorial site, as it does not overtly commemorate a tragic event (Lehrer 2013). On the contrary, that violent history is silenced, erased, and disassociated from the island, as the destruction of the Armenian community is neither memorialized nor recalled, and the church is employed as a symbol of the state's tolerance. It has been curated as a place in which tourists can experience and consume the multicultural mosaic of Turkey in a depoliticized, sanitized form, without being reminded of the unpleasant sides of the site, of "heritage that hurts" (Sather-Wagstaff 2016).

From the \$1.5 million restoration between 2005 and 2006 to its opening as a museum in 2007, and then finally to its first church service in 2010, critics from Armenia and the Armenian diaspora in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere leveled myriad complaints against the government of Turkey regarding the project. They claimed that the renovation of the church was simply a political show, that the government was using the restoration to display to the European Union, which Turkey hoped to join, that Turkey was a tolerant, democratic society that celebrated difference and championed minority rights (Sassounian 2010). Critics who decried the restoration as an empty gesture pointed out that at the end of the two year renovation process, the church had been repaired, paths had been laid, amenities had been constructed on the island, and a massive flag installed, yet the cross that is visible in old photographs at the top of the church was missing. As part of the renovation, a newly commissioned painting of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus was placed on the altar inside the church in keeping with the convention in Armenian Orthodox churches, yet the authorities postponed installing the cross atop the dome of the church for the first few years after the renovation, which incited considerable criticism from Armenian communities in Turkey and abroad (Cheterian 2015).

In 2010, the central government in Turkey finally gave permission to the Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul to hold the first religious service in the Church of Akhtamar since the violence of the First World War emptied the church. This development came at the height of a thawing of political tensions between Turkey and Armenia and amidst the possibility of normalization of relations between the two countries with the signing of the protocols in 2009 that outlined a path to establish diplomatic relations and open the border. This process eventually stalled when the protocols were not ratified and both countries backed away from the negotiations, but at the time, the Akhtamar church service was seen as a unique symbolic gesture within this political climate (De Waal 2015).

In the months leading up to the first service on September 19, 2010, widespread publicity and excitement in the international media led the Van municipality to worry that the local hotels would not suffice to accommodate the thousands of visitors that they expected to arrive for the historic service. In response to this concern, a local newspaper-owner, himself Kurdish and from Van, launched a campaign to encourage locals to open their homes to the anticipated Armenian visitors. Aziz Aykaç, who has since passed away, began a campaign with the slogan “*Van’a Gelecek Ermenilere Evimizi Açıyoruz,*” meaning “We open our homes to the Armenians coming to Van.” This idea was approved by the governor of Van, Münir Karaloğlu, who stated that “This campaign shows that the people of Van have forgotten about some things that happened in the past and in fact are taking a new step to build the future.” Aykaç expressed his feelings thus, “With this campaign, we plan to come together once again with our old neighbors and to erase any tension between us. We want to put the things that happened in the past behind us. As the people of Van, we want to show the people of the world what friendship, hospitality, and

humanity is. Armenians can come comfortably to our city. Our homes, our businesses are open to them. We are ready to embrace them, they have nothing to worry about” (Haber Turk 2010).

Aykaç’s campaign was met with enthusiasm from the public in Van, and over four thousand individuals applied to be considered as local hosts for the Armenian visitors. However, just before the service was to take place, the authorities in Turkey announced that the cross, which had been commissioned to be placed atop the church and weighed 200 kilograms, was too heavy for the fragile roof and could not be installed (Figure 2.5). This created an uproar in both Armenia and the diaspora, and many groups who had planned to attend the ceremony decided to boycott the event. The central church in Armenia had planned to send two bishops from Yerevan to attend the service but canceled its decision. In the end, approximately one thousand people, instead of the anticipated five thousand, attended the September 19 service, which was nonetheless hailed as a historic opening to the Armenian past in Turkey’s history since 1915, despite the many criticisms that it was simply a publicity stunt (Bektas 2010). Finally, on September 30, 2010, ten days after the first church service, the authorities gave permission and the cross was installed on the dome of the church (News.am 2011) (Figure 2.6).



Figure 2.5. Akhtamar church before the cross was installed. July 26, 2010.



Figure 2.6. Akhtamar church after the cross was installed. July 9, 2011.

I attended the second service in early September 2011, along with a group of friends from Istanbul who were making a documentary about the event. They had conceived of the idea after the first ceremony the year before and decided to shoot a film documenting the journey of an Armenian family from Istanbul with roots in Van and who traveled to Van for the ceremony and stayed with a Kurdish family along the lines of Aykaç's prior campaign. They interviewed multiple families, looking for one to be the subject of their film, but each time they were met with the response that the family was interested in attending the service, but they would prefer to stay in a hotel rather than in a local home. Though I am not from Istanbul, I do have family roots in Van on the side of my maternal grandmother, Vanouhi Kazanjian, and thus these friends requested that I be the subject of their film, so that they could document the meeting of peoples long since torn apart by the violence of 1915 at the second historic service at Akhtamar. I traveled with these filmmakers to Van and we stayed with a local Kurdish family with whom they had made contact in advance. Over the course of a few days, we learned about each other's families, ate our shared foods together, and attended the church service in a spirit of hopeful

wonder at what seemed to be a historic breaking of the taboo of speaking of our common past after a century of silence. Though the filmmakers never finished producing the film that they had originally planned, the raw footage remains a document of the second church service at Akhtamar and the effort of both local Kurds and diasporan Armenians to come together and imagine a more peaceful future together.

After the service, I contributed an article to a magazine, *Van Times*, which Aziz Aykaç, the local Kurdish newspaper owner printed that year as a special issue in Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian, and English, on the occasion of this historic event. The article was titled “Ayranası, Tanabour,” which are the Turkish and Armenian names, respectively, of a yogurt and barley soup made today in Van as well as among Van Armenians in the diaspora. In this article, I described my first impressions of the church, and my frustration with the lack of acknowledgment of the region’s violent history on the island.

On Akhtamar [...], there is no recognition of what that space represents, of the fact that those who built and worshipped in that church are no longer there. [...] When we visited Akhtamar, [our local guide] carefully explained each of the carvings on the exterior of the church and the frescoes inside. Before long our small group began to grow, as other visitors to the island, hungry for information, began listening to [his] explanations. At the end of his tour of the church the newcomers thanked him profusely, explaining that they were very curious about the church and its history, but that there were no guides or information available on the island. Indeed, it was the lack of information and the lack of recognition on Akhtamar Island that troubled me. When other visitors saw me attempting to read some inscriptions inside the church, they gathered around to hear. On the boat back to shore a Turkish army officer and his family who were visiting from a nearby town asked us where they could find more information about the history of the church and the Armenians of Van. (Suni 2012)

In this initial visit to the church, I was struck by the way in which the violent history of the region was glossed over and ignored, and local visitors to the island could only enjoy the scenery, but were provided with no information and were left with many questions about the history and the significance of the site.

I attended the church service a second time in 2014, for the fifth consecutive annual ceremony. This time, the event took place in a radically different political environment, as it was in the middle of the two-year cease-fire between the Turkish army and the PKK, the militant Kurdistan Workers' Party that has been fighting a guerrilla war in southeastern Turkey for the past three decades. The atmosphere was again marked by a hopeful euphoria, as this peace process had brought a new openness to the region. This year, in this hopeful spirit of healing past wounds and building a democratic, open, and peaceful future, a concert was organized on the island after the church service. The concert featured two women as the main performers - one *dengbêj*, or traditional Kurdish singer, and one *ashough*, or traditional Armenian troubadour, along with their all-female musical group.

This event was part of a project entitled *Kadın Aşık ve Dengbejler* (Women *ashough* and *dengbêj*), organized by Anadolu Kultur, a civil society organization based in Istanbul, under their program of Culture and Art Dialogue with Armenia and funded by the European Union under the Armenia-Turkey Normalization Process Support Program. The organizers from Anadolu Kultur explained the significance of this project thus: “The traditions of *dengbêj* and *ashough*, kept alive today in both Armenia and Turkey, can be explained as a type of folk literature that carry the quality of oral history. These traditions play a large role in bringing to light the common stories that are silenced and ignored by official history” (Anadolu Kultur). Indeed, the 2014 ceremony was an exemplary instance of an attempt to bring to light “the common stories that are silenced by official history” between two communities that have long been kept apart by a closed border. Here a Kurdish and an Armenian woman performed together their common folk songs - melodies that are shared across Armenia and Kurdistan - and sang them in both languages. The concert took place after the ceremonial church service in which regally robed priests representing the

Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul sang the Holy Mass inside the church, accompanied by hundreds of attendees from Turkey as well as from abroad. The Holy Mass comprised the standard Divine Liturgy performed by the Armenian Apostolic Church, known in Armenian as the *Badarak*. The whole service lasts approximately two-and-a-half hours.

During the 2014 mass at Akhtamar the feeling in the air was one of hope and possibility, as the peoples who had lived together in that region for centuries, and who were torn apart by violence and war and then further separated by closed borders over the past century, were coming together and singing their shared songs. In the years since 2014, those of us who attended that mass have only just realized what an extraordinary event we witnessed. At the time, we expected to attend mass in the following year and beyond. Little did we know that in July 2015, the peace process would come to an abrupt end and the fighting in southeastern Turkey would take on new, deadly proportions. Beginning in July 2015, the fighting between the PKK and the Turkish army recommenced and resulted in the destruction of a dozen cities in the Kurdish region of Turkey, hundreds of lost lives, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands (Amnesty International 2018). The failed coup of July 15, 2016, further heightened the political tension in the country, resulting in an ongoing State of Emergency, the suspension of due process of the law, and the firing and imprisonment of tens of thousands (Hansen 2017).

Thus, citing security concerns, the authorities withheld permission for the yearly service at the church of Akhtamar to be held in 2015, 2016, and 2017. In October 2017, Osman Kavala, a well-known Istanbul-based philanthropist and the founder of Anadolu Kultur, was arrested and imprisoned on charges of “attempting to abolish the constitutional order” and “attempting to remove the government of the Turkish Republic” (Hürriyet Daily News 2017). Kavala’s arrest,

along with thousands of other arrests since the attempted-coup, demonstrates just what a fragile peace had been enjoyed, one I had taken for granted during the service on the island in 2014.

History of Akhtamar

The restored church of Akhtamar, despite the absence of annual services, still stands as a symbol of a lost past and a possible future. Even as a museum and not a church, to some it is a monumental testament to the Armenian history of Van and a reminder of the silenced histories of the region in which architectural remains replaces a living people. At the same time, state officials present the restoration of the church as a demonstration of their goodwill and generous treatment towards minorities. But what stories does the official narrative of multicultural tolerance occlude? On our visit to Akhtamar Island with Murat and Evin, we see that the island itself contains very little information for visitors. Apart from arrows on the main path directing visitors to “Church” and “Monastery,” along with “WC,” “Cafe,” and “Beach,” there are no informational plaques detailing the history of the church or the island.

What histories does this lack of information conceal? Perhaps the lack of expected tourist accoutrements – texts, storyboards, pamphlets, catalogs, trained knowledgeable guides – points to Turkey’s underdeveloped tourism infrastructure throughout the country, especially outside Istanbul. When thinking comparatively, for instance, in relation to the Seljuk cemetery described earlier in this chapter, the lack of signage is not unusual, as heritage sights in the Anatolian hinterland are often left unmarked and underdeveloped. However, I would suggest that the lack of signage is not only due to a lack of infrastructure or resources. For the government of Turkey, Akhtamar represents a dilemma, an inconsistency, a crack in their historical narrative. On the one hand, it is a manifest representation of the centuries of Armenian history of the region, which is a

history that is denied in official forums (Dixon 2010a; Göçek 2015; Hovannisian 1998). On the other hand, it is a useful symbol to be displayed as a token of Turkey's tolerance of its multicultural history and population. As such, Akhtamar is recast as an architectural site without a history, or with its history conveniently missing to avoid any mention of state violence or destruction.

For instance, in 2015, after an application by the Permanent Delegation of Turkey to UNESCO, Akhtamar Church was included on the UNESCO Tentative List of World Heritage (Aravot 2018; UNESCO). On the UNESCO website, for the page concerning the church, there is a lengthy text outlining the founding of the church as well as its art and architecture. However, regarding its recent history, the information provided is as follows: “The church was abandoned during World War I. In 2005-2006 the Turkish government carried out a rehabilitation project to preserve the historical identity of the Akdamar Church. In 2007, the church was opened to visitors as a monument museum. In 2010, the government decided to open the church for religious ceremonies once a year” (UNESCO). Here the church is presented as being “abandoned” rather than confiscated, and no mention is made of the fate of the Armenian community that was massacred and deported. The government is represented as magnanimously carrying out a restoration to preserve the church, with no mention of its culpability in the church's partial destruction (which I outline below). Finally, the church is listed under its Turkified name, Akdamar, rather than any variant of its Armenian name, whether Akhtamar or Aghtamar (as discussed above). In this way, the Turkish government attempts to present itself to the international community, through UNESCO, as a benevolent, generous, tolerant state, celebrating the cultural heritage of its minority communities. However, on the ground in Van, within the territorial boundaries of Turkey, it is massive Turkish flags that greet the visitor rather

than information regarding the Armenian community that used to worship in that space before its destruction. The government is willing to exploit the Armenian cultural heritage for its own benefit but stops short of acknowledging the history on the ground, let alone taking any steps to restore ownership of the property or use rights of the building to the Armenian community.

In the absence of signs and pamphlets, my fellow visitors and I are left to wonder what occurred on this island over the past centuries. As we stood outside the church, looking up at its carved façade against the blue sky, Evin contemplated the complicated, yet somehow invisible history of the island, saying, “These stones, these mountains, have witnessed everything. If these stones could speak, what stories would they tell?” Here Evin, a Kurdish local from Gevaş, is pointing to alternate forms of memory, a memory inscribed in place, on the landscape. Growing up in Gevaş, she heard stories from her grandparents of their good relationship with their Armenian neighbors and of the eventual war that destroyed that coexistence. Now, she wonders aloud what unspoken histories the mountains and stones might have seen (Figures 2.7, 2.8).



Figure 2.7. “The island of Akhtamar/Akdamar and the monastery. Source: (Bachmann 1913).” Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From < <http://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van.html>>



Figure 2.8. Akhtamar Island with Gevaş in the background. April 2, 2017.

The history of Akhtamar in the century before the restoration is one fraught with war and violence, but for centuries before the bloody events at the turn of the twentieth century, Akhtamar was an active and important spiritual center of the Armenian community, with significance well beyond the Van region. As an architectural specimen, the Akhtamar church is one of the most famous and most studied of Armenian medieval architectural sites. As described by Stepan Mnatsakanian, “Aghtamar represents the epitome of Armenian architecture and remains one of only a few extant Armenian monuments in which architectural creativity and artistic talent are expertly interwoven” (Mnatsakanian 2010, 9). Jean Michel Thierry, in his exhaustive study on Armenian art, explains that the church was built between the years 915 and 921 by the Armenian architect Manuel as part of a palace complex for the Armenian king of the kingdom of Vaspurakan, Gagik Ardzruni, who was a vassal under the Abbasid Caliphate (Thierry 1989, 476). Thierry cites the tenth-century chronicler, Thomas Ardzruni, as he describes the foundation and building of a fortified city with a harbor on the island. Though the palace and

other buildings disappeared, the church survived and was eventually turned into a monastery, which served as the seat of the Patriarchate of Akhtamar from 1113 to 1895 (Thierry 1989, 476).

The church is built of light-brown volcanic tufa stone, and the façade is richly decorated with relief carvings and ornamentation in parallel bands, featuring animals, plants, angels, hunting scenes, and scenes from the bible. The inside of the church is also decorated with colorful frescoes depicting the life of Christ. This church has long been a source of fascination for art historians, such as Sirarpie Der Nersessian, who, in her 1965 monograph on Akhtamar, wrote the following:

We do not know when the palace of Gagik and the other secular buildings were destroyed; however the church in which he took such pride stands to this day, perpetuating the memory of his name, but abandoned and silent, ever since the entire Armenian population was driven from this region. The walls no longer echo the chants of religious services which were celebrated there for almost a thousand years, yet in some intangible way the island still retains a feeling of its past glories and impressed those who visited it in recent years. (Nersessian 1965, 6)

The Organization of Land and Culture (*L'Organisation Terre et Culture*), based in France and devoted to the preservation of Armenian built heritage, published a website in 2015 under the title "Collectif 2015," which documents one hundred examples of significant Armenian churches and monasteries that were confiscated by the Turkish government after the Genocide and demands the restitution of these monuments. In the description of Akhtamar, the website describes the recent history of the monument thus:

At the beginning of the 20th century, the jurisdiction of the catholicosate of Aght'amar covered two large dioceses south of Lake Van: Aght'amar and Khizan, which in 1910 possessed a total of 272 churches in 194 sites. Forty monasteries were under the jurisdiction of the see of Aght'amar. Plundered in 1915, the monastery of the Holy Cross at Aght'amar was confiscated after the Great War and left empty. Sometime around 1950, the State undertook its demolition. This exceptional monument of art and architecture was saved in 1951 thanks to the intervention of the writer and journalist Yaşar Kemal. (Collectif 2015)

Yaşar Kemal, a well-known Kurdish author and journalist from Turkey, recounted the story of how he helped to save the church of Akhtamar from destruction in a book of interviews published in 2007 (Kemal 2017). Kemal describes that he was just beginning his career as a young journalist in 1951 when he was traveling across the Van Lake on a ship. He happened to meet a military doctor on the ship, who, upon learning that he was a journalist, told him “Look at this fortune, it’s good that I met you. Here on Akdamar Island there is a church left from the Armenians. It is an extraordinary monument. Now they are destroying it. Tomorrow I will take you there. This church is a monument of these lands, whether or not it was built by Armenians. It is the property of humankind, regardless of who built it. Will you help me and our country?” (Agos 2015). Kemal was nervous, thinking he might be fired from his new job for getting involved in such activism, but together, with the doctor, they went to Akhtamar. They saw that workers on the island had all but torn down the small chapel next to the church and that the main church would be next. The doctor ordered them to stop the destruction until he returned, and when they arrived back in Van, they called the newspaper where Kemal was working, *Cumhuriyet*, a widely-read Istanbul-based newspaper. The editor of the newspaper was sympathetic to their cause and called the Minister of Education, who wrote to the Governor of Van, who then issued an order to stop the destruction. And thus the church of Akhtamar was saved on June 25, 1951.

Because of Yaşar Kemal’s fortuitous encounter and effort to save the Akhtamar church, the site survived. Thus, thanks in large part to Yaşar Kemal, on my visit to the island with Murat and Evin, we are able to visit the medieval monument that would have otherwise been destroyed a half-century ago. After contemplating the carved exterior of the church, we approach the entrance and duck through the low door, finding ourselves in the dark, cool narthex built of large

brown stones. To the right of the door is a dried-up well, where visitors can often be seen making wishes as they toss a coin into its depths. Opposite the well, propped against a column is a white marble tablet, its bright smooth surface in stark contrast with the surrounding rough-hewn, earth-colored stones. The tablet displays an Armenian inscription in stately lettering and is cracked through the middle. Above the tablet, a frame is hung on the column that contains a faded piece of paper with a Turkish translation of the tablet, which details a restoration carried out during the rule of Abdul Hamid II. This is the only text to be found in the church, and the other visitors crowd around to read it and see if it provides any information regarding the significance of the site. We climb the stairs built of wide stone slabs at the back of the narthex and emerge into the vaulted sanctuary of the Church of the Holy Cross. We crane our necks to see the tenth-century frescoes of the twelve apostles, the angles, and Lazarus rising from the dead.

Back outside in the sunshine, we follow the paths through the island, stopping to examine the *khatchkars*, or carved cross-stones, that are displayed haphazardly, some standing upright, and some lying flat. Then we wander into the untended and overgrown area beyond the stone-paved paths. We pick our way between bushes and the remains of ancient walls and find ourselves in what was part of the monastery cemetery. Toppled and broken gravestones litter the ground. Murat laments that it is a shame that these gravestones are lying in the dirt and that unknowing visitors will step on them as they pass by, unaware that they are disrespecting the dead. Here Murat is expressing a common opposition towards respecting any dead, not only Armenian dead. Still, however, by expressing empathy towards the Armenian dead of Akhtamar Island, he is further performing the progressive stance that Armenian dead, along with their monuments and symbols, deserve respect based on a shared humanity, a stance that rejects older notions that Armenians were less-deserving because they were not Muslim. Such intolerant

notions that Armenians and Christians are somehow lesser-than, and that their sacred sites do not require the careful treatment that of Muslim sites would, is partially what allows treasure hunters to continue to dig in Armenian cemeteries, the state to destroy and expropriate churches, and villagers to use the stones from monasteries in building their sheepfolds.

Finally, we hear the whistle of the last boat of the day ready to depart and we hurry back to the dock. As we travel over the water back to Gevaş, we look back at the sun setting behind Akhtamar and we muse about what life might have been like one hundred years ago, when Akhtamar was still an active monastery, Gevaş was full of Armenian villages, and pilgrims visited the island by boat, just as we had done.

Memory of Destruction

The first time that I met Murat and Evin, Akhtamar was immediately the center of conversation. Azad and Evin had been classmates over a decade earlier in a university in western Turkey but had fallen out of touch when they moved to different cities. Upon discovering that they were both in Van, they reconnected, and Evin invited us to her home for breakfast. At that first meeting at their house, over a breakfast of *börek* and local cheese and honey, Evin and Azad reminisced about their student days together, and then after the requisite pleasantries had been exchanged, they asked me, “What are you doing here in Van?” Before I could answer, Azad said, “Actually, Anoush is Armenian, her family is originally from Van.” This immediately piqued their interest, and both began talking at once. Murat said, “Our village was an Armenian village.” Evin added, “Most of the villages here were Armenian villages.” Murat continued, “In fact, of the 33 villages in Gevaş only the town center and two villages were Muslim, the others were all Armenian.”

Murat then began telling us a story about his now eighty-five-year-old father. He explained that around the year 1950, his father was sent with five other men by the regional governor to the island of Akhtamar with the task of tearing down the church. They climbed up to the dome of the church and for five hours they tried to break the stones with hammers. But try as they might, all they could manage was to chip off one stone. It was hot and sunny and they were exhausted, but they were afraid of their commander, so they continued for hours until finally they ran out of water and decided that it was a futile task. They did not want to return to the mainland empty-handed, so they collected some of the stones lying around the island, most likely from the ruins of the palace and the monastery, and transported them to Gevaş in their small boat. At the shore, they loaded them into an oxcart and took them to the regional governor, to whom they explained that this was all that they could manage that day. The governor decided that this was enough for the moment and relieved them of their task. Murat explained, “My father was against the destruction of the church, but not for the same reasons as we are now. He was not thinking, ‘this is a church, we should protect it. It is a historical site and a holy place.’ No, he was just thinking, ‘what if a shepherd comes, or there is a storm and some fishermen or travelers on a boat need to take shelter. They can come here and spend the night. Why destroy it?’” This approach is representative of the local attitude towards Armenian sacred sites. In contrast to the government’s alternating policies of destruction and restoration, locals are more likely to evaluate Armenian churches and other sites in terms of everyday use value, and to repurpose them for their own means.

One week after our initial meeting, Azad and I returned to Gevaş to see Evin and Murat again and to meet Murat’s father. While driving through the small town of Gevaş, just at the edge of the town center, Murat pointed out a small, two-story building, with the sign *Adliye*

(Courthouse) over the door. Its light reddish-pink paint was cracked and peeling. It looked as if it had been built half a century ago and had not seen much care since then. Murat explained, “This is the courthouse building, built with the stones from the destroyed churches. They painted over it so you can’t tell. Behind it was an Armenian graveyard and they built military housing on top of it.” As we drove on, we could see a run-down apartment building behind the courthouse, and Murat cautioned me not to take any photos of these buildings because photographing any government or military installations could raise undue suspicion and cause us to be stopped and questioned. Here again, Murat, a Kurdish local, through his narration, is enlivening the invisible destruction of the Armenian material heritage of the region. To the naked eye, the courthouse and the apartment building behind it look like innocuous structures, but Murat’s memories uncover the unseen palimpsests, the layers of destruction, violence, and erasure congealed in those spaces.

We drove on through narrow, winding, tree-lined roads until we reached a house nestled in a sizeable garden with tall walnut and apricot trees leaning over the fence and into the street. This was the house where Murat grew up with his 11 siblings. The one-story house had a flat roof and was built of mud-brick and concrete blocks on top of a stone foundation. We entered the shady garden and walked around the back of the house, past the *tandır* oven (a clay oven dug into the ground) and the small outdoor fire pit where Murat’s mother still cooks meals even though her children had bought her a gas-stove. We approached the porch of the house where Murat’s father was sitting on a daybed (*sedir*) and supported by pillows. He was an elegant, clean-shaven and portly elderly gentleman, well dressed in slacks and a striped button-up shirt, with a small knitted cap over his silver hair. As we arrived, he greeted us graciously and formally in Turkish. Then Murat’s mother, a petite woman wearing a white scarf, long sleeved-shirt, and

şalvar pulled up over her belly, emerged from the house. She kissed me warmly and said enthusiastically “*Xoş geldin! Nasılsın? İyisin?*” (“Welcome! How are you? Good?” in Turkish, but said with Kurdish-inflected pronunciation and grammar), and without waiting for my response, she laughed heartily and walked back inside. Murat explained, “That is all the Turkish that she knows, she speaks only Kurdish.”

Murat motioned for me to sit in the plastic chair next to his father. Azad sat across from me, while Murat sat on the low-wall of the cement porch. A few moments later his mother emerged again and forcefully whacked both Azad and me with a pillow, motioned for us to stand up, and put a pillow on the seat of our chairs before disappearing back inside. Murat’s father opened the conversation by telling us that he has twelve children, six boys, and six girls. But, he grumbled, they have all moved away and he and his wife now live all alone: “All of these boys and not one of them stayed with us!” Azad attempted to console him, “At least they live nearby and come to visit you!” The father protested, “What use are they when they are not by your side?”

Murat introduced me, explaining that I was Armenian and wanted to hear about what was left from Armenians in the area. His father immediately jumped into a narrative, recounting both his own experience and what he had heard from his elders, with events from his own life and others that took place before he was born intertwined into the same continuous tale. Murat’s father’s account represents what Marianne Hirsch terms “postmemory:”

Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (Hirsch 2008, 106)

Hirsch's concept of "postmemory," originally developed in relation to the descendants of Holocaust survivors, has also been applied in studies of the descendants of survivors of the Armenian Genocide (Firat et al. 2017). Through the narratives of Murat and his father, we can see a similar process at work, here, not from the descendants of Genocide survivors, but among the descendants of those communities who live on the land that was the scene of Genocide and where erasure and destruction of that history continue.

In the following narrative, Murat's father shares his memory and postmemory of the Armenian heritage of Gevaş, as he described how "the government" (*devlet*), through the figure of the regional governor, gave the order to villagers to destroy their local churches, and how he had participated in the failed trip to tear down Akhtamar. Although he was born after the war and never himself saw the Armenians, he speaks as if he had seen with his own eyes the church festival that in Ottoman times used to be a meeting point for Armenians all over the region.

Above our neighborhood, there was a very big church. The Armenians from this region would all come there for a festival, from Erciş, from Muradiye. They would bring vegetables and sell them. It went on for a week. They called it *şaredêr*. Then the government gives the order and they destroy that as well. They said, "Get rid of their monuments." Akhtamar remained. I was already grown at that point. We had a governor named Mr. Ismet. He said, "Go to Akhtamar, tear it down and bring the stones, we are going to build a mosque." We went with five or six workers, they climbed up to the top and tried and tried and they could only break off a tiny piece. It was impossible. We ran out of water, so we gave up and we came back to the governor and said, "It didn't work, we couldn't do it. We couldn't even chip off a tiny piece." [...] The government destroyed these churches. They wanted to get rid of anything left from the Armenians. I saw all of the churches, but I didn't see the Armenians, they were already gone. They [the government] destroyed all of the churches in one or two years. The order came, they said, "Don't leave a single one, they want them back." I guess they [Armenians] were making claims that these were their property, saying, 'We can prove it, we have churches there.' So they [the government] said, "Destroy the traces so that there is nothing to see." [...] At that time they order the villagers to go and tear down the churches within a week. The governor named Ismet gives the order. Then two years later a new order comes to stop destroying the churches. [...] [In Narek] the governor sends the order to the village headman. The government doesn't have the power to tear down everything, so they ask the villagers to do it. Then after that, they used the stones to build their houses. They built a mosque in the place where the church was, but they didn't use the church stones for that.

Just as I was about to ask him more about what happened to the stones of the churches, his wife came out to rouse him to get ready to go to a relative's wedding in the neighborhood, saying, "Come on, get up! They are all going to wonder where you are! You are the family elder!" As he rose to go and dress for the wedding, he mentioned that he had a stone in his garden from a church and instructed us to go look at it. We went down into the garden that was full of tall, old trees. There were pear, apricot, walnut, and mulberry trees. The apricots were only the size of marbles, but very sweet. Murat pulled out a pocketknife that Azad had gifted him on our previous visit and began peeling green walnuts for us to eat. Then he motioned us to follow him over to the base of one of the tall apricot trees. There on the ground lay a large, rectangular stone block, approximately two feet in length by one foot in height and width. Murat lifted it onto its short end so that it was standing upright. On the long side, we could see three simple crosses that had been carved into the stone. Murat explained that locals collected stones like these when they were destroying the churches and used them in building their houses. He said that the foundation of his father's house was also built using stones from the churches, but they are not visible because his father had plastered over them.

This stone lying in the garden highlights the difference in the memories voiced by Murat and his father. The father points us to the stone that he had salvaged and placed in his garden, but the son remembers what the father does not mention, that the foundation of their very own house is built using the stones taken from Armenian churches. This divergence in memories between Murat and his father echoes the more general difference in generational memory amongst the Kurdish inhabitants in Van. The younger generations—especially those sympathetic with the leftist Kurdish movement that has overtly recognized the Genocide and called for the government to do the same (as discussed in Chapter Three)—is more willing to talk openly about

the role of the Kurdish community in the expropriation and destruction of the Armenian community. The older generation, on the other hand, who may themselves have been complicit in or benefited more directly from the spoliation of Armenian property and goods, often take a more cautious approach when discussing the violent history of the region.

The Monastery of Narek

As Murat's father described in the above account, Akhtamar was lucky because it survived the wave of destruction around the year 1950 in Gevaş. Some other monasteries in remote mountainous areas around Gevaş also survived to some degree, but all of the monasteries and churches in the center of Gevaş and the surrounding villages were torn down. The largest and most famous of these was the monastery of Narek (also Nareg) or Narekavank in Armenian. It was founded between the years 925 and 940, in the same period as Akhtamar and also during the reign of the Armenian king Gagik Ardzruni of the kingdom of Vaspurakan. It was built in the already existing village of Narek and took on the same name. Under the skilled Abbot Anania of Narek (Anania Naregatsi, d. 980) the monastery established a school that produced many influential scholars, poets, musicians, and manuscript copiers. The most famous of these was Gregory of Narek (Krikor Naregatsi, 940-1003), a mystical poet who was long considered a saint in the Armenian Church and was canonized as a Doctor of the Church by Pope Francis on April 12, 2015 (The Vatican 2015).

The Collective 2015 project describes the significance of this figure and the site of the monastery as follows:

This monastery has remained intimately associated with the exceptional personality of Saint Gregory of Nareg, whose conduct, as well as his sermons, meditations and prayers, won him veneration during his lifetime. The collection of his prayers, or Book of Lamentations, compiled by Gregory with the help of his brother between 1000 and 1002

at the behest of the monastic community, is a long poem of ninety-four chapters in which the author explores the powers of the soul, and the manifestations and images of the coherence presiding over the creation, revelation and redemption: Armenians regard it as an almost sacred book. [...] Until the 20th century the Nareg monastery was the destination of countless pilgrims traveling to the grave of the Saint for the feast days of the Transfiguration and the Holy Cross of Varak. (Collectif 2015)

For centuries the monastery of Narek was an active scriptorium, and in the mid-1800s opened a seminary and an orphanage. Narek was a wealthy monastery and after Akhtamar, owned the most land and property in the diocese, with its jurisdiction extending over four villages. During the 1895 Hamidian massacres the monastery was attacked and pillaged, and then it was finally confiscated by the state after the First World War. Finally, in 1951 the monastery was completely destroyed by order of the regional governor, and a mosque was built on the plot where the monastery once stood (Figures 2.9, 2.10).



Figures 2.9. “The monastery of Nareg (Source: Keghuni, 1904, Venice, St Lazzaro).” Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From < <http://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van.html> >



Figure 2.10. The village of Narek (Yemişlik). July 10, 2016.

The transformation of churches into mosques and vice versa during various historical periods has been documented in Turkey, Europe, and elsewhere. For instance, during the Spanish Reconquest, many mosques were transformed into churches in a material triumphalist message of Christian victory on the peninsula (Harris 1997; Kroesen 2008). A similar process occurred after the Ottoman conquest of Istanbul in 1453 when many Byzantine churches were converted to mosques (Hayden 2013; Kirimtayif 2001). Most famous among these was the Hagia Sofia, which was first a Byzantine cathedral, then an Ottoman mosque, and finally a museum in the Republican era (Z. Çelik 1993; Nelson 2004). Many other similar cases of the transformation of churches into mosques have been documented in Turkey, such as in the towns of Ayvalık, Derinkuyu, and Kars (Tanyeri-Erdemir, Hayden, and Erdemir 2014; Guney 2016; Karanian 2015). One Byzantine church, for example, was converted to a mosque in the sixteenth century, back into a Greek Orthodox church in 1920, and again into a mosque into 1923 (Hayden et al. 2011). During my fieldwork in the region around Lake Van, I came across one such example of

an Armenian church being actively used as a mosque in the village of Ovakişla near the town of Ahlat on the northwest shore of the lake (Collectif 2015). Most other churches were being used as stables, barns, or storehouses, or were simply abandoned or destroyed. Narek was one striking example in which the original monastery had been razed to the ground and a mosque built on the site.

The first time I visited the village of Narek (now officially “Yemişlik”) was on a sunny day in June 2016 with a motley crew that included myself and Azad, as well as Gohar, a middle-aged woman from Armenia, and Nizam, a middle-aged Kurdish man from Gevaş. Gohar, who had moved to Istanbul over fifteen years ago to work, had eventually acquired Turkish citizenship and started a business, and had been visiting the Van area frequently for the past eight years. She had met Nizam on one of her first trips and now they were old friends. Gohar’s mother’s family had migrated to Armenia from the historic Armenian village of Ishgerd (now Dereğzı) in Gevaş, and she had recently fulfilled her long-held dream of buying an apartment in Van. When we had met for the first time a few weeks earlier, we had shared the stories that we knew about our ancestors from Van, and connected over the fact that, at that point, we were the only two Armenians who were living in Van. Thus, we were both anomalies in that most Armenians who visit Van either from the diaspora or from Armenia come as tourists and not with the intent of relocating there.

On this day Gohar had called me unexpectedly in the morning to ask if Azad and I would be interested in joining her and Nizam for a trip to see Narek village. We had long been curious about this famous site, so we quickly got ready and got on the road. We picked up Gohar and Nizam, and then followed Nizam’s directions as he guided us through the narrow dirt roads lined with verdant trees and bushes as we approached the village of Narek. When we reached the first

group houses, Nizam directed us to park the car in front of a two-story house built of large, old stones. He bounded up the stairs to the second story porch and, speaking Kurdish, greeted the woman who had come out of the doorway. She was stout and was wearing şalvar with a flowered pattern and a white scarf around her head that slightly covered her mouth. I was nervously waiting at the bottom of the stairs, unsure if I should proceed or not, but Nizam gestured to me enthusiastically, shouting, “Come, come! This is my niece, they are family, come!”

As Gohar and I reached the top of the landing and greeted the woman, Nizam said to her in Kurdish, “These two are Armenian! This is their house!” The woman was immediately unsettled, and asked, “Their house?” I realized that Nizam had unnecessarily worried her about potential owners returning and claiming their property in his enthusiasm in showing off his guests, so I quickly said to her, “No, no, this is not our house.” She asked, “Are you from this village?” I replied, pointedly, “No, definitely not. I’m from America, and Gohar’s parents are from a different village in Van. I am a historian. I am interested in historical sites (*tarihi yerler*).” The woman nodded knowingly, “Ah, you are looking for historical artifacts (*tarihi eser*).” Again, I quickly tried to correct her, saying, “No, no! Not historical artifacts, historical *places*. Old churches and places like that. I am writing about their history.”

The problem here is that the expression “historical artifacts” (*tarihi eser*) is usually used to refer to what treasure hunters are looking for — that is, buried valuable objects. We frequently came upon such reactions when we were poking around near ruined churches in villages, as many locals assumed that if we were so interested in the site, we must be looking for treasure, as were many others who visited the site before and after us. This reaction always bothered Azad, who felt that it was an affront to our moral character. Now he was agitated by the woman’s reaction, and he pulled me aside, saying to me in English so no one would understand, “I think

we should go. I really am not comfortable, all of the villagers think that you will come and take their house, they are looking at us.”

Just then, Gohar called out to me, “Anoush *can* (dear)! Come take my photo by this fountain!” I took her photo and she asked me, “What did Azad say?” I told her, “He is a bit uncomfortable because the villagers think we are coming to take their houses.” She scoffed, saying, “No, we’re not here to take anyone’s houses. We’re just here to visit.” We walked through the village, through old, two-story stone houses and new houses with smooth, cement walls. As we came around a bend, we entered a clearing full of a series of ruined walls and stone foundations, with grass growing in between the stones and pieces of trash strewn amongst them. Above these remnants, perched atop a slight hill was a pristine looking mosque, with smooth cement walls that had been painted a light lime green. It was a large boxy building with one thin minaret in one corner. As we walked around the mosque, Nizam explained that the monastery had been on this very spot. He pointed to the ruined walls and explained that these were all parts of the monastery. Then, his eyes glinting, he said that underneath all of this was a large cave, but unfortunately, no one knows how to find the entrance so they had no way to know what was inside. It was clear that this was what really had piqued his interest (Figure 2.11).



Figure 2.11. The new mosque in Narek (Yemişlik). July 10, 2016.

Nizam asked if we would like to see the inside of the mosque. I was already wearing a long sweater, and I wrapped my scarf around my head so that my attire would be mosque-appropriate as we climbed up the stairs to the entrance. We could hear the sounds of vacuuming from inside. Azad took the lead, and approached the door, saying, “Selamün aleyküm. We have two guests from America. They would like to take pictures of the mosque. Can we come in?” We could hear a man’s voice from inside the mosque reply gruffly, “They can take pictures from outside.” Azad was miffed at this and said, “What do you mean, are you saying they can’t come in?” The man replied in the negative. Azad was infuriated, retorting, “Is this not the house of God? The house of God is open to everyone!” The man inside did not respond, so Azad angrily exited the building and we left. Nizam was extremely embarrassed at this encounter and apologized profusely, saying, “Unfortunately, many of our people are still ignorant.” Gohar was offended as well and protested, “A house of God is open to everyone! If they want to come to our churches that’s fine! And anyway, they first destroyed the church here and built a mosque, which is already terrible. Build a mosque, that’s fine, but don’t destroy a church! A church is a house of god and open to everyone! Why are you destroying the church? First, they destroy the church and build a mosque, and now they won’t even let us into the mosque! Who do they think they are?”

Here Gohar registered her indignation on multiple registers. First, she was angry at the destruction of the church and the erasure of a historically significant medieval monument. Second, she was angry that a mosque was built deliberately on the site of the destroyed church. Finally, she was angry because we were refused entrance to the mosque, that this new space had been closed to us, and we could neither enter nor document it by photograph. Here there is a triple exclusion, as an Armenian with roots in a nearby village returned to the area to visit its

historic sites, only to find the monastery destroyed, a mosque built in its place, and herself unwelcome inside. Gohar was particularly irritated by this incident because she was used to receiving a warm welcome from most Kurds in Van—whether this was because they recognized Armenian historical claims to the area and desired to right past wrongs by welcoming the descendants of the exiled Van Armenians, or because they wanted to curry favor with her in the hopes that she might help them in their quest to find buried Armenian gold.



Figure 2.12. *Khatchkar* or carved cross-stone in the wall of a building in Narek (Yemişlik) village. July 10, 2016.

Once we had finished our visit to the village, we got back in the car and were winding our way through the narrow dirt roads between old stone houses. As we were driving, out of the window I saw a *khatchkar*, or carved cross-stones, in the wall of a building which looked to be a barn or a storehouse. It had a cross and Armenian writing carved on its face (Figure 2.12). I asked Azad to stop the car so that I could take a photograph and Nizam immediately became very excited, saying, “Ms. Gohar will read this! Ms. Gohar will read this! What does it say, Ms. Gohar?” Gohar, Nizam, and I got out of the car and walked over to the stone. Gohar read it

slowly, sounding out the letters. She reported that it seemed to be part of a larger inscription, and listed some names of members of a family. She commented, “Someone probably picked it up from somewhere and used it for building this wall.” Nizam was intrigued but also seemed somewhat disappointed because this stone did not provide any specific information regarding the “historical artifacts” (*tarihi eser*), that his niece had mentioned, and which seemed to be the principal attraction of Armenian sites for him.

In this particular village, the silencing and obscuring of history is palpable on the material landscape, as monuments are literally erased, and new structures built in their place. But the erasure is never complete, as traces of the past linger on the landscape and in the narratives that locals continue to tell. It is represented in Nizam’s accounts of the village and of his niece’s fear that we had come to claim her house, echoing an understanding of historical Armenian claims to the land. It is materially visible in the *khatchkars* in the walls of old homes, and in the rubble of the destroyed monastery strewn about the village. And finally, it is constantly enlivened in the imaginations of locals who dream of finding buried Armenian treasure, like Nizam, who are constantly searching for traces of that past (as discussed in Chapter Four).

Beyond Narek and Akhtamar

Beyond these two examples of Akhtamar, the question of how state actors perform and construct sovereignty through Armenian architectural heritage is further complicated by other examples of restoration and destruction, both in Van and the nearby regions. One significant case that sheds light on more recent political developments is the Surp Giragos Armenian Church located in Diyarbakir, the largest city in southeastern Turkey and the unofficial capital of the Kurdish region within Turkey. Though most of the Armenian population in southeastern Turkey was

decimated after 1915, the city of Diyarbakir continued to have a small Armenian population. In the 1960s there were about three hundred families, but that number dwindled rapidly until finally the last Armenian man still living in Diyarbakir, Sarkis Eken, passed away in 2016, two years after the passing of his wife, Bayzar Eken (Kamer 2016). After the 1980s, the Surp Giragos Armenian church in the Old City of Diyarbakir fell into disrepair. The roof of the large church caved in and grass and weeds grew where the pews once stood. In 2011, the church was fully renovated by the Surp Giragos Armenian Foundation with the support of the local municipality, which at that time was in the hands of the Kurdish party, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party, or *Barış ve Demokrasi Partisi*).

As Armenian-American journalist Raffi Khatchadourian reported in the *New Yorker*, two prominent local Kurdish politicians, Osman Baydemir and Abdullah Demirbaş, championed the project. Khatchadourian describes how the two men welcomed Armenians who came from Istanbul and abroad for the opening of the newly renovated church: “Diyarbakir’s mayor, Osman Baydemir, told the Armenian visitors, “You are not our guests. We are your guests.” Abdullah Demirbaş, the mayor of the city’s old district, where my family had lived, even made reference to the great taboo—the genocide—saying, “Our grandparents, incited by others, committed wrongs, but we, their grandchildren, will not repeat them” (Khatchadourian 2014)

This restoration was not an isolated case, but instead part of Diyarbakir’s BDP-run municipality’s broader effort to make visible the Armenian past of the city that had been systematically erased for decades. For instance, Khatchadourian reports that efforts of Abdullah Demirbaş as follows:

He set out to rename three streets for local writers: a Kurd, an Armenian, and an Assyrian. He used municipal funds to run Armenian-language courses and erected a signboard in Armenian welcoming visitors. Within his jurisdiction, seventeen parcels of land that had been taken from the church were returned. He told the *Armenian Weekly*,

“We want the people living in the city to realize that, historically, Diyarbakir has always been a multicultural city.” When the *Weekly* asked, “What is your message to the Armenians who were uprooted from their ancestral lands?” Demirbaş said, “Return!” (Khatchadourian 2014)

In addition, in 2013, the municipality of the Old City (Sur) of Diyarbakir erected a “Monument of Common Conscience” (*Ortak Vicdan Anıtı*), upon which were inscribed the words “We shared the pains so that they are not suffered again” in Kurdish, Turkish, English, Armenian, Arabic, and Hebrew (Figure 2.13). At the opening ceremony, Demirbaş declared that “We Kurds, in the name of our ancestors, apologize for the massacres and deportations of the Armenians and Assyrians in 1915,” as he called on the Turkish government to do the same (Akkum 2013).



Figure 2.13. The Monument of Common Conscience (*Ortak Vicdan Anıtı*) in Diyarbakir. August 8, 2014.

In Diyarbakir progressive Kurdish politicians had the platform from which to enact policies materializing their stated goals of righting the historical wrongs perpetrated both by Kurdish groups as well as by the ongoing denial of the Turkish government. However, the period in which such radical and critical projects were possible proved to be short-lived. After fighting

recommenced between PKK militants and the Turkish military in the summer of 2015, the government declared a continuous curfew in Diyarbakir that lasted for three months, during which time the Old City of Diyarbakir was essentially under siege by the military and heavy fighting ensued. During these clashes, Surp Giragos church suffered heavy damage. When the curfew was lifted, the Official Gazette of the Republic of Turkey published an announcement that an “urgent expropriation” decision had been made by the cabinet, and that 6,300 plots of land were being expropriated by the state, including the Surp Giragos Armenian church, along with the nearby Chaldean, Assyrian, and Protestant churches (The Armenian Weekly 2016).

The case of Surp Giragos in Diyarbakir is a contemporary case in which, like in the case of the Monastery of Narek half a century earlier, state forces destroy and expropriate Armenian church property. In the case of Diyarbakir, however, the destruction occurred in the middle of a large urban area, instead of in an out-of-the-way village like Narek. Additionally, there is a double process of destruction, as it is not only Christian material heritage that is being expropriated and destroyed, but the entire urban fabric of the old city, the lives and livelihoods of Kurdish inhabitants of the city, and the nascent attempts at local autonomy that were developing before the siege.

While these cases of violent destruction and seizure are one mode of how the state interacts with Armenian material heritage, it is not always the rule, as the case of Akhtamar demonstrates. In the province of Van, there are two other churches that were renovated in the last decade, though both restorations have been criticized for being both too thorough, and not thorough enough. The first was the Edremit church, a small, one-room village church that was renovated with funds from the European Union in 2007 by the same firm that renovated the Akhtamar church, Kartalkaya Proje run by the Cahit Zeydanlı. Critics of this restoration

complain that the restored church looks like a newly constructed building, with new stones, new paint, a flat instead of pitched roof, and a new entrance, and thus that the renovation was not faithful to the original building (Figure 2.14). As one commenter concluded, “the alleged "restoration" has destroyed the value of the building as a memorial object. Nothing is left to touch the emotions of a visitor; it can no longer be interacted with” (VirtualANI 2011).



Figure 2.14. The restored church of Edremit. July 25, 2014.

The second church is a small one-room chapel located in the Old City of Van just fifty meters from the historic Kaya Çelebi Mosque that as of 2017 was undergoing restoration. In 2011 the governor of Van undertook a restoration of the chapel, which produced a result very similar to the restored Edremit church – a relatively new-looking building with a flat roof, new entrance, and whitewashed interior walls. The problem with this restoration was that while the area immediately around the church was excavated, the earth surrounding the church was left intact, and so the church was left sitting in a two-meter deep ditch (Figures 2.15). As there is no system of drainage, the ditch has filled with water, reeds, frogs, and turtles over time. Thus, the church is now inaccessible except in the depths of winter when the pond freezes over and visitors

can slide over its icy surface to reach the door of the church, fixed half-ajar in the ice (Son Dakika 2012).



Figures 2.15. The restored church in the Old City. February 19, 2017.

Apart from the church of Akhtamar and the two chapels near Van city, no other churches have been restored in the Van region, although there have been efforts in that direction. Besides Akhtamar, there are two other islands in the lake that housed monastery complexes prior to 1914. Adır Island held the Lim Monastery, which is now mostly in ruins, with only half of the church still standing. Çarpanak Island housed the Gduts Monastery, which, on the other hand, is in relatively excellent shape and could much more easily be renovated, as all of its walls, ceiling, and dome are intact. This may be because it is much more difficult to reach by boat than Adır, and so it is visited by comparatively fewer treasure hunters. I was only able to visit Çarpanak once because of the difficult logistics in getting there. One has to find a willing fisherman who will take you by boat (at a cost of at least one hundred dollars) on a forty-minute trip from the

closest village to the island. The water can be rough in that area, so you have to be lucky with the weather as well as with finding a free boat and a guide. On the one day that I visited the island, I was surprised to see an empty pier on a small peninsula quite close to the island. There were neither any boats there, nor was there a road by which to reach the pier. The fisherman explained that after Akhtamar was restored the government had planned to restore this church as well and open it to tourism. They built the pier but then abandoned the project when funds and interest ran low.

Another example of a monastery waiting for restoration is Varakavank (Varak Monastery), which is known as *Yedi Kilise* (Seven Churches) in Turkish. Varakavank was the most active and important religious site in Van on the eve of the First World War. Located about five kilometers east of the city of Van on the slopes of the Varak Mountain (*Erek Dağı*), the monastery held a school and a printing press and was used as a refuge by Armenians fleeing the city during the fighting in 1915 before it was burned down by the Ottoman army. After the war, the lands of the monastery were given to a prominent local Muslim, who for a time rented them out and eventually sold parcels of land to Kurdish villagers who had relocated from the Bahçesaray region, a mountainous district of Van to the southwest. The remaining buildings of the monastery were dismantled over time by the villagers as they built new homes, and the main church, which is a large structure with three interior halls, was used as a stable for many years. According to a local man, Ahmet, with whom I spoke on multiple occasions, his father, who was the local imam, decided that it was unsuitable to keep animals in a religious sanctuary, and forced the villagers to clear the church of their livestock. Then the imam, together with his son, cleaned out the interior and built a small fence around it with a lock to keep anyone from harming the church further. After the death of his father, Ahmet took it upon himself to continue

the care of the church, in spite of the other villagers, who were less enthusiastic about this endeavor. Ahmet keeps the dirt floor of the interior swept and clean, has strung light bulbs in the three halls (although they were not working the last times that I visited), and placed a table at the front with a pile of full guest books along with a half-empty book in which visitors can write a note. On return visits, I have reread the notes that I left in those books in 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015, and 2016.

Every time that I visited, Ahmet would explain to me that he wants the government to come, restore the church, and open it for tourism. During my first visit in 2010, he told me that the restoration was about to begin. In 2011 a devastating earthquake shattered Van's city center and killed over five hundred people, and the project was put on hold. The church itself also suffered considerable damage, as some of the front arches and one dome collapsed. Since then, Ahmet has continued to send letters to the governor, and though there seemed to be some interest, in the process of investigating the logistics of such a project, another obstacle was discovered. The land on which the church is standing is not the property of the government, but of the family of Fatih Altaylı, a prominent Turkish journalist and TV personality. It soon became clear that it was Altaylı's grandfather who had been granted ownership of the monastery after the war, and though he had sold most of the land to the villagers who now live there, the title deed of the church had stayed in the family. This discovery raised a media frenzy, and elicited questions such as "How can a Muslim own a church?" and "Is Altaylı a secret Armenian?" Eventually Altaylı made a statement saying that he would be happy to transfer ownership to the state and that the Ministry of Culture and Tourism could do whatever they wanted with it, but complications arose because Altaylı was not the only descendant of the original landholder, and a certain protocol must be followed when there are multiple inheritors. Thus, the project was

stalled again and Varakavank, though more fortunate than other monasteries that have no guardian, continues to slowly deteriorate (Koptaş 2012; Collectif 2015). The case of Varak Monastery raises the fundamental question of property ownership, which varies in the cases of Armenian churches. Before 1915, Armenian churches and monasteries were the property of the Armenian patriarchate in Istanbul, but during and after the war many, like Akhtamar and Narek, were confiscated by the government and are now in the hands of the state treasury. Others, like Varak and many village churches, were simply granted or sold off to local villagers or landowners as if they were empty parcels of land (for more on questions of appropriation of Armenian property, see Ungor and Polatel 2013).

Akhtamar After War

In this chapter, I have discussed in-depth two case studies of the restored Akhtamar Church and the destroyed monastery of Narek as an investigation into the ways in which the state in Turkey interacts with the material remains of the Armenian community of Van. The discussion of Akhtamar dealt with the history of the church through the period of my fieldwork, which ended in September 2017. Here, as an addendum to the above account, I include a brief discussion of the developments regarding the church from the subsequent two years. As mentioned above, I first visited Akhtamar in 2010 and attended the Akhtamar church services in 2011 and 2014. During the period of my fieldwork, between July 2015 and September 2017, the three expected annual services at Akhtamar were canceled due to security concerns – a result of the government’s brutal military campaign against Kurdish militants in the southeast. Finally, after a three-year hiatus, in September 2018 the government gave permission to hold a service. I attended this long-awaited service on September 9, 2018, in Van, along with hundreds of other visitors. There were many noticeable changes to the island and the surroundings since the

previous service and since my last visits. The island had been spruced-up, and tourist amenities and signage had increased in preparation for this new opening. There were volunteers from the local municipalities run by the ruling party (AKP) handing out free water and snacks, as well as brochures about tourism in the area. There was generally a festive air, with sailboats and kayaks on the water, and many people swimming in the designated beach area.

To an unaware visitor, this welcoming atmosphere would seem to suggest that in Turkey, minority histories and spaces, like Akhtamar, were unequivocally celebrated and cherished. However, this church service came on the back of three years of bloody counter-insurgency operations that had left multiple Kurdish-majority cities and towns in the southeast in ruins, and damaged many historic sites, including the Surp Giragos Armenian church described above. Here again, similar to the previous few years, Akhtamar was mobilized as a tool, an opportunity for the government to represent itself as tolerant and compassionate, but only when it is convenient. In 2015, 2016, and 2017, the Armenian community in Turkey and abroad waited for the news of whether the service would be permitted, and each year for those three years it was canceled. Finally, once the authorities had deemed that their military operations had achieved their aims of sufficiently weakening the Kurdish movement in the southeast and that state sovereignty was not under immediate threat, they once again allowed a service to be held on Akhtamar. The service and the environment were curated in a way that highlighted the state as a benevolent protector of Armenian material cultural heritage and as the provider of security through military and police presence. As a tangible and visible reminder of state sovereignty over the land and Turkish military supremacy, the white-chalk inscription on the hillside in Gevaş opposite Akhtamar had been updated to include another nationalist slogan under the star and crescent, which read “*Vatan Bölünmez*” (the homeland will not be divided).

The way in which the church service was being employed as a political performance of state tolerance and authority was manifested during the statements made by the attending officials. As one of the primary representatives of the central government, the Minister of Culture and Tourism, Mehmet Nuri Ersoy said the following words, putting the service in context:

We have gone through a very successful process in the fight against terrorism. The events (*olaylar*) have ended entirely. We can see in the service today that the events (*olaylar*) have ended and that an environment of peace and security has come. [...] Just as in the past, today, as the Turkish nation, together we will continue to support, respect, and protect the religious freedoms and cultural life [or lifestyle] (*yaşam kültürü*) of the Armenians. From now on it will be like this. [...] For thousands of years we have experienced a shared history and culture with our Armenian brothers [and sisters] (*kardeşlerimiz*) on the land of Anatolia. Just as in the past, today and from now on we will continue to approach the freedom of worship and cultural values of our Armenian brothers [and sisters] with respect. Because of this, we are very happy. (Aşan and Varol 2018)

Here Ersoy refers to the violent conflict of the previous three years with the Turkish phrase “*olaylar*,” which literally means “events” but is also used frequently to refer to a clash or attack of various sorts. He expresses that “we” have been successful in the fight against terrorism, referring to the overwhelming military operations that crushed the resistance movement in Kurdish cities across the southeast and left hundreds dead and destroyed countless homes and livelihoods. This comment glosses over the ongoing state violence against the Kurdish community and instead claims that the state today, as in the past, “will continue to support, respect, and protect the religious freedoms and cultural life” of Armenians.

This sentiment was echoed and reflected in the words of the then-acting Armenian Patriarch, Archbishop Aram Ateşyan, the official representative of the Armenian community in Turkey. Immediately after the divine liturgy, still inside the sanctuary of the church, Ateşyan

shared these words to an audience including the governor of Van province, the Minister of Tourism, and countless reporters and onlookers:

Happy are the ones who provide peace, for they will be the children of God. The political leaders of our state have done everything in their power to ensure peace and tranquility and we find this peace today. Without discriminating between religions, we—as the children of this land, all together, for the peace of this country, for the sake of this state, for the waving of the flag—we will hold hands and definitely struggle to see beautiful days. As the Armenian community, we thank first our Honorable President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as well as our honorable Minister, our honorable Governor, and those who contributed. (Aşan and Varol 2018)

The words of Archbishop Ateşyan and Minister Ersoy express concisely the way in which the state tries to represent itself vis-à-vis Armenian history. Ersoy paints a picture of a continuous, unbroken past, present, and future of a benevolent and peaceful relationship in which the “Turkish nation” respects and tolerates its Armenian minority. There is no mention of massacre, Genocide, expropriation, or forced assimilation. Ateşyan responds in kind as a model minority – deferential and grateful for the tolerance and protection of the government. He expresses that Armenians thank the government for bringing peace and commits the Armenian community to working selflessly for the good of state and country.

The sharp paradox here is that there is no recognition of the two separate yet parallel histories of state violence that shaped the history and present of the church and the service on that day. First, the destruction of the Armenian community in 1915, which produced the church as an abandoned ruin available to be coopted and restored by the Turkish state is erased through the discourse of continuous protection of Armenians by the state and the “Turkish nation” which it claims to embody. Second, the past two years of bloody destruction that the military wrought on Kurdish cities and civilians of the southeast, which were the cause of the cancellation of the earlier three services, is glossed over as a successful fight against terrorism.

Both the Minister of Culture and Tourism and the state-sanctioned representative of the Armenian community present a scenario in which the state is a magnanimous and generous protector of a grateful Armenian minority, thus erasing the past and present state violence against both Kurds and Armenians, as well as the state destruction and appropriation of land and property. The incongruity embodied in these statements is not unusual, but instead, as I have demonstrated through the examples of Akhtamar, Narek, and other churches, it defines the relationship between the state and the Armenian cultural heritage of the area. This is a relationship that is determined by exceptional instances of restoration, with even more atypical moments of recognition, set within the context of a *longue durée* of ongoing violence and denial. These isolated moments such as Akhtamar are held up by state representatives to showcase the state as benevolent protector, all the while obscuring the background of continued destruction.

Conclusion

This chapter has focused on the way in which state actors approach and interact with the material heritage and built environment of the Armenian past in the Van region today through policies of destruction or restoration of churches. In some ways a reflection of the ongoing denial of the Genocide of 1915, state policy has at times been one of destruction and erasure, as in the case of Narek and Surp Giragos. At the same time, however, the approach of state actors is never uniform and is often contradictory and ambiguous. The erasure and destruction are never complete, and spaces are left where alternative stories can be told. At other times, state representatives have restored Armenian sacred spaces, as in the case of Akhtamar, Edremit, and the Old City church. Yet, these restorations are critiqued as being carried out carelessly and only for political gain. Within these processes of restoration or destruction carried out by the state,

locals continue to interact with such spaces outside of the frame of an imposed official history through their own memories and understandings of past and place. Thus, through these examples, I suggest that the ruined and restored spaces of Armenian cultural heritage become a space through which sovereignty and understandings of the past are constructed, negotiated, and contested in Van and beyond.

In the following chapter, I explore how locals in Van today interact with the spaces of Armenian ruins outside of the purview of officially sanctioned restoration or destruction. These spaces of ruin, neither curated and narrated officially nor deliberately erased, take on a life of their own within the communities and environments that they inhabit and that inhabit them. Chapter Three explores the “afterlives” of these spaces of ruins, long after they have ceased functioning as a church or a monastery and after the Armenian community has gone from the area. I explore one example in-depth – Der Meryem (or Church of Mary), a ruined monastery nestled in the mountains in a remote area south of Van. This church has become a popular pilgrimage destination for Kurdish families who go to pray and sacrifice a rooster in order to ensure the health of their young children. This chapter explores the stories and legends that locals recount in relation to this church and discusses how this space shapes their understanding of the local past and present politics. The discussion in Chapter Three regarding how locals interact with spaces of Armenian ruins will thus complement the analysis presented in the present chapter regarding the interaction between Armenian ruins and representatives of the Turkish state.

CHAPTER THREE

Afterlives of Ruins: The Politics of the Past in the Present

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, the ruins of the Armenian churches in eastern Anatolia are, following Navaro, remnants of state violence, “residues of territory [...] unassimilable to nationalizing processes,” that “remained and survived in spite of all efforts to eliminate, bury, curb, and control” (2017). As I outlined through the examples of the restored monastery of Akhtamar and the destroyed monastery of Narek, these remnants become interfaces through which state authorities interact with the Armenian material heritage in the area, at times through restoration and appropriation, at other times through destruction and erasure, and sometimes simply through abandonment and neglect. What then, happened to those spaces that are more or less ignored by state actors? What happens to those spaces that are neither restored and advertised as tourist destinations or destroyed? All across Anatolia, and especially in the Van region, there are churches and monasteries dotting the countryside, whether a small, one-room chapel in a village or an imposing, domed monastery on top of a hill. During my fieldwork, I visited dozens of such sites dating back to the sixth-century and saw various possible afterlives of these churches and monasteries. Employees of the Van Museum, which is connected to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the central government in Ankara, are supposed to keep inventories of these sites and to officially register them as protected historical areas (*tarihi sit alanı*). When I checked the local inventory, I was impressed to find that many Armenian sites were indeed listed, but not surprised to find that many were missing. Additionally, even those that are registered have no signs, guards, or fences, and are easy prey to anyone who wants to dig for treasure in the floor or foundations or pilfer stones to build a garden wall.

The remote mountain monasteries are mostly left abandoned and are empty except the passing shepherd who might use them as a shelter for himself or his sheep. Some prominent such examples in the Van region are: near the town of Gevaş, Garmravank Monastery, Surp Tovmas Monastery, and the Tivapuyn monastery; near the town of Gürpınar, Saint Marinos Monastery; near the town of Muradiye, the Arkelan Monastery; near the town of Başkale, Saint Edchmiadzin in Sorader; near the town of Bitlis, the Monasteries of Saint Anania and Saint John in Bor; near the town of Tatvan, the Monastery of Saint George of Koms; and near the town of Adilcevaz, and the Convent of the Miracles of Ardzguc.³

The churches and monasteries that are located in populated villages had more varied afterlives than those in remote areas, as they often are repurposed and reused by the people living around them. For instance, in the village of Sorp/Yelkenli near Tatvan, the Monastery of the Holy Precursor is now used as a larder to store food for the winter and as a *tandır evi*, or a place to bake bread in a clay oven dug into the ground, which explains why the interior walls are now black with soot. In the village of Junoug/Albucak near Çatak, the church of Surp Asdvadzadzin was used for some time as a school and now is used to store hay. Another church in the town of Çatak has been turned into a family home. In the village of Gdzwag/Kıyıldüzü near Tatvan, the Church of Saint George is used as a stable for sheep. In the village of Prkhus/Ovakışla, the church of Saint Stephen has been turned into a functioning mosque and its structure is thus still in excellent condition. The three churches and one monastery in the region of Çiçekli near Edremit are have all been largely spoliated for building materials, and only a few walls are left standing, which is a common fate of many, if not most, of the churches near populated areas. In

³ For more information on the current states and histories of these and other monasteries and churches in Van and across Turkey, see the following online collections: Collectif 2015; Aghjayan; Houshamadyan; VirtualANI; Verheij.

the village of Elbak/Albayrak near the town of Başkale, the massive Saint Bartholomew Monastery was used for some time as part of a military base and was surrounded by barbed wire, sandbags, and military structures until 2012, when the military abruptly abandoned the site. The monastery is now in ruins. The roof has collapsed, the interior has been excavated for treasure, and the carvings are riddled with bullet holes, as the intricate inscriptions and reliefs of lions and eagles above the entryway were used by soldiers for target practice.

Before the Genocide of 1915, the Van region held hundreds of functioning Armenian churches, monasteries, and chapels. After the destruction of the Armenian community, these structures remained on the landscape and took on new afterlives as they became part of the new environments and communities that evolved around them. These ruined spaces play a role in the everyday lives of the people who live around them, and in many ways shape their historical understandings. In this chapter, I interrogate in-depth the afterlife of one abandoned monastery and examine how local Kurds imagine, narrate, and enact the politics of the past and the present within and through that space of material ruin. Through this example, I demonstrate how the history of the Armenian Genocide and continuing violence against the Kurdish community are intricately linked, and highlight the continuation of violence over the past century and the dramatic transformation of the Kurdish community of eastern Anatolia from perpetrator to victim.

The Sacrifice

In a remote corner of a mountainous region south of Van Lake in southeastern Turkey, one hour's drive and a second hour's hike away from the provincial capital of Van city sits the ruins of a large Armenian monastery. Constructed in the eighth century, it housed a flourishing

scriptorium and was a pilgrimage destination for the Armenian community of the region until the Genocide of Ottoman Armenians of 1915 left it abandoned. The main structure of the monastery is now largely destroyed, with its crumbling light brown and yellow stones blending in with the grasses and brush, already dry in the mid-November sun. The attention now, however, is not on the monastery, but on the remaining wall of a half-ruined stone chapel, set just beyond the monastery walls, where I am standing with a motley group of eight pilgrims – men and women of various ages. The wall itself is covered with countless small ribbons, pieces of cloth and string, that were tied to the crumbling stones over decades, some little more than threadbare shreds after years of sun and rain. These have been left by visitors who make a wish at this spot, and tie a string, or sometimes a rock tied to a string, to this wishing wall. One of the younger women from the group of pilgrims produces a blue plastic bag, out of which she takes a live black rooster, its wings and legs bound, and lays it on a flat stone in front of the chapel wall. A young man takes a small knife from his pocket and slits the throat of the rooster. An older woman prays aloud in Kurdish, “We have slaughtered this rooster as a sacrifice, may God accept our prayers and the prayers of all Muslims. May the Lord bring healing.” The rest of the group echoes her, “May God accept this.” The young woman lifts the expiring rooster by its bound feet, dabs her fingers in its blood and marks her forehead. Then she gestured for me and the other younger woman in the group to come forward and anoints our foreheads as well.

Besides myself, an Armenian-American anthropologist, the rest of the party are all local Kurds living in Van. So how did we come to this place? Why is a group of Muslim Kurds sacrificing a rooster and praying in the ruins of an abandoned Armenian monastery in the year 2015? The practices of tying string to wishing walls or trees and sacrificing animals are common in Turkey as well as across the Middle East (Bulut 2011; Dafni 2006; Gürsoy 2012). Literature

on how knots have been used cross-culturally for magic and religious rituals has analyzed the knot as a physical fetish to fix prayer and wishes (Day 1950; Pietz 1985, 1987, 1988). The phenomenon of shared sacred spaces between diverse religious communities has also been widely documented in various contexts, including shared pilgrimage sites for Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Middle East (Albera and Couroucli 2012; Barkan and Barkey 2014; Bigelow 2010; Bowman 2015).

In this instance, however, there is more at play than simply the sacred site of one community being adopted by another. Here, in the region of Van, one hundred years ago the Christian Armenian community of the region was destroyed by a historical atrocity in which local Kurds played a critical role, as discussed in Chapter One.

Ruins, History, Memory, Time

In her exegesis of Walter Benjamin's monumental work on the Paris arcades, political theorist Susan Buck-Morss (1991, 293) writes: "The past haunts the present; but the latter denies it with good reason. For on the surface, nothing remains the same." In this chapter, I explore the echoes of a century-old history of genocide and destruction, focusing on how the material traces of this violent past inform a present shaped by ongoing ruination. Inspired by the work of Walter Benjamin, in recent years scholars from diverse disciplines have begun exploring the meaning of material ruins in relation to imperial histories and processes of capitalist exploitation (Dawdy 2010; Gordillo 2014; Schwenkel 2013; Stoler 2013). Such works have transformed a focus on ruins as romantic reflections of a bygone age to a critical investigation of "ruination as an ongoing corrosive process that weighs on the future" (Stoler 2013, 9). This chapter builds on these discussions as it traces the way in which histories of destruction and spaces of material ruin

are revisited, reinterpreted, and given new significance for the present and the future by those whose lives continue to be shaped by ongoing processes of ruination. It explores the way in which spaces of material ruins, created through histories of state violence and genocide, become spaces for articulating alternative senses of history and crafting possible futures. The material and lived continuity between past and present processes of ruination highlights the flimsy fiction upon which denial is built and shatters the fragile edifice of a nationalist imaginary founded on erasure of past crimes.

Focusing on how past, present, and future congeal in spaces of material ruination (Apter and Derby 2010), I highlight how historical and contemporary violence are reimagined and re-narrated as an emancipatory project. Rather than explore how the destruction of material spaces is simply a testament to histories of genocide, I highlight how these spaces of ruination unsettle state attempts to create a national historical imaginary. I approach these ruins not only as melancholic spaces, representing a now-absent community (Navaro-Yashin 2012), but as places through which palimpsests of violent histories can be unearthed, exposed, questioned, and critiqued, both by scholars as well as by locals in their everyday lives. Walter Benjamin approaches ruins through a method he terms “montage” in order to deconstruct mythical bourgeois history. By presenting ruins of capitalism as a dialectical image, he seeks to create a flash of recognition which would awaken the dreaming masses, and thus to unsettle notions of linear progress and teleological capitalist development (Benjamin et al. 2002). Building on Benjamin, I suggest that the ruins produced through genocidal violence similarly serve to dissolve the mythical foundations of nationalist histories, and thus enable the deconstruction of official and exclusionary notions of past and present.

The remainder of this chapter consists of three sections. The first introduces the contested

history of what is today southeastern Turkey, a geography that has been shaped by war, genocide, forced displacement, and civil conflict over the past century. The following ethnographic section examines the afterlife of one particular space of ruination through the example of the ruined monastery of Der Meryem and explores how locals interact with and imagine this space. The subsequent ethnographic section investigates how these locals reinterpret the violent history of the genocide through their own experiences of ruination, displacement, and war, as informed by the scarred geography that they inhabit. These narratives reveal a specific conception of time and retribution, shaped by both their memory and contemporary experience of exceptional violence, and allow a further conceptualization of the relationship between materiality, temporality, and violence. I argue that much of the existing literature, which focuses on ruins of the past viewed through the lens of the present is insufficient to understand the ethnographic complexity in a context in which ruination in the past is understood to be cyclically repeating in the present.

Echoes of Genocide: An Unburied Past Weighing on the Future

In contexts where mass violence has shaped both local memory and landscape, history and the material world take on new political valences and social significance in the present (Apter and Derby 2010; J. Cole 2001; Shaw 2002; Slyomovics 1998b). The geography of southeastern Anatolia is one that has been repeatedly tormented by war, state violence and civil conflict over the last century. The material traces of these troubled histories remain visible on the landscape, embodied in the ruins of crumbling stone churches and the remnants of burned and abandoned villages. At the turn of the last century, Van was the only province in the Empire where Christian Armenians made up a plurality, or perhaps even a majority of the population (Suny 2015). Van

was one of the centers of the Armenian community historically and the site of the medieval Armenian kingdom of Vaspurakan (Derderian 2014). On the eve of WWI, after centuries of Armenian habitation, the region of Van held over three hundred churches and monasteries and four hundred Armenian-populated villages (Hovannisian 2000).

During the late Ottoman period, beyond the provincial capital of Van city, which was the commercial, cultural, and intellectual hub of the region, the Armenian peasantry in the rural plains and mountains of Van lived alongside their Kurdish neighbors, who made up the majority of the rural Muslim population and lived primarily as semi-nomadic herders. Though tensions often existed between rural Armenians and Kurds, as well as with the ruling Muslim Turkish elite in the center and their provincial representatives, an imperial order with some semblance of a fragile equilibrium (albeit based on inequality, hierarchy, and violent repression by the state) reigned until towards the end of the nineteenth century (Hovannisian 2000; Suny 2015).

The first major episode of violence against the Ottoman Armenian community came during the reign of Sultan Abdulhamid, who undertook a large-scale policy of repression and killing as a response to perceived sedition by small groups of Armenians. During the years 1894-1896, Sultan Abdulhamid organized irregular Kurdish military groups in the eastern reaches of the empire, which he employed in the widespread massacres of Armenian peasantry (Altıntaş 2018; Deringil 2012). These irregular armed units, known as the Hamidiye Regiments (*Hamidiye Alayları*), were organized within and through the Kurdish tribal structure, and served also as a way for the central government to regulate and control the Kurdish tribes in the far eastern reaches of the empire (Klein 2016; McDowall 2004).

Two decades after the Hamidian Massacres, the outbreak of the First World War again signaled tragedy for the Armenians of the Ottoman Empire. The years 1914-1918 brought

massive upheavals to the region, including the attempted annihilation of the Ottoman Armenian and Assyrian population by the ruling Committee of Union and Progress or CUP (as described in Chapter One). This state-orchestrated program of massacre, deportation, assimilation, and the expropriation of property would later come to be known as the Armenian Genocide of 1915 (Akçam 2004; Kevorkian 2011). While Ottoman army officials and soldiers were instrumental in organizing and executing the Genocide, due to a lack of regular manpower and local conditions, in the southeast of the empire much of the actual work of killing and looting was carried out by the local Kurdish irregular cavalry (Suny 2015).

In the aftermath of the Genocide and WWI, many Kurdish families settled in the now-empty Armenian villages, taking over the land and houses of those who had been murdered and driven away (Biner 2010; Neyzi 2013). In a contemporaneous process of appropriation, the state confiscated many of the Armenian churches, monasteries, and other valuable properties left behind (Onaran 2018). As Ugur Umit Ungor and Mehmet Polatel outline in their study of the seizure of Armenian property by the government of the CUP (Committee of Union and Progress), this process of confiscation was overseen by the Abandoned Properties Commission (*Emval-i Metruke Komisyonu*) and legitimized by the law enacted during the war to legalize the seizure of the property of the deported Armenians⁴ (U. Ungor and Polatel 2013).

Many accounts of the Genocide highlight Kurdish participation in the acts of killing and appropriation and emphasize that not only the Turkish state and army officials, but also local Kurds played an active role in carrying out this historic atrocity (Hovannisian 2000; Panossian 2006). While these accounts are essential to understanding late Ottoman history and the unfolding of the destruction of Ottoman Armenians, their narratives end at the conclusion of the

⁴ Law number 224, April 20, 1922. For original document see Kardes 2016.

First World War and thus elide the continuation of violence and the dramatic transformation of the Kurdish community of eastern Anatolia from perpetrator to victim. Following the Turkish War of Independence between 1919 and 1923 and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal, later named “Atatürk” (Father of the Turks), the fate of the Kurdish population of the nascent republic would take a turn for the worse.

Though there had been an uneasy relationship between Kurdish groups and the Ottoman central government, with the attendant power plays that arose between the central court in Istanbul and powerful local notables in the periphery of the empire, Kurds were still considered (at least in name) to be the Muslim brethren of the ruling Turkish nobility, as they had been under Abdühamid (Klein 2016). After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, however, the Kurdish community came to be seen as a dangerous and seditious ethnic alterity by the new elite, who were guided by the Turkish-nationalist principles of Kemalism (Galip 2016). Thus, with the violent closure of the “Armenian Question,” which had plagued the Ottoman government for the better half of the nineteenth century, the “Kurdish Question” was born, which has been the paramount domestic issue with which Turkey has struggled over the past century, and which continues to torment the country today (Cheterian 2015; De Waal 2015).

Beginning just two years after the founding of the new Republic in 1923, the Sheikh Said rebellion of 1925, an uprising against the central government, would be the first of many insurrections in the Kurdish regions against the new order which “afforded no place for “Kurdishness” (Galip 2016, 463). Each new uprising was met with overwhelming force against militants, massacres of civilians, and forced relocations of Kurdish communities in an effort to deter future unrest (Van Bruinessen 1992). In the following years, the Ararat Rebellion of 1930 and Dersim massacres of 1938 resulted in the deaths and forced migration of thousands of

Kurdish civilians and destruction of their villages and properties (Van Bruinessen 1994).

The genealogy of sporadic Kurdish rebellions in Turkey culminated in the 1970s with the founding of the PKK, the armed militant Kurdish group that has been waging a guerilla war against the Turkish armed forces for nearly four decades (McDowall 2004). This most recent iteration of Kurdish armed resistance against the Turkish state reached its height in the 1990s, when, in an effort to root out the militants, the Turkish army forcibly evacuated and burned thousands of Kurdish villages, prompting impoverished and homeless Kurdish villagers to flood the regional cities and metropolitan centers of western Turkey (Jongerden 2001). After on-and-off ceasefires, the fighting most recently was reignited in July 2015, followed by a period of intense urban warfare between state and guerilla forces in cities across the southeast, as described further in Chapters One and Six. In order to crush the resistance, the Turkish army carried out a brutal campaign of siege and destruction in a dozen Kurdish-majority cities, shelling the urban landscape indiscriminately and leaving little more than smoldering rubble in its wake (Worth 2016).

Throughout this last century of state violence against its own civilians, the Turkish government has pursued a policy of consistent denial, vis-à-vis both the Kurdish and Armenian population and history of the region. Vehemently denying the existence of the large-scale, organized violence against the Ottoman Armenians, government officials and historians loyal to the state argue that Armenian gangs carried out massacres against innocent Muslim Turks, thus prompting necessary defensive measures from the state (H. Çelik 2005; Dixon 2010b; Göçek 2015; Hovannisian 1998). In the Kurdish case, official history denies not only the suffering inflicted upon Kurdish civilians through massacre and deportation but also at times their very existence as a distinct ethnic community. For certain periods of the last century, official state

discourse claimed that Kurds were actually “Mountain Turks,” and that Kurdish did not exist as a language, going so far as to outlaw the speaking, printing, broadcasting, teaching, and even singing of the Kurdish language (Jamison 2015; Yegen 2009).

At its founding, the PKK was a Marxist-Leninist military organization seeking an independent Kurdish state (Hakyemez 2017). In 1999, its leader, Abdullah Öcalan, was captured, and over the next decade, from his prison cell, on the island of Imralı in the Sea of Marmara off of the coast of Istanbul, he began to develop a new theoretical perspective that took the organization in novel directions. During his imprisonment, he was given access to philosophical books in Turkish translation, and he carefully studied the writings of such scholars as Murray Bookchin, Michel Foucault, and Benedict Anderson (Danforth 2013; Enzinna 2015). Debbie Bookchin, the daughter of the theorist Murray Bookchin, writes that “When Öcalan’s intermediary, a German translator named Reimar Heider, wrote to my father in 2004, Heider told him that the Kurdish leader had been reading Turkish translations of my father’s books in prison and considered himself a ‘good student’ of my father’s” (Bookchin 2018).

Inspired by the writings of Bookchin and others, Öcalan developed a new model for local autonomy in Kurdish regions, called Democratic Confederalism and informed by ecological, feminist, and socialist principles (Bookchin 2018). These ideas now guide the Kurdish movement in a broad sense, including not only the militant PKK but also affiliated Kurdish civil and political organizations in Turkey, as well as the local governments of the Kurdish-controlled cantons of Rojava, in northern Syria (Graeber 2014; Taussig 2015). Öcalan’s theoretical revolution has drastically transformed ideas in the largely conservative, Muslim Kurdish regions, not only regarding women’s role in society and the importance of cultural, linguistic, and political rights but also in relation to the stained and troubled history of the region. In 2014,

Öcalan published a letter labeling the 1915 destruction of Ottoman Armenians a ‘genocide’ and called on the world and the Republic of Turkey to honestly confront and recognize that painful history (Radikal 2014). This was not an isolated gesture but echoed local efforts to acknowledge and atone for the past, such as the building of the “Monument of Common Conscience” by the Kurdish-controlled Sur Municipality in Diyarbakir in 2013 (as discussed in Chapter Two).

The geography of eastern Anatolia continues to be a hotly contested territory. Not only the land, but its memory and history are grounds on which battles are repeatedly fought. Even the name of the territory is a contentious topic. Officially, and in Turkish sources, it is “Eastern Turkey. Many Kurds, on the other hand, refer to the area simply as “Kurdistan,” or more specifically as *Bakûr*, meaning “North” in relation to the majority-Kurdish populated regions in Iraq, known as *Başûr* (South), Iran (*Rojhelat*/East), and Syria (*Rojava*/West). Finally, to many Armenians, this territory is known as “Western Armenia” in relation to the Republic of Armenia, which today occupies a small part of what was historically the eastern half of the Armenian populated provinces of the Russian and Ottoman empires (Leupold 2017). Each of these names carries with it historical and political claims of belonging that are inscribed on the very geography (See Chapters Two and Five for further discussion of specific place names within Turkey).

Today, on the ground in Eastern Turkey, one finds Kurdish civilians living in a state of semi-occupation by the Turkish military, with Armenians long gone but the ruins of their churches and monasteries still dotting the landscape. The violence of the past is still palpable in the violence of the present, as large armored vehicles, tanks, military helicopters, and checkpoints are regular fixtures of everyday life in Turkey’s Kurdistan. And the memory of the absent Armenians is never far from the minds of local Kurdish villagers, as they inhabit the

remnants of the material world that the Armenians left behind, and continue to use the crumbling, centuries-old churches as stables, barns, or storehouses for hay. In the sections that follow, I argue that these histories are congealed in spaces of violent destruction and ruination (Apter and Derby 2010), but that these are not simply negative spaces representing layers of violence, repositories for evidence of past crimes, or sites of melancholia. Rather, I suggest that they are spaces that create new possibilities for alternative understandings of histories and new imaginations for the future.

Pilgrimage to the Past

When I first arrived in Van to begin my fieldwork in August 2015 on the topic of the afterlives of Armenian churches and monasteries in the Van region since 1915, many local Kurdish friends recommended to me that I visit a place called Der Meryem. One classmate from a local Kurdish language course, who was attending the class in order to learn to read and write his mother tongue, said to me, “If you are studying Armenian churches, you must visit Der Meryem. It is the biggest monastery in the whole region! It has 300 rooms!” He himself had never visited the site, but like many others, had heard of its purported historic importance and fame. However, these same friends who insisted that I go there also warned me not to go alone, or even in a small group, because it was located in the heart of a remote area that continued to be contested territory between the Turkish government and the Kurdish militants of the PKK, which at times was declared off-limits by the army due to military operations. Another obstacle to visiting the church was that locals referred to it by the local appellation, Der Meryem, which means “Church of Mary” in Kurdish. This did not translate to any obvious Armenian church, and though there are churches with the Armenian name Surp Astvadzadzin, “Holy Mother of God,” referring to

the Virgin Mary, none were in the region in which this church was described. Additionally, when I asked friends to specify the location of the church, they would explain that it was near one village or another, but the village names recited were the local Kurdish names, which have no standardized spelling and do not appear on official maps, which list only the newer, state-assigned Turkish names.

Finally, after triangulating between the description of the church and identifying the relevant villages, I discovered that the church in question was the Armenian monastery of Hokeats Vank, which translates to “Convent of the Spirits” in Armenian. According to French art historian Jean-Michel Thierry (1989, 245), the monastery was first mentioned in historical sources in the ninth century, and by the eleventh century, it was one of the most important monasteries in the Vaspurakan region. Other accounts link the founding of the monastery to a much earlier episode, in which, according to tradition, Saint Bartholomew—one of two apostles credited with introducing Christianity to Armenia—brought an icon of the Virgin Mary to the area after her death and placed it in a chapel, which he dedicated to the Mother of God (Collectif 2015). By the turn of the 20th century, the monastery was a massive structure, with fortified walls, towers at each corner, twenty-five dormered rooms, and two churches within the complex - the church of the Holy Mother of God and the church of Holy Zion. Just outside of the walls was the small chapel of Saint John. Thierry also mentions that an icon of the Virgin Mary was housed at the monastery, which most likely explains why local Kurds today still call it Der Meryem, that is, “the Church of Mary” in Kurdish. And though the monastery did not have 300 rooms, as purported by more than one of my acquaintances in Van, such hyperbolic claims demonstrate that its imaginary and historical import continues to live in the memory of locals today.

One day in November 2015, an archeologist friend, Mesut, who had an interest in Armenian architecture offered to take me to visit Der Meryem. I jumped at the chance to visit this legendary site with an experienced guide, and so a few days later, Mesut, his wife Nazlı, and our friend Azad set off in Mesut's car. Mesut liked to drive fast and Nazlı repeatedly warned him to slow down as he sped along the road between Van and the small town of Gürpınar and then eventually onto the empty roads that wound into the hills and mountains south of Gürpınar into the region locally known as Norduz. As we drove further and further into the remote countryside, and the last village that we had seen was miles behind us, Mesut asked if I knew exactly where the monastery was located. I had a vague idea, I told him, but I had thought that he knew, so I had not loaded the directions onto my Google Maps app in advance, and now that we were in the middle of the mountains, my phone had no service. At this point, Mesut admitted that he had never been to the monastery, and perhaps had been overly confident about his ability to find it on instinct. Trying not to worry too much that we might be lost, we continued on until we reached a roadside fountain, where we saw a group of men who had stopped for a drink. Mesut parked the car and approached them to ask for directions. "Excuse me, do you happen to know how to get to Der Meryem church?" He asked them. With a mischievous smile, one of the men replied, "Yes, we know, and we are also going there." Not understanding the subtext, Mesut replied, "Wonderful! Let's go together in that case." The man responded, "Fine, but we'll be partners. Whatever we find, we'll split half and half." Azad realized what the man was implying and interjected, saying "Ah, you think we are looking for treasure. No, no, we are not treasure hunters." The men laughed and insisted on their conviction, saying, "In this cold weather no one would go there unless they were looking for treasure! Why else would you go there?" The men could not be convinced that we were not going in search of buried gold, so we politely took our

leave of them and continued driving through the empty hills until we reached a small village full of stone houses.

We parked in front of the first house to ask for directions, and the Kurdish family who lived there insisted that we come inside. We tentatively entered the main room, where we found a large family sitting on cushions on the floor around the perimeter of the room. In the center of the room was a wood-burning stove, on top of which a large, dented black teapot was bubbling away. In one corner of the room, an elderly man was sitting in a chair. He had white hair and a distinguished air and was wearing long, thick, hand-knitted woolen socks with blue and red stripes on the toes. Each person who entered the room kissed his hand reverently and we understood that he was the respected patriarch of the family. We sat on some of the free cushions along the far wall, and as one of the younger boys of the family brought us small glasses of tea, we addressed the patriarch in Kurdish, telling him that we wanted to go to Der Meryem but that we had lost our way. Without asking us why we were going there, he replied solemnly, "I have never been there, but if you are going, then pray for me as well." This comment was more surprising to me than that of the men who assumed that we were on a treasure hunting expedition, but it demonstrated to us that clearly the site of the monastery held spiritual significance not only for the departed Armenians but also for the Muslim Kurds who continued to inhabit the area. We promised him that we would do as he asked, and listened carefully to his detailed directions before we thanked the family for the tea and began our journey again.

We drove on, turning off of the main road at the place where the elderly man had instructed until finally, we arrived at a village known as Aras in Kurdish, and Özlüce in Turkish. When we entered the village, a young man and a middle-aged woman wearing a bright yellow dress and thick black eyeliner approached our car. We addressed the woman and asked where the

church was, and she sent the boy to fetch her husband. Then she poked her head in the back window and, looking pointedly at Nazlı and me, she asked in Kurdish, “Which of you doesn’t have children?” Ignoring our perplexed looks, she followed with a second question that struck me as a non sequitur: “Did you bring a rooster with you or do you want to buy one?” Just at that moment, the woman’s husband appeared, and another car pulled up behind us. The driver of the second car got out and spoke with the husband, asking about the location of the church. In response to the same question posed to him regarding the rooster, the newcomer responded confidently, “Yes, we brought our own rooster from Van.” At this point we realized that these newcomers seemed to be more familiar with the appropriate procedures than we were, so we asked if we might join them, and together we set off. We left our cars at the appointed spot near a certain telephone pole with no wires, and from there by foot we began the steep descent into a valley. The slopes were dotted with short, dark green pine trees, and at the bottom of the valley was a stream lined with small bushes and trees with yellow and gold leaves. We began to hike northwards, following the stream, which was to eventually lead us to the ruins of the monastery.

As we began the trek, we introduced ourselves to our new traveling companions. There was a mother and daughter pair, a male cousin, and an uncle. The uncle, Ibrahim, who was in his 50s, did most of the talking. He explained that his niece had had two stillborn and no successful births yet, and she was pregnant again, so the four of them were making the journey to Der Meryem together to sacrifice the rooster in order to ensure that she have a healthy pregnancy and birth. The mother was carrying the live rooster in a blue plastic bag, with its legs and wings tied and its head poking out. At first, Azad, Mesut, and Nazlı took over the conversation with Ibrahim, but after he had asked them all about where they were from and their occupations, he gestured to me and asked, “And what about this friend?” “She is from America,” Azad answered.

Hearing this, Ibrahim announced emphatically, “We are all brothers and sisters!” as if to demonstrate that he did not discriminate based on place of origin. Then he paused for a moment and added, “Is she really from America? I don’t believe it.” I was not sure how to reply, but he had walked away to pick green almonds from a tree by the side of the path, so I waited a moment to gather myself, and then approached him saying, “Uncle, I was born in America, but I am originally Armenian, from Van.”

Ibrahim stopped picking almonds and looked at me solemnly. “You know what?” He said and then paused thoughtfully. Unsure whether this was a rhetorical question and feeling anxious about his reaction to my confession, I replied nervously, “What?” He continued, “You know what? Today the Kurds are suffering because of what they did to the Armenians in 1915. We are paying that price today. In 1915 the state tricked the Kurds and then Kurds massacred Armenians. The state sent sheikhs (religious leaders) who said that if you kill seven Armenians, you will go to heaven. The Armenians said, ‘If you betray us now, if not tomorrow, then the next day the same thing will happen to you.’ And our people foolishly didn’t listen to them.” As if providing proof of how Kurds continue to suffer today because of the misdeeds of the past, Ibrahim then recounted the story of what befell one of his relatives. He explained that in 1997 his uncle’s son had been captured by Turkish soldiers in a nearby village. The soldiers first tortured him and then tied him to the back of a military vehicle and dragged him through the streets until he was dead. He was a father of five children, the youngest still a baby when he was killed.

The notion that Kurds, whether individually or communally, were carrying a curse for the violence that they had inflicted upon Armenians a century ago was expressed to me by multiple individuals during my fieldwork in Van and has been documented in other parts of Turkey’s Kurdistan as well (A. Çelik and Dinç 2015). This common refrain was expressed in multiple

forms. Some, echoing Ibrahim's formulation, recounted that as the Armenians were being deported, they warned their Kurdish neighbors, saying, "We are the breakfast, and you will be the lunch" (in Kurdish "*Em taşte ne, hûn jî firavîn*" or "*Em taşte ne, hûn jî şîv*"), implying that Armenians were the first victims of the Turkish state, but Kurds would be the next. For instance, one of my acquaintances in Van, Ismet, a local teacher, recounted that his maternal uncle's father-in-law had been cursed for his cruelty against the Armenians. Ismet described how this man had been part of the Hamidiye Regiments—which were instrumental in the repression of the Armenian community—and that he had personally killed 17 Armenian children. Because of his act, Ismet asserted, later in life his legs had become terribly disfigured to the point that he could no longer walk. Ismet recalled how, as a young man, he had transported the crippled old man from place to place in a wheelbarrow. With solemn certainty, Ismet declared that "*Eva ahê fileh girtî*"—which translates roughly to "he was under the curse of the Armenians."

Anthropologists have written on the concepts of curses, often in the context of witchcraft, as a way to explain misfortune, as well as the material power of words (Geschiere 1997; Eves 2000; J. L. Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Evans-Pritchard 1963; Weiner 1983; Austin 1975; Tambiah 1990, 1968). In some cases, curses are reversed through sacrifice of various kinds, a concept which I will return to later in this chapter (Taussig 2010; Apter 2017; Girard 1986).

Alongside the notion that Kurds were cursed as a legacy of the violence of 1915, another recurring theme regarding the historical atrocities against Armenians were stories of salvation, of merciful Kurdish individuals and families who at times courageously risked their lives to save Armenians bound for deportation and slaughter. These stories were passed from generation to generation, and multiple acquaintances of mine recounted with solemn pride how a great-grandfather had nobly sheltered and protected fleeing Armenians, in some cases even going so

far as to accompany them to the Russian border, like the underground railroad conductors of the Antebellum American South. Even more common were stories of Armenian women and children, who were left behind or became separated from their families during the chaos of war and deportations, or sometimes were forcefully abducted (Çetin 2004). These orphans, known locally as *kılıç artıkları*, or “remains of the sword” in Turkish, were adopted into Kurdish and Turkish families, became Muslim, were given new names and assimilated into their new societies (Hadjian 2018; Sivaslian 2013). Many of them eventually married and had children, and thus today many Kurds and Turks in Turkey, especially in the southeast, are the descendants of such Islamized Armenians (Altınay, Çetin, and Libaridian 2014).

Ibrahim also had a story of salvation to share with me, which he eagerly recounted as we trudged through the grass and shrubs alongside the meandering stream. He explained that his family was from Beytüşşebap, an area located southwest of Van in the province of Şırnak, and that he is from the Gevdan *aşireti* (tribe), a large *aşiret* that makes up one of the twelve branches of the even larger Ertuşi *aşireti* that has a considerable presence across the provinces of Van, Hakkari, and Şırnak. Ibrahim explained that in his village, there were *Fileh* (Christians), who had stayed during the deportations and did not convert. In Kurdish, *Fileh* means Christian and is used to refer to Armenians, Assyrians, and other local Christians. When speaking Turkish, many Kurdish speakers translate *Fileh* as *Ermeni* (Armenian), which often creates confusion regarding the specificity of various local Christian communities.

Continuing his account in Kurdish, Ibrahim told me that his people and the *Fileh* had lived side by side for centuries and that they were like relatives. Switching to Turkish, he explained that during the deportations, his ancestors had protected those *Ermeni* (Armenians) and that they continued living there until the 1990s when they finally migrated to Europe. Later,

after some more research and discussions with other individuals hailing from the same village, I discovered that these “Armenians” were actually Assyrians, and that indeed they still returned to the village every summer and stayed in contact with their Kurdish neighbors. In his narrative, Ibrahim was cursing those Kurds who had partaken in the massacres of Armenians in 1915, and he was proud of his village, which had protected its Christian neighbors and saved them from deportation. “We are all brothers and sisters,” he proclaimed, “Why should religion make any difference? After all, *Allah rabbil muslimin degildir, rabbil alemindir*⁵ (God is not [only] the Lord of the Muslims, but of the whole world).”

We continued our trek along the babbling stream past wild almond trees and bushes with red berries, the mother carrying the rooster in the blue plastic bag and the daughter toting another white plastic bag full of apples and mandarin oranges that they were taking to the monastery to then bring back to feed the children of the extended family to ensure their good health. Finally, after over an hour of hiking through the dry grasses and short pine shrubs, we caught sight of the ruins of the monastery in the distance, nestled in a narrow valley between two rocky mountains (Figure 3.1). Before we reached the outer wall of the main monastery, we arrived at the ruins of a small stone chapel, one hundred meters away from the monastery (Figure 3.2). One wall of the chapel was still relatively intact, with part of an arch still visible. An adjoining wall was half-standing, and the two other walls were little more than piles of rubble. Ibrahim, Azad and I congregated in the middle of the dilapidated chapel, staring at the careful stonemasonry that was still visible in the remaining walls. Wondering aloud, Azad asked, “How did it get to this state?” Gesturing to a hole in the wall where a stone block had been intentionally removed, most likely

⁵ *Rabbil Alemin* in Arabic means “Lord of the Worlds,” referring to God. This phrase is taken from the first verse of the Qur’an, known as *Al-Fatiha* (the opening).

by treasure hunters, Ibrahim replied regretfully, “This is because of our ignorance. We are ignorant. Not only ignorant (*cahil*), but savage (*vahşi*).”



Figure 3.1. Front walls of Der Meryem monastery. November 8, 2015.



Figure 3.2. View of the inside of the ruined chapel outside of Der Meryem monastery. November 8, 2015.

I thought back to a moment earlier on our hike, when Ibrahim had asked me about the meanings of different cross signs that he had seen carved on church walls. I had told him that they were religious symbols, sometimes used for decorating the space, and sometimes carved by pilgrims who had visited a church. I asked him if he had visited Der Meryem before, and he said that he had. He then asked me then if I had been to Yedi Kilise or other churches in the area, and when I asked him the same question, he replied that he had visited some churches in the past to look for treasure. I asked him if he had ever found anything, and he simply chuckled and shook his head. Now in the chapel, contemplating the plundered wall, I was left to wonder if he himself had searched for treasure in the ruins of the monastery where we now were standing, if his interest in religious iconography had anything to do with his past attempts at treasure hunting, and whether his critical view of the destruction of the church was at all self-reflexive.

Following our brief pause at the chapel, we continued walking towards the monastery, which from afar looked simply like one dilapidated wall. After entering through the arched doorway however, we could see that it had been a formidable complex with multiple structures, now mostly collapsed and overgrown with grass, but still discernible. Some of the vaulted halls and rooms were still intact and could be entered, though from above they looked like overgrown mounds. Crosses of all shapes and sizes were carved on the crumbling walls, and gravestones with one large cross on the front side were strewn on the ground (Figure 3.3). As I walked over the grassy mounds, careful not to step on the fallen headstones, I could hear Ibrahim and the cousin's voices as if they were coming from underground. Around the side of one mound, I found the entrance to the place where they were standing — a cool, dark, cavernous room with a doorway that led to another room from one side. Looking up I could see a partially collapsed dome and realized that this must have been the main church of the monastery—the church of the

Holy Mother of God (Figure 3.4). The ground was covered in a thick layer of soft, ashy earth and pigeon feathers, and in the corner were the remains of a fire pit with a large blackened metal tea kettle beside it.



Figure 3.3. Crosses carved on the stone walls at Der Meryem monastery. November 8, 2015.



Figure 3.4. The partially collapsed dome of the church of the Holy Mother of God within Der Meryem Monastery. November 8, 2015.



Figure 3.5. Graffiti on the walls inside the church of the Holy Mother of God within Der Meryem Monastery. November 8, 2015.

Graffiti decorated the walls around us, written in black ink or scratched onto the stone surface. Along with the names of various people who had passed through was written “PKK” and “APO,” referring to Abdullah Öcalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK (Figure 3.5). Following my gaze to the graffiti, the cousin said, “This used to be under the control of the PKK. At that time, the church was in better shape, but then the state discovered that guerillas were living here, and so they bombed it from the air and destroyed it further.” I was unable to verify this account, but it would not be surprising if it were true, since, during the height of the fighting between the PKK and the Turkish military in the 1990s, the army burned thousands of villages in the southeast, as well as forested areas, in order to deprive the guerrillas of shelter. The guerillas were then forced to retreat into more and more remote, mountainous, and inaccessible areas, and the military chased them as far as they could. Thus, the idea that guerrillas may have sheltered in this monastery, and that state forces might have thus targeted the building, would be believable within this historical context.

Whether this instance is verifiable or not, the cousin's offer of this account to me demonstrates the ways in which locals read cycles of violence imprinted onto the landscape. Within this historical frame, the past violence against the Armenian community is compounded by violence against Kurds in the present, and each new episode of violence is inscribed in layers onto the further ruined monastery. Perhaps, because the monastery may have been a place where guerrillas took shelter or perhaps were killed, it might even acquire a new layer of sacredness for the locals. The crumbling walls of the Der Meryem, with its broken cross-stones and more recent graffiti scrawled on the walls, thus becomes both reflection, receptacle, and product of this cyclical violence, as well as a space in the present in which the past is remembered, narrated, and critiqued, the future is imagined and desired.

Just as I was contemplating how these repeating cycles of past and present violence had left its traces on this place, the older woman called out to us from near the dilapidated chapel and we picked our way through the overgrown grass and piles of rubble to join her. The time had come to sacrifice the rooster that she had carried all the way from Van city center, in the hopes of ensuring a successful pregnancy for her daughter. The older woman was wearing a black velvet dress and a white headscarf with delicately crocheted blue and red flowers decorating the edges, draped loosely over her henna-dyed hair. Her daughter wore a black dress and brown sweater, along with a gold-hewed headscarf tied at the nape of her neck, which matched her intricate gold necklace that shone in the sunlight. The daughter sat on a rock by the remaining wall of the chapel, in front of a stone arch, and took the hapless rooster from the blue plastic bag. She laid it on a stone in front of the arch, and her cousin, with a small pocket-knife, cut the animal's throat, its crimson blood spattering onto the stones of the wall. Dabbing her finger in the fresh blood, the daughter first marked her own forehead, and then mine and Nazlı's as well, as her mother

prayed aloud in Kurdish, asking that God accept this sacrifice, bring healing, and accept their prayers and the prayers of all Muslims. The sacrifice was a brief affair, and soon the now-lifeless rooster was back in the blue plastic bag. Nazlı then produced a few pieces of string from her bag, and she and I each chose a small stone and affixed it to the string and then to the wall, among the countless other bits of cloth and ribbon that had been left there over the years (Figure 3.6). Nazlı explained to me that as we tied our strings to the wall, we should each make a wish, and so we stood solemnly together, each carefully tying our rock to our string and our string to the wall, and silently made our wishes, leaving them there among the hundreds of wishes made before.



Figure 3.6. Pieces of string, cloth, and stones tied to the wall of the chapel outside of Der Meryem monastery. November 8, 2015.

This practice of tying knots in pieces of cloth or string is an important ritual of many pilgrimages and is often a mechanism for fixing a prayer or wish. For instance, Josef Meri describes how in Medieval Syria, both Muslim and Christian women would tie knots to date

palms in order to conceive (Meri 2002). The practice of tying knots as part of pilgrimage is also common among Yezidis, who are also Kurdish-speaking, and share many practices with Muslims Kurds. For instance, Ibrahim Al-Marashi writes that in the Yezidi holy shrine of Lalish, “pilgrims tie knots on the cloth covering the tombs, with each knot representing a wish. Untying the knot in a future pilgrimage would bring about the fulfilment of that wish” (Al-Marashi 2017, 150). In addition to fixing wishes, Frazer describes how the tying of knots can be used as sympathetic magic, to effect a curse, or to serve as a protective amulet (Frazer 2002)

After the rituals of sacrifice and wish-making were over, we sat on the grass near the chapel for a picnic and laid out the various provisions that we had brought. Our party offered thin *lavaş* bread, white cheese, tomatoes, and olives, while Ibrahim’s group had flat *tandır* bread, *otlu peynir* (a local dry cheese with herbs), and a thermos of tea. As we sat looking out over the valley and listening to the pleasant sounds of the stream as it flowed west towards the provincial town of Çatak, I asked Ibrahim, “So, what will you do with the rooster now?” He replied that according to custom, a rooster sacrificed here at Der Meryem must be given to the first person that they meet on the road. As might have been expected, once we had hiked back to our cars and were just beginning our journey back towards Van, the first person that we met was a young man just outside the village of Aras. We stopped our caravan and Ibrahim called out to the young man, who approached the driver’s side window. Ibrahim handed him the rooster, still in its blue plastic bag, and the young man, clearly familiar with the scenario, thanked him graciously, saying, “God bless you,” as he collected his prize. As we continued on our journey, my companions and I laughed, remarking to each other that of all those involved, the inhabitants of Aras village seemed to benefit the most from this situation. Many pilgrims come and go, and I would hope that some of their wishes are granted. The people of Aras, however, sell the roosters

that they raise to some of these visitors, and then, after the sacrifice is complete, it is almost guaranteed that the slaughtered rooster will be returned to them, free of charge, since the next village is miles further down the road.

Thus, for Aras, the spiritual economy of Der Meryem embodies the type of reciprocal exchange that Marcel Mauss describes in his classic work, *The Gift*, (Mauss and Evans-Pritchard 2011). In some cases, it seems to be a clear circular system of exchange, in which the pilgrims buy and receive a rooster from Aras, and then after the ritual, are obliged to reciprocate by returning the rooster (the gift), back to Aras. In other cases, the pilgrims, like Ibrahim's family, may have brought their own rooster from Van, but they are still obligated to return it to Aras upon their departure. Here, however, there is an added dimension of the sacrifice, as the rooster, in between being given and then reciprocally returned, becomes a sacrificial element in the ritual at the monastery. Marcel Mauss has also written on the question of sacrifice, and identified how in the process of sacrifice, something is both set apart and given up, and thus is made sacred (Hubert and Mauss 1981). Ethnographic accounts have also described how sacrifices are sometimes made to fix a vow or an oath by bloodletting, or as an act of expiation or atonement for wrongdoing (Westermarck 1968).

Historian Renee Girard has also written extensively on the nature of sacrifice in relation to violence, and he argues that human or animal sacrifice represents ritual violence with the purpose of avoiding violence within society at large (Girard 1979). Girard explains how the violent tendencies of humans are put in check and channeled towards the "scapegoat," the individual human or animal that must be sacrificed in order to protect the balance in the community (Girard 1986). Olli Pyyhtinen has written in his discussion of Girard and Mauss, "in

Girard's reading, sacrifice is violence-turned-sacred" (Pyyhtinen 2016, 25). Expounding on the theory of Girard, Philosopher Louis Dupré writes the following:

This ritual violence constitutes the core of sacrifice. It serves the social purpose of checking the ever-present human tendency toward violence in communal living, whenever a disturbance of the group's equilibrium threatens to unleash it. A single individual or animal must die or at least be removed from the group in order to restore its precarious balance. [...] In Girard's view, sacrifice, as we know it, consists in an attempt to overcome a communal crisis of widespread violence, by directing the anger of the masses unanimously to a scape-goat (Dupré 2008, 256).

In the case of Aras village and Der Meryem, there is both a circulation of exchange along the lines of Mauss's gift, as well as an animal sacrifice as described by Girard. The rooster, which is given to the pilgrims is removed from the circuit of exchange and made sacred through the ritual of the sacrifice, but then it reenters the ring of exchange through the obligation to return it to Aras village.

The other element that resonates with Girard's discussion is the fundamental element of violence central to the context of Der Meryem. The historical and contemporary landscape is saturated in violence, with the ground soaked by the blood of Armenians victims of the Genocide, Kurdish guerrillas more recently, and countless sacrificial roosters over the years. Here, the ritual violence of killing the rooster as an oblation, a sacrificial offer to God as a supplication for fertility and a healthy birth, echoes the earlier episodes of violence and earlier blood spilled. As I mentioned earlier in the chapter, the narrative that Kurds have been cursed for their participation in the destruction of the Armenian community a century ago continues to be recounted today as an explanation for the continued suffering of the Kurdish community at the hands of a repressive Turkish-nationalist state. As mentioned above, in some cases cross-culturally, curses are believed to be reversed through rituals of sacrifices (Taussig 2010; Apter 2017; Girard 1986). Though in the pilgrimage to Der Meryem the sacrifice itself was not

explained in direct relation to the violence of 1915, the overlapping histories of violence and their material effects in the present are congealed in the ruins of an Armenian monastery, narrated, remembered, and recalled through sacrifice.

Within this pilgrimage to Der Meryem we have seen multiple elements that have resonance both within the Middle East and beyond, including animal sacrifice and circuits of exchange, shared sacred sites between diverse religious communities and the use of tying string and knots to fix a wish. Within the theme of shared sacred sites, a note should also be made regarding the significance that this is a pilgrimage to a church identified with the Virgin Mary. Pilgrimages to images, shrines, and churches representing the Virgin Mary have been studied by anthropologists, geographers, and historians around the world, from Europe, to the Americas, Asia, and elsewhere (Hermkens, Jansen, and Notermans 2009; Warner 1983; Sallnow 2013; Stewart 2012; Dubisch 1990). Particularly in the Middle East, the participation of Muslims in Marian pilgrimages has been a focus of scholarly attention (Jansen 2009; Jansen and Kühl 2008; Slyomovics 2009). Considering this background then, this group of Kurdish Muslims in Van traveling to an Armenian monastery dedicated to the Virgin Mary is not a singular incident, yet it is complicated by the local context of overlapping histories of violence.

On the long drive back to Van city center, I could not help but marvel at the ritual that we had just witnessed—a family of Muslim Kurds seeking health and healing in the ruins of an Armenian monastery, a place that was empty and abandoned because of the violence of 1915, a historic atrocity in which some of the ancestors had played an active role. As I understood from Ibrahim’s ruminations during our trek to the monastery, the place did not tell only one simple story. In many ways, Der Meryem embodies what Ann Stoler describes as “imperial ruins” (2013). Such sites are more than just “scenes of a crime” or “documents to damage” (Stoler

2013, 28). Rather, they are also nodes around which lives are lived and stories are told in the present and possible futures are imagined and performed. In Der Meryem, the Genocide of Ottoman Armenians is remembered and narrated. With heavy overtones of regret and remorse, the participation of Kurdish groups in the injustices of 1915 is openly acknowledged and condemned by the descendants of the very perpetrators. But Der Meryem is not only a space of memory and nostalgia. It is not only a reflection, a material representation of past violence, or evidence of the historical crimes against the Armenian community. The afterlife of Der Meryem since 1915 tells repeating stories of destruction—of violence against the Kurdish community and the ongoing war that continues to shape Turkey’s southeast. The space embodies the cycles of ruination of the last century—ruination of both communities and the material landscape. And finally, Der Meryem is a lively space in the present, where new futures are imagined, where rituals are enacted, health is sought for yet unborn generations, and buried riches are desired. Additionally, the space is also enmeshed in the ongoing war, as it may have been put to new use by guerrillas, and then targeted and further destroyed by the military. Thus, Der Meryem is a space in which past, present, and future are entangled, and in which past and present violence are congealed and imagined futures are performed.

In the following section, I transition from our visit to the ruined material remains of an Armenian monastery to the contemporary urban city center of Van, where I further explore how memories of the genocidal violence committed against Armenians is interwoven with the ongoing violence against Kurdish communities in the present.

Reading the Past in the Present

Two weeks after our fortuitous meeting with Ibrahim in Aras village and our joint pilgrimage to Der Meryem, Azad and I paid him a visit at his house, which was in the neighborhood in Van city known locally as Xaçort and officially as Hacibekir. Try as I might, I could not uncover the origin of the colloquially used name, Xaçort. While the official name, Hacibekir, is the name of the nearby military station, the name Xaçort has no obvious meaning. It has no meaning in Kurdish, and though it sounds similar to two Armenian words – *Xaç*, meaning “cross,” and *Hacort*, meaning “the next,” I found no reference to any such name on Armenian maps of pre-1915 Van.

In contemporary Van, the name Xaçort is nearly synonymous with the everyday politics of the Kurdish movement and conjures images of street protests and police violence. This neighborhood was one of many that sprung up two decades ago as a result of war and forced migration. During the height of the fighting between the PKK and the Turkish army in the 1990s, the army sought to oust the guerillas from the southeast by destroying their support system of sympathetic villages that would house and feed them. Some villagers were given the choice of staying on their land if they agreed to become “village guards” (*korucu* in Turkish)—local militia armed by the state to fight against the PKK (Hanifi 2017). Those who refused to ally with state forces and take up arms against the PKK were driven from their homes. Many villagers, especially those in particularly remote or mountainous areas, were not offered such a choice and were summarily expelled from their lands. In total, by the end of the 1990s, approximately 3,500 villages and hamlets were evacuated, many of those also burned and destroyed, and over 380,000 Kurdish villagers forcibly displaced by Turkish security forces (Van Bruinessen 1999; Human Rights Watch 2002; Kurban et al. 2007).

These destitute internal refugees, having lost their homes, their land, their livestock, their crops, and their livelihoods, flooded regional cities as well as the metropolises of western Turkey, often with only the clothes on their backs. They built temporary shelters (*gecekondu* in Turkish) that expanded into shantytowns and over the years became permanent—if economically disadvantaged and underserved—neighborhoods (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011; Secor 2004). One such neighborhood, built on the outskirts of Van city center by Kurdish villagers fleeing state violence in the 1990s, was Xaçort. Populated by migrants hailing from the rural and mountainous areas of Hakkari, Yüksekova, Beytüşşebap, and elsewhere, the neighborhood is today known for its sympathy for the PKK and the Kurdish movement and general antipathy towards the Turkish state apparatus. A drive through the streets of the neighborhood provides ample visual evidence, as ubiquitous graffiti decorating garden walls advertises and praises the PKK and its off-shoots, calls for revenge (Turkish: *intikam*, Kurdish: *tol*) and revolution (Turkish: *devrim*, Kurdish: *şores*), and displays such slogans as “Let go of the hand of the enemy—don’t let go of the hand of the PKK” (Kurdish: *Destê dijmin berde destê PKK bernede*).

In the few months leading up to our visit with Ibrahim, Xaçort had been the scene of nearly nightly clashes between masked youth, armed with stones and Molotov cocktails, and police in armored vehicles and tanks.⁶ I had learned about Xaçort’s reputation as politically charged, explosive, and somewhat dangerous in my first days in Van, over dinner with Azad and one of his friends, Cihat, who was visiting from Germany. Cihat was also Kurdish and originally from the town of Elazığ in southeastern Turkey but had lived in Europe for many years. Cihat was exhilarated to be back in Kurdistan after a long absence and was an enthusiastic supporter of

⁶ For more on politically active Kurdish youth, see Darici 2011, 2013.

the Kurdish movement. As our dinner was drawing to a close, he said excitedly, “What shall we do this evening? Are there any activities going on? Any political activities, for instance?” Azad replied jokingly, “There are clashes going on in Xaçort. If you want, we can go fight with the police.” Cihat’s eyes widened when he heard this, and he quickly backtracked, “Maybe we had better just head home.” Though moments earlier Cihat had seemed eager to participate in some “political activities,” when faced with the reality of the everyday “political activities” that took place in the streets in Van, he suddenly changed his tune.

Often during that period of ongoing clashes, if a loud noise came from outside, everyone would stop what they were doing and nervously wait to see if a fire had broken out or a bomb had exploded. In most cases, after a moment we would understand that the noise came from the backfiring of a car or fireworks from a wedding celebration, and everyone would breathe a sigh of relief and resume their regular activity. All too often though, the sounds that we heard in the night were indeed from gunshots or makeshift explosives set along the road by Kurdish militants as booby traps for police and military vehicles. At that time, every three or four days we would hear news of clashes, police raids on homes, and roadside bombs in Xaçort and the surrounding neighborhoods. Kurdish militants and local youths, police, and soldiers, and civilians caught in the crossfire were killed and wounded.

On the day that we visited Ibrahim and his family, the streets were mostly quiet and empty. It was dusk, and as we passed from the city center into the neighborhood of Xaçort we began to see armored police vehicles roaming the streets, creating an ominous sense of impending violence. These vehicles, known as *akrep*, or “scorpion” in Turkish, have a machine gun mounted on the roof. Just before the turnoff to Ibrahim’s house, we came to a red light at an intersection, where one *akrep* was already stopped. As we pulled up and then stopped directly

behind the vehicle, its machine gun slowly rotated in its base in a circular motion until it was trained on our car. We stayed motionless, with bated breath, our hearts racing and palms sweating, until, after what seemed like ages, the light finally turned green and we turned off of the main road in the direction of Ibrahim's house, as the *akrep* rumbled off in the opposite direction.

I describe the details of our experience on the road to visit Ibrahim in order to impart the constant tension in the air, the atmosphere of impending violence and potential death that pervaded the Kurdish regions throughout my fieldwork. These areas, as mentioned above, continue to exist in a state of semi-occupation by the Turkish army, and this environment—marked by violence, insecurity, and roving military vehicles—defines the everyday experience of the Kurdish population and also shapes their historical understanding of the Armenian past of the region.

When we reached Ibrahim's house, we were welcomed by him and his smiling wife, who led us into a large and cozy sitting room, with cushions arranged on the floor around the edge of the room, a large carpet in the middle, and a wood-burning stove by the door. We took our seats on the cushions and then Ibrahim's children began entering the room one by one. He had nine children, two older boys in their early twenties and seven younger girls. The older children greeted us and then sat across the room from us on the cushions, while the younger ones hid behind stove, whispering and giggling among themselves. I told Ibrahim that I was very interested in the stories that he had told during our trip to the church and asked if he could tell some more of what he knew about the Armenian history of the area. As if he had been waiting for his cue to begin, Ibrahim launched into a narrative in which he recounted the local history of his village as passed on to him from his grandfather:

In the old days, we and the Armenians were neighbors. In Beytüşşebap now there is an Armenian village still standing. In the Armenian times, the Turks set us and the Armenians against each other. At that time, the government gave support to my grandfather. The father of my mother was named Basri. They took him to fight against the Armenians. They gave him weapons and took him to fight. When I was young, I sat with my grandfather and he told me this. There was a cave, a very big cave. He said that in this cave there were thousands of Armenians. They had escaped from their villages and were hiding in the cave. Soldiers had surrounded the cave, and they were shelling it with a canon, but they were unable to hit it. My grandfather was a very good marksman. They put him in charge of the canon and told him to shoot at the cave. He said, 'Ok, I will aim it, but I won't shoot it tonight, I will shoot it tomorrow.' They asked why, and he said, "This evening it is already dark, it's too late. If we shoot now, they will hear the noise of the canon and run away and escape. We will shoot tomorrow so that they can't escape." At that time, we had *aghas* (semi-feudal lords and/or tribal leaders), we had elders, and they agreed amongst themselves and at night, they secretly sent their men to the cave, and they said to the Armenians, "Leave this place, get out of here." The Armenians asked why, and they said, "We have no choice, in the morning we have to shoot at this cave. We made them postpone until tomorrow by saying that you wouldn't be able to escape. Escape tonight and save yourselves!" Then, those who were able to leave escaped. And those who were old stayed in the cave. In the morning, they shot at and destroyed the cave. The old ones had stayed in the cave. The others, the youth, and the girls and the boys, they escaped.

Following this narrative in which his maternal grandfather tricked the Ottoman soldiers into allowing a group of Armenians to escape, Ibrahim elaborated on the story that he had told during our trip to Der Meryem, in which people from his village saved the Christians who lived in the neighboring village:

Now let us return to the history of Beytüşşebap. There is an Armenian village in Beytüşşebap near our village. The government said, "We are going to destroy them, we are going to kill them." Our people, our *aşiret*, said, "We don't accept this, we won't allow you to kill them." They asked why, and we said, "They are our relatives, they are our in-laws. We grew up together." In this way, that village was saved, and it is still there today. In 1994-1995, because of state pressure, they went to Europe. And now, they have again come back to their village and they live there.

I had heard many stories of Christians surviving massacres and deportation, and sometimes even retaining their property, by converting to Islam, and so I asked Ibrahim, "Did these villagers become Muslim or did they remain Christian?" He retorted reproachfully, sounding almost offended that I would suggest such a thing, "No, no, they remained Christian! They are still

Christian now. And still today, we keep up our neighborly relations with them. We are like brothers, there is no discrimination between us. We go to their weddings, they come to our weddings.”

This example of a Muslim Kurdish *aşiret* protecting an entire Christian village is rare, though stories of individual woman and children being saved by and adopted into Muslim families are more common across the region, as mentioned above (Altınay, Çetin, and Libaridian 2014). Ibrahim emphasized the uniqueness of this effort to save the Christians as he described the overall environment in which authorities encouraged local Kurds to do away with the Christian population: “The state said to the Muslims, ‘Kill the Armenians. *Serê ji me ra, malê ji we ra* [Kurdish: the head for us, the house for you].’ That is, ‘Kill them, and take their property.’ Of course, the Armenians said to the Muslims, ‘Don’t do this, we are brothers. Today it is our turn, but tomorrow it will be your turn.’”

Just then, the electricity went out and we were left in the dark. One by one telephone flashlights were turned on, which eerily illuminated Ibrahim’s face as if he was about to tell a ghost story. In the semi-darkness he continued his narrative, explaining that during the massacres, Muslim preachers began provoking the Muslim population to kill the local Christians: “They said if you kill seven Armenians, you will go to heaven. So, they would catch ten or twenty people, my grandfather would tell me, and they would tie them together, and shoot them all at once.” In order to clarify, I asked who exactly was carrying out the killing. He replied, “The state was doing the killing. They killed maybe ten or twenty thousand Armenians just in Beytüşşebap and Hakkari. My grandfathers told me. They saw this with their own eyes.”

The narrative of Muslim preachers or religious leaders (Turkish: *imam* or *şeyh*, Kurdish: *mele* or *şeyx*) encouraging local Muslim to kill Christians was one that I heard repeated again and

again in Van and Hakkari, and also in Bitlis and Muş. A common refrain is that these preachers announced that a person who killed seven Christians would go to heaven. One acquaintance, Hasan, who is a shopkeeper in Van and also originally from Beytüşşebap, like Ibrahim, had also repeated this narrative to me, with a slight alteration. As a merchant selling local artisanal wares, Hasan was well aware of the cultural heritage of the region. He praised the craftsmanship of the Armenian artisans of Van who had been famed for their silver and goldwork, carpets, and stonemasonry. He often mused regretfully that if the Armenians had stayed in Van, the region would now be rich and developed, on par with the major cities of Europe, instead of an underdeveloped and forgotten backwater. He frequently told us that Kurds and Armenians had lived together peacefully as neighbors for centuries, had spoken each other's languages, and would have continued like that, but that the Ottomans poisoned their relationship. He said that the Ottomans sent one hundred or one hundred and fifty imams to the east of the empire, who had been specially trained to turn the Kurds and Armenians against each other. One day as we were sitting in Hasan's shop among his wares—locally handmade rugs, bags, and ceramics, he said, "The government sent these people (imams), saying, 'Whoever kills them (Christians) will go to heaven.' They made a *fetva* (fatwa or religious decree) that whoever kills one [Christian], seven generations of their descendants will go to heaven." Laughing, he added, "Of course, if this is true, then three more generations after me will go to heaven." Though he did not elaborate on this last statement, he implied in this comment that his great-grandfather had participated in the massacres. He himself, however, like Ibrahim, condemned the violence and often proclaimed that Kurds would be better off today if the Armenians had stayed.

Back in Ibrahim's living room, the electricity came back on, just as suddenly as it had gone out minutes earlier, and the older girls and boys began to scurry back and forth to the

kitchen, bringing trays of tea and sweets. They placed in front of each of us a delicate glass of tea, small bowls of sugar and candy, and a plate of cookies. As we thanked them for the tea, Ibrahim's wife apologized that she had not set out a full meal for us. Ibrahim thoughtfully sipped his tea for a moment, and then suddenly spoke up, addressing me directly and shaking his finger pointedly to emphasize his words.

Anoush, the Turkish government tricked us. They tricked the Kurds. They said, 'Kill the Armenians, kill the Alevis, kill the Yezidis. We are Muslim, we are brothers.' They wanted to destroy the Kurds, to erase them from history. But were they erased? They would have been erased, but our leaders turned the situation around and asserted the Kurds again. If not, they would have destroyed us. They would have assimilated us.

In order to elaborate on how the government had influenced Muslim Kurds to turn on their non-Muslim neighbors, Ibrahim recounted a story about a trip that he had made to Iraq a few years earlier to purchase some sheep. During that trip, he happened to visit a Yezidi village. He was thirsty, and a young Yezidi woman brought him a glass of water. After he drank the water, he laughed to himself, and an old Yezidi man who noticed him laughing became angry and asked, "Why are you laughing?" Ibrahim recounted to me the response that he gave to the old man thus:

I said to him, "*Kiriv*⁷, do you know why I am laughing? When I was a young boy, my mother took me to a Yezidi village near Batman. I was hungry and began to cry and an old Yezidi woman brought me some bread and *pekmez* (grape molasses) to eat. I refused to eat it, thinking it was *haram* (forbidden in Islam) to eat food from the hand of a Yezidi. You see, our enemies had brainwashed us. They told us not to eat food from a Yezidi. They said if you kill seven Yezidis you will go to heaven. They told us that Yezidis believed that if they killed a Muslim child they would go to heaven. Then, after we had become enemies, *Rabbil Alemin* (Lord of the Worlds) made it so that one day *Serok*⁸ Öcalan came, and he said that God is Lord of the *whole* world, not only the God of the Muslims – the God of everyone, whether they be *Fileh*, Assyrian, Armenian, Turk, Kurd, Arab, Circassian, Yezidi, or Alevi. The *whole* world, God is *Rabbil Alemin*. God is great, God is Lord of the earth and the heavens. *Serok* came and told us that [our ideas] were wrong. Yezidis also have rights, *Fileh* also have rights, Muslims also have rights. We must all live together as

⁷ *Kiriv* or *Kirve* refers to a type of fictive kinship bond, which, in Ottoman times, was common between Kurdish Muslim and Christian or Yezidi individuals and families. This institution is still common amongst Kurdish communities. For more on the institution of *Kirve*, see Çelik (2015).

⁸ *Serok* in Kurdish means "Leader," and is used often by Kurds to refer reverently to the imprisoned leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan.

brothers. Religion is one thing, and society is something different. See, if not for Öcalan then I would not have drunk the water that this girl gave to me. That is why I laughed.” And the old man laughed as well, I made him laugh.

Ibrahim continued explaining how attitudes towards non-Muslims had changed in recent years, and how the Kurdish movement, here represented by the figure of Öcalan, prompted significant shifts in these ideas. Positioning me as a foil, Ibrahim emphasized how in earlier times people would have discriminated against me because I was Armenian, but then he suggested that now the ideas of those Kurds sympathetic with the Kurdish movement had transformed dramatically towards championing ideas of the cultural rights of diverse groups. However, he mentioned that in contrast, supporters of the conservative, ruling AKP party continue to hold anti-Armenian views.

Don't take this the wrong way, but there was a time when we would have said, “This girl is Christian, we won't talk to her. It is *haram* for us.” But we were very wrong. We were on the wrong path. Why was it wrong? Because every person is a human. You can't kill a Muslim and a Muslim can't kill you. Each person may have their own religion, but we are brothers. Now we realize that everyone has the same rights. And who made this change? Öcalan! But the people who vote for AKP are conservative, and they say, “The Armenians are going to come back.” So what? Let them come back and be your neighbors, let them build their churches. Let everyone have their own religion. You have your religion and I will have my religion. For instance, if you gave me all the money in the world, I wouldn't change my religion, and it is the same for you, isn't that so? You love your religion and I love my religion. I am Muslim, and you are *Fileh*.

At this point, Ibrahim's wife, who had been participating cheerfully in the conversation for the past hour, suddenly looked surprised, and, referring to me, asked her husband, “Her religion is not the same as ours?” He replied calmly, “No, she is *Ermeni* (Armenian), and we are *Bisilman* (Muslim).” She asked again to verify, “She is *Fileh*?” He replied in the affirmative, thus confirming her suspicions. She seemed a bit taken aback by this revelation and fell into a pensive silence as I continued the conversation with her husband. Finally, after fifteen minutes, as I was joking about being all alone in Van since my family was in America, she piped up and said

excitedly, as if she had suddenly found a solution, “Come join our religion!” Her husband laughed and said “No!” Not wanting to be rude, I responded, “We’ll see...” She continued, enthusiastically, “Come, come! Come to our religion. Our religion is nicer.” Chuckling, Ibrahim prompted me to reply, saying, “Tell her that won’t do. Tell her that you have your own religion.” The wife responded, “We like her, let her join us.”

Here Ibrahim’s wife’s reaction to me, her initial incomprehension, her discomfort at my being Christian, and her attempt to resolve the situation by enfolding me into her religion reveals the continued disconnects between various discourses about Christians and Armenians in Van. On the one hand, Ibrahim’s wife represents a view that posits Christians as outsiders, while Ibrahim represents the progressive discourse espoused by the Kurdish movement. Ibrahim’s wife’s suggestion that I convert is made all the more poignant considering the long history of forced conversion, assimilation, and discrimination, which Ibrahim vocally critiques.

Imagining the Future in Spaces of Ruin

Three years passed before I saw Ibrahim again, though from time to time we exchanged holiday wishes by telephone. Then one day in the summer of 2018, he called and suggested that we meet for tea. Azad and I found him waiting for us outside of a small hotel on a bustling side street in the center of the city. Together we walked to the adjacent teahouse, where we sat on short stools positioned around a low table, on the sidewalk in front of the shop. Over our small glasses of tea and Nescafe (which, to my surprise, was also served in a tea-glass), we cheerfully exchanged pleasantries and small talk, asking about each other’s families and work, and vaguely gesturing towards the economic and political crises that the country was embroiled in. I was eager to find out if our trip to Der Meryem had born any fruit but was unsure how to ask politely in case the

answer was negative. I tentatively ventured a question, “How is your niece who we met at Der Meryem?” Joyfully, Ibrahim recounted that two years prior she had given birth to a healthy baby girl, and as per the custom regarding babies born after a visit to the monastery of Der Meryem, she had named her Meryem. If the baby had been a boy, he added, he would have been called Isa, the Turkish name for Jesus. I mentioned to him that our other companions, the married couple who had accompanied us, had also had a baby boy two years ago, and we laughed and joked the perhaps the miracle of Der Meryem had accidentally worked on them as well.

After the customary questions had all been asked, Ibrahim casually queried, “So, how long are you staying?” I told him that I would be returning to the United States soon, and, his eyes twinkling, he replied, “What are you going to bring us as a present from America?” Unsure of how to respond, and not wanting to appear stingy, I asked, “What would you like?” Without hesitation, he declared, “A map!” Realizing immediately that he was referring to a treasure map, I laughed, but Azad asked, “Do you believe in those things?” “Of course!” Ibrahim proclaimed emphatically. Azad continued, incredulously, “Have you ever heard of anyone finding anything?” “Of course! I found things!” Ibrahim replied, with utmost confidence. As Azad and I listened with surprise and curiosity, Ibrahim began to tell us, now in more hushed tones so that those customers sitting at adjacent tables would not overhear us, a series of elaborate stories of how he nearly found buried Armenian treasure, yet how in each instance, at the last moment he was thwarted before he could reach the bounty.

In one instance, Ibrahim explained, someone had shown him a map with the location of buried treasure clearly marked on the site of an old shrine that is now used as a small stable. He showed the place to a relative, and they swore an oath that they would return to unearth the treasure together. But, he said bitterly, the man went back the next day without him and dug in

the place he had shown, unearthing a number of valuable antique objects and gold items. Someone else then found out about this and reported the illegal excavation of historic objects to the authorities at the local museum, and the relative was arrested and imprisoned for five months while the objects were confiscated. In another story, an old woman from the Tiyari valley in Hakkari came to Ibrahim and asked him to help her. She had been born a Christian (most likely a Nestorian) but lost her family during the massacres. Somehow, she had survived the war, stayed in the area, and become Muslim. When she was already very old, she told Ibrahim that before the massacres her family had buried an earthen jug full of gold in their village. She had trusted him and told him that she knew where it was and asked him to help her retrieve it. But, Ibrahim recounted sadly, shortly after this she passed away and he missed the chance. This story echoed a common refrain about treasure hunting in the region (which I will discuss at length in Chapter Four) – that the finding of treasure is always a possibility, but is never fully realized. More often than not, the chance is missed at the last minute.

Just as suddenly as he had opened the subject of treasure hunting, Ibrahim closed it again. As I was about to ask a further question about these perpetually-thwarted attempts to reach the treasure, Ibrahim loudly proclaimed, “Let me treat you two to lunch!” We politely declined, and after insisting twice more, he abruptly rose, paid for our tea, bid us a warm but hasty goodbye, and hurried off, leaving us bewildered and disorientated. On the way to this encounter, I had hoped that our meeting would answer some of my lingering questions about our trip to Der Meryem, but in the end it had complicated the story with further contradictions, and left me with even more questions about how locals, like Ibrahim, imagine and engage with the past, present, and future of that contested geography. As represented by Ibrahim’s somewhat contradictory statements, there are feelings of sadness and regret about the violence of the past, as well as an

enthusiastic, even perhaps desperate desire to uncover the traces of that past, the buried treasure. Finally, there are expectations that I may be able to furnish him with the necessary material—a map—to uncover that treasure.

The spaces of ruin left behind after the Armenian Genocide, such as Der Meryem, represent a historical atrocity. But they are also spaces of imagination, of desire, and of aspiration for a better future. Just as his niece sought a future child in the space of a ruined Armenian monastery, so Ibrahim seeks to find precious objects left behind by the destroyed Christian community as a path to material wealth. These spaces do not tell a simple story about a violent past, but rather, they are sites with which locals continue to engage in the present as they envision and enact a desired future.

Conclusion

The landscape of Van is one marked by cycles of state violence, forced migration, and material destruction. The Armenian community that inhabited the land for thousands of years has been absent for the past century since the genocide of 1915, yet the material traces of their history and the memory of their destruction continue to live on in new contexts and on shifting landscapes. The remnants of the Armenian community represent both “documents to damage,” and “scenes of a crime” (Stoler 2013). They can also be seen as “survivor objects” (Watenpaugh 2017), resilient material artifacts that remain after atrocities and recall the peoples and places that were destroyed. What I argue here is that they are not only repositories, reflections, or receptacles of a violent history. The spaces of material ruin left after the Armenian Genocide of 1915 are not stagnant spaces of loss and melancholy. They are places of dynamic engagements with both a violent history and an imagined future. They are spaces in which Kurdish locals today both recall

and remember the past and enact and perform desire – for health, for children, for prosperity, for gold.

The story of Der Meryem is more than just a story of two religious communities sharing a sacred space, of Muslim Kurds seeking a divine miracle in the ruins of a Christian Armenian monastery. Der Meryem is a space in which the cyclical violence of the past and the present and the as-yet-unborn possibilities of the future congeal in the material space of ruination. It is more than a space of nostalgia and regret or a reflection of a static past. Instead, the space itself is agentive and generative of new futures, called into being through the enactment of ritual. As a space that continues to be enmeshed in ongoing cycles of violence, it both echoes the past and generates the future.

In the following chapter I will further delve into the question of how the Armenian past is imagined through a search for buried treasures, and how I, as an Armenian-American, am often approached as an emissary of that past, someone who can translate that past into the present, or perhaps even as an alchemist, someone who can turn that past into gold.

CHAPTER FOUR

Buried Gold, Buried Histories: Myth, Magic, Materiality

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I described the contemporary afterlife of an eighth-century Armenian monastery, known locally now as *Der Meryem*, or the Church of Mary, and how Muslim Kurds in Van today visit the ruined monastery in order to sacrifice a rooster and pray for a healthy pregnancy and birth. I recounted how, on the way to my visit to the monastery in the company of three friends, we encountered a group of men to whom we asked directions to the church. They immediately assumed that we were going to look for buried treasure and suggested that they join us and that we split our findings fifty-fifty. In the conclusion of the chapter, I described a meeting with Ibrahim, a man whom we had befriended at *Der Meryem*, where he had gone with his relatives to participate in the rooster sacrifice. In all of our previous conversations, Ibrahim had presented himself as leftist, progressive, and critical of the historical Kurdish participation in the dispossession and massacres of Armenians. Because of how he had represented himself as disapproving of and apologetic for Kurdish mistreatment of Armenians, I was surprised when in our most recent meeting he suggested that I bring him a treasure map from America. He then proceeded to describe to me two instances in which he had searched for and come close to finding gold that had been buried by Armenians or other local Christians (Nestorians or Assyrians) as they were fleeing the area during the First World War, and how in both cases his efforts were thwarted.

These two instances of locals in Van either assuming that I was engaged in a hunt for buried treasure or asking if I could assist them in their efforts marked the rule rather than the exception during my fieldwork in Van. During my two years of continuous fieldwork between

July 2015 and September 2017, there were many occasions on which, while traveling in the area with friends, we would pass through a village on our way to look for a certain remotely located ruined Armenian monastery or church, and we would stop to ask local villagers where we could find the church. Oftentimes, the villagers would ask us directly whether we were looking for treasure and if we had a map, and if so, that they would be happy to help us out and split the findings with us. On other occasions, especially if we had addressed them in Turkish, they would eye us suspiciously and, assuming that we did not understand, say to each other in Kurdish, “*Ew bo zêr hatine* (They came for gold).” This signaled to us that they assumed that any outsiders looking to find Armenian historical sites must be there with the intention of digging for treasure.⁹

This chapter addresses the phenomenon of treasure hunting in the Van region as one of the primary ways in which locals imagine, value, search for, and interact with the material and architectural remnants of the Armenian past in Van today. As I described in the previous chapters, the ruins of the Armenian built environment littering the landscape in Van today keeps the Armenian history of the region visible and omnipresent in everyday life, public memory, and political discourse. In Chapter Two, I described how the question of the restoration or destruction of monumental Armenian structures such as the Church of Akhtamar remains a contentious political issue in Turkey today and one that is used by state actors to bolster whatever political ambition happens to be paramount at any particular time. In Chapter Three, I explored themes of remembrance and ritual with the example of the ruined monastery of *Der Meryem*, through which I discussed how ruined Armenian structures are not relegated to the annals of history, but

⁹ Charles Stewart, in his study of digging for buried objects in island Greece, discusses the long history of outsiders being suspected of digging for treasure, dating back to when European classicists and philhellenes began to come to Greece to study Greek and Roman ruins and inscriptions (Stewart 2012, 200).

instead continue to play a lively role within those localities in which they make up part of the spiritual infrastructure of the community.

Building on the discussions of the previous two chapters, this chapter also addresses the question of the afterlives of the remnants of the Armenian community of Van, but this time through the lens of what lies underground. While the previous two chapters focused on the ways in which state actors and locals interact with the prominently visible ruins of the large, imposing churches and monasteries that continue to populate the villages and countryside of Turkey's Kurdish regions, in this chapter I focus on how locals in Van today attempt to read the Armenian past onto the landscape through interpreting cryptic maps and symbols, and how they search for the subterranean traces of that past.

Grounded in an exploration of local narratives and practices of treasure hunting for buried Armenian gold, I demonstrate how the search for buried treasure in Van illuminates the multiple and often contradictory and ambiguous ways in which the violent history of the Armenian Genocide continues to affect and animate contemporary everyday life in eastern Turkey. Here, I suggest that the search for buried Armenian gold is at once a recognition of the destruction of the Armenian community—a history officially denied in Turkey—while also simultaneously an attempt to profit materially from the remnants of a violent past by appropriating the possessions of the victims of a century-old genocide, as well as an enactment of hope for a more prosperous future.

Landscapes of Destruction

As I have described in the preceding chapters, the geography of eastern Turkey is visibly marked by violence, war, and destruction. While traveling through the area, one can see crumbling stone

churches dotting the landscape, which are remnants of the Genocide of 1915 in which the Ottoman state massacred and deported approximately ninety percent of its Christian Armenian subjects (Akçam 2004; Hovannisian 2007; Kevorkian 2011; Suny 2015). Alongside the ruined churches of 1915 are the burned-out shells of Kurdish villages, leftovers of the state's anti-insurgent policies of the 1990s, in which the Turkish army forcibly evacuated thousands of rural Kurdish communities from their homes – a history that I outlined length in Chapter Three (Darici 2011; Gambetti and Jongerden 2011). The story told by the layers of ruins visible on the landscape today is complicated by the shifting positions of victims and perpetrators over the past century. In 1915, many Muslim Kurds participated in the state-orchestrated massacres and deportations of Christian Armenians, while today in Turkey, the Kurdish minority continues to suffer repression and forced displacement at the hands of the Turkish state. As I discussed in the previous chapter, in recent years many Kurdish groups, including the militant PKK, began to recognize the tragic parallels between their current situation and that of the Armenians of 1915, have officially apologized for Kurdish participation in the Genocide, and have called on the Turkish government to do the same (Galip 2016).

The repeating cycles of state violence over the past century have left behind a landscape marked by destruction, and in what follows, my concern is what lies invisible below the earth, below the ruins that we see above the ground on the visible landscape. Here, I attend to the subterranean remnants of those histories of violence that have lain untouched for decades, as I interrogate how they continue to animate the past and enchant the present. I explore the search for buried Armenian gold in eastern Turkey, which today is a lively, if shadowy and semi-legal economy, involving a motley crew of peoples, places, and things. Among them are local Kurds and Turks, Armenians from elsewhere, and soldiers representing the Turkish state. There are

technologies and tools such as shovels and metal detectors. There are inscriptions to be read, symbols to be interpreted, and maps to be deciphered. And finally, there are the objects of desire themselves—the gold, jewelry, and coins—which, more often than not, escape those who seek them. I ask, what does this hunt for Armenian gold tell us about the past, the present and the future, and about perceptions of history, time and materiality in eastern Turkey?

The hunt for buried treasure is by no means limited to the Van region in Turkey, nor is treasure hunting in Turkey a unique phenomenon in itself. Illegal digging in ancient sites is the bane of professional archeologists the world over, as amateur bounty hunters and locals looking for a get-rich-quick scheme attempt to get a share of the subterranean spoils. From “nighthawkers” digging in fields in England to locals searching forests with metal detectors in Germany, to divers looting underwater crusader-era shipwrecks in Israel, the illegal spoliation of ancient sites is a phenomenon that threatens cultural heritage globally (*The Telegraph* 2009; *The Local* 2014; *Haaretz* 2017). Recently, in Bulgaria, embattled archeologists even created a board game to raise popular awareness about the problem in their country, called “Archaeologists vs. Treasure Hunters” (Dikov 2018).

The question of how both tangible and intangible heritage can be protected by law, especially in areas of armed conflict, has been a matter of concern for both scholars and policy-makers alike (Johannot-Gradis 2015). On an global scale, international bodies such as UNESCO (The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and ICOMOS (the International Council on Monuments and Sites) have worked to establish international norms to protect cultural heritage from such destruction, such as the guidelines set forth in the landmark 1972 Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which brought together two movements focusing on the preservation of cultural sites and the

conservation of nature (UNESCO 2005). Anthropologists such as Lynn Meskell have discussed the ways in which such efforts by UNESCO, while pursuing the noble purpose of preventing destruction and intolerance, are severely inadequate, as demonstrated by recent battles over World Heritage sites in areas of conflict around the world (Meskell 2018). Anthropologists and archeologists have also addressed the specific question of the looting of cultural property and the increasing severity of the problem of illegal spoliation of archeological sites due to uneven enforcement of existing laws along with growing demand for antiquities (Barker 2018; Brodie and Renfrew 2005).

Within Turkey, with ancient Roman, Byzantine, Greek, and pre-historic sites dotting the country from East to West, a lively economy in the illegal digging and sale of antique artifacts flourishes. As archeologist Mehmet Özdoğan describes, “cultural heritage in Turkey, like all “archaeologically rich” countries, suffers considerably from the exploits of treasure hunters” (Özdoğan 1998, 121). Archeologist David Shankland, in his study of the interaction between villagers and the nearby archeological sites of Çatalhöyük and Küçükköy, describes how villagers imagine ancient burial mounds to be sources of treasure, and some have dug there looking for gold teeth or valuable items (Shankland 1999). In the popular press, there are frequent news reports of historic and archeological sites being damaged by the work of treasure hunters. For instance, from just one online news site, *Diken*, within five days in December 2018 there were three articles reporting illegal digging and destruction of historic sites, all in Western Turkey: one regarding digging in a Roman burial site in Bursa, one describing treasure hunters who used dynamite to blow up part of an Iron Age settlement in Kırklareli, and a final one reporting six people caught digging in the site of an ancient Roman city only to be released with no charges (*Diken* 2018c; *Diken* 2018b; *Diken* 2018a). Meanwhile, there are a plethora of

websites that offer either advice and information regarding treasure hunting across Turkey, or open forums in which would-be treasure hunters can field questions. Some of these well-trafficked websites have names such as *Define İşaretleri* (Treasure Symbols), *Define Sohbeti* (Treasure Chat), *Define Bulma* (Finding Treasure), *Define Rehberi* (Treasure Guide), *Define Mekanı* (Treasure Place), *Define Bilimi* (Treasure Knowledge), and *Define Yolu* (Treasure Road).

The legal dimension of treasure hunting in Turkey is also a subject of controversy. Though officially illegal, the digging for buried gold is usually ignored, and thereby tacitly approved by authorities. These authorities oftentimes do not possess the resources to stop such illegal digging, but other times they may be systematically unconcerned with the preservation of certain historic sites, especially those connected to minority communities and do not fit within a Turkish nationalist narrative. As I discussed in Chapter Two, there have been documented instances of officials in Turkey intentionally destroying Armenian sacred monuments, and so it would not be surprising if they turn a blind eye when locals harm similar sites in their efforts to uncover buried treasure. Anthropologist Alice von Bieberstein discusses the legality of such digging in her article on treasure hunting in Muş, a city located two hundred kilometers west of Van in southeastern Turkey (von Bieberstein 2017). Von Bieberstein explains the legal background as follows:

The Law for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets defines treasures (*define*) as valuable objects that were buried or hidden long before they were found and are without owner. Principally it is forbidden for laypeople to search for treasures in areas under protection such as graveyards, officially demarcated archaeological sites and in registered urban and natural protection areas (*kentsel or doğa sit alanı*). Everywhere else, such ventures are regulated by means of particular search permits that are issued upon application to the provincial or district administrator (*vali or kaymakam*). If a treasure is found, profits are split such that 50% goes to the state (von Bieberstein 2017, 175).

Von Bieberstein goes on to explain that despite the threatened punishment of up to five years of imprisonment and a hefty fine of up to one hundred thousand Turkish lira, she has not heard of

anyone who had pursued this path of applying for a treasure hunting permit. Still, the practice of treasure hunting in Muş, as in Van, continues unabated. It is the tacit approval on the part of state authorities, despite the official interdiction, that allows treasure hunting to be as ubiquitous as it is. For instance, drawing on her fieldwork observations, von Bieberstein reports that in Muş, it seemed that everyone had some male relative (and it is almost exclusively a male pursuit) who was engaged in treasure hunting as a regular hobby (von Bieberstein 2017, 174). Similarly, in Van, the practice of treasure hunting for Armenian gold is commonly understood to be widespread and is a very popular pastime. Despite its official illegality it is understood to be implicitly allowed, and most everyone, if not involved themselves, either knows someone involved in treasure hunting or at the very least has heard the stories that circulate around the practice.

Muş and Van, along with the rest of the Kurdish majority region of contemporary eastern Turkey, were also the areas with the highest concentration of Armenian populations prior to 1915. In these areas, the treasures being sought today are not ancient Roman or Byzantine artifacts, but rather the personal wealth buried by Armenians fleeing deportation and slaughter at the hands of their government and their Muslim neighbors. Because of this relatively recent violent past, here the hunt takes on a particular historical, political, and moral valence. I suggest that in Van and the surrounding regions, the treasure hunting economy is predicated on an understanding, and indeed a recognition, of the violent history of the destruction and dispossession of the Ottoman Armenian community. It is a recognition of the Armenian history of the area—a recognition that Armenians once lived, worked, and prospered there, and that they were then driven away and massacred, often with the explicit participation of Kurdish locals. Treasure hunters today, working with the understanding of this violent history as the foundation

of their search, are motivated by the hope that finding Armenian gold will save them from economic precarity and guarantee their future prosperity. I contend that in Van, locals hunting for Armenian treasure are at least aware of the violent history that produced those imagined treasures. In many cases, treasure hunters go a step beyond awareness and remorsefully acknowledge the participation of their ancestors in the massacres of their Armenian compatriots, even sometimes offering a personal apology.

In my exploration of how locals in Van imagine and process the regional history through digging for buried treasure, I draw upon the work of other scholars working on the intersections of historical understanding, archeology, and acts of excavation. In his extensive study on the long history of digging for sacred objects in the island village of Naxos in Greece, anthropologist Charles Stewart explores the relationship between dreaming, buried objects, and historical consciousness. Stewart describes how in Naxos, there is a tradition of either saints or local spirits appearing to people in their dreams and instructing them where to dig for buried objects. These objects may be gold coins, sacred religious icons, or the valuable mineral emery. Stewart positions his study in conversation with other studies on the relationship between narratives of treasure, such as that of George Foster, who posited that treasure stories were a way for locals in a Mexican village to justify individual wealth (Foster 1965, 1964), or Michael Taussig, who argued that Bolivian tin miners, undergoing the process of proletarianization, enter into a contract with the devil as a response to their experience of capitalist modes of production as evil, alienating, and destructive (Taussig 2010). Stewart argues that “rather than enforcing social stability as Foster contended or critically mediating the imposition of capitalist production as Taussig has suggested [...], the stories of haunted treasure on Naxos express the emotional bond

with place. [...] Treasures serve as metonyms for one's natal land and a "home" that can never be abandoned" (Stewart 2012, 122).

As a post-Ottoman space, the Greek island described by Stewart shares many similarities with the situation in Van. Stewart explains the historical context thus, "in areas such as Greece, which repeatedly suffered conquests and expulsions, the correlation between violent rupture and treasures has become part of a generalized common sense traceable to antiquity. [...] Invasions, occupations, and ethnic cleansings produced treasures" (Stewart 2012, 197). In Van as well, the treasures sought are largely conceived of as products of the violent rupture of the Genocide, objects that were hidden as their owners were fleeing massacre or about to be deported. Stewart also highlights the intrinsic connection between treasure and historical consciousness thus:

"Buried objects incite historicization. [...] [Their] material existence sooner or later raises questions about possible pasts, thus stimulating historical accounts. [...] Their discovery in the present activates a historical imagining of the land and its former inhabitants" (Stewart 2012, 169). In Van, I would argue that a similar, yet partially opposite process occurs. Rather than the discovery of a buried object (such as an icon) inciting historical accounts regarding the origin of that object as in the case of Naxos, the contemporary Kurdish inhabitants of Van already share a common understanding of the violent uprooting of their former Armenian neighbors. This historical consciousness then leads some to imagine that this violent past has left behind as its residue an underground world of buried treasures, waiting to be unearthed in the present.

In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which both the memory of past violence and the fantasy of future riches are enacted through and activated by treasure hunting in the present. Considering this dynamic interplay between past, present, and future, I argue that treasure hunting for buried Armenian gold is a material recognition of a taboo history and a material

translation of a violent past into a hopeful future. I offer multiple ethnographic accounts that illustrate the practice of treasure hunting and the myths, rumors, and stories that nourish this ongoing process. I engage with the narratives of a number of my acquaintances from Van who have been involved in treasure hunting, or who share the stories that they have heard about treasure that was sought, found, or that remained beyond reach. Through rumor, legend, myth, and folktale, I demonstrate the ways in which locals in Van today interact with the violent past of the Armenian Genocide materially, and how that past is valued monetarily in the present. Finally, I demonstrate how locals attempt to activate that past for future aspiration.

While considering the ways in which locals in Van interact with the Armenian past through practices and narratives of treasure hunting, it is important to underline that this treasure hunting does not occur in a historical or political vacuum. Instead, this practice is enmeshed in the turbulent and often explosive political environment in contemporary Turkey. The practice thus is not only predicated on an understanding of history but also is shaped in and even motivated by the violent everyday of Turkey's Kurdish regions. The lives of these treasure hunters are often dictated by ongoing processes of war, dispossession, and precarity, as I discussed at length in Chapter Three. Thus, their understanding of the Armenian past and their search for the remnants of that past in the present are formed in relation to their politically and historically situated subject positions. As von Bieberstein also reports from Muş, the ongoing "war of changing intensity is responsible for the destitution that forms a crucial driving force for the practice of hunting for treasures" (von Bieberstein 2017, 187).

Accompanying the stories of searching, digging, finding, or being unable to find, there are also many diverse interpretations of this phenomenon that one might hear in Van—some critical, others apologetic. For instance, it is common to hear expressions of outrage and insult

from the many Armenian tourists who come to Van on curated heritage tours or group pilgrimages to visit historic sites and their ancestral places of origin, and who see the churches and monasteries that were the sacred places of worship of their great-grandparents now partially destroyed and surrounded by holes from treasure hunting expeditions. I have heard from multiple such visitors who interpret the ongoing hunt for buried treasure as simply an extension or repetition of the violence and expropriation of the Genocide. These explanations put the blame squarely on the moral failings of Kurdish locals, without taking into account the real material conditions of hardship under which they suffer due to systemic government policies of underdevelopment, underinvestment, and discrimination, in addition to ongoing military operations. Others offer a contrasting explanation, as they explain that the hunt for gold is motivated simply by the basic material economic needs of the treasure hunters. One trope that I heard many times from local Kurds was that these people were simply poor, uneducated villagers who had no other source of hope for the future, that they were not trying to do any harm to anyone, and rather that they were simply trying to augment their meager incomes to feed their families. In contrast to the former explanation, this interpretation served both to excuse the practice and absolve the hunters of any moral responsibility for their behavior.

I suggest that both of these interpretations include grains of important insight, but each also contains significant blind spots. The first severs the practice from its political context in the present, ignores the current plight of the Kurdish community, and reads the contemporary practice anachronistically back into the past. The second, in contrast, divorces the current practice from its historical context and erases any question of ethical accountability. Indeed, both of these interpretations are rooted in historical and social experience and economic realities that cannot be dissociated from one another and that shape the lives of those who have roots in and

still inhabit these troubled lands. In examining the question of treasure hunting, we cannot ignore the basic material economic needs and aspirations of those who are doing the hunting. These people are not searching for treasure in either a historical or an economic vacuum. Their search is shaped both by their understanding of the local history—itsself defined by the violent destruction of the Armenian community in 1915—as well as the last century of state violence against the Kurdish community, which has left the region chronically underdeveloped and impoverished in relation to the rest of the country.

Examining the material and temporal effects of the violent history of the Genocide in the present through the lens of treasure hunting serves to complicate such simplistic explanations and demonstrates the complex reality of the afterlives of that history in the present. Thus, I suggest that while both of these explanations speak to aspects of the process, there is more to the story than what either a material economic equation or a linear trajectory from the Genocide to the present can explain. Instead, I argue that that the phenomenon of treasure hunting illuminates the ways in which past historical violence, a present that continues to be defined by violence and precarity, and an imagined future are congealed together in the imagined valuable objects lying underground. In what follows, I explore a variety of anecdotes that illustrate how ideas of buried Armenian gold are imagined through the stories, myths, and rumors that circulate in Van today. Through these vignettes, I demonstrate how these narratives are kept alive and nourished through being told and retold, and how they serve as a medium through which Kurdish locals in Van continue to engage with the violent past of the Genocide as they imagine a labyrinth of riches lying below their feet.

Enchanting the Present

I am walking up a hillside covered in dry grass and sparse trees on the shore of the large, blue Lake Van, near the small town of Gevaş, in the province of Van, in eastern Turkey. I am with two Kurdish friends, Evin and Murat, a married couple who are both teachers from Gevaş. The area that we are walking in is a large swath of land owned by Evin's grandfather. To this day, the field is known locally in Kurdish as *Zeviyê Sarkis*, or "Sarkis's Field." Sarkis is a common Armenian name, and there had apparently been an Armenian man named Sarkis from Gevaş who had owned and cultivated the field prior to the Genocide of 1915. At the conclusion of the First World War, with the Empire's Armenian community largely destroyed, many local Kurds and Turks took over the now-abandoned Armenian land (U. Ungor and Polatel 2013). Evin's great-grandfather was one of many local Kurds who made use of this opportunity to take over Armenian property as he claimed Sarkis's Field.

As we climb up the hillside, we pass large holes in the earth. Evin explains that locals know that this property was owned by an Armenian before the war, and so they come here to dig for buried Armenian gold. She points out a miniature cave formed between two stones, and Murat explains that a rock with a hole like this is an important sign of nearby treasure. Further up the hill, we come to a tall rock face with a long crack running vertically in the shape of a snake. Below the rock, there is a deep, freshly dug hole. Murat conjectures that treasure hunters had dug here because the snake-shaped crack is another sign.

We continue hiking upwards until we arrive at a spring known locally in Kurdish as *Kanî Kew*, or Partridge Spring, which, Evin explains, has remained from Armenian times. It is a natural spring, surrounded by thorny purple flowers, where clear, cold water bubbles up from beneath the ground. Murat washes his face and drinks from the water and then he says, "You

should drink this water because your ancestors must have drunk from here as well!” Murat knew that two of my great-grandparents had immigrated to the United States from Van, and with this statement, he positions me a person indigenous to that place, an autochthon, and thus who has claims to that water, that spring, that land. This statement echoes a sentiment that I heard expressed by Kurdish locals in Van many times during my fieldwork – that much of the land in Van was historically Armenian land and thus that Armenians somehow had some right to the land. Though I purposefully avoided soliciting such comments, nonetheless I was often included in the imagined collective of Armenian heirs to that geography, and frequently addressed as if I were some kind of representative of that imagined community (Anderson 2006). On many occasions, people in Van would declare to me a version of the following: “Van belongs to the Armenians. This land belongs to your people. All of this is yours.” Of course, this is historically incorrect. Just as all of Van did not belong to Armenians prior to 1915 (though Armenians did own considerable property), the likelihood that my ancestors drank from that specific spring is very slim (though they did originate in that region). Nonetheless, these overgeneralized statements all stand in for a specific political stance of recognition of the Armenian history and claims to the land, in direct rejection of the government’s continued denial of those claims and the violent history that dispossessed the Armenian community of its land a century ago.

Murat, Evin, and I sit down on nearby rocks to take in the view of the lake and the mountains (Figure 4.1). At the distant end of the field, a group of men picks their way through the tall grass and we wonder whether they had anything to do with the fresh holes we had seen. To the east, we can see the city of Van, and in front of us, just off the shore of the lake, is the island of Akhtamar, which houses the tenth-century Armenian monastery of the Holy Cross, restored in 2007 by the central government (discussed in Chapter Two). West of Akhtamar is the

mountainous peninsula of Deveboynu, which extends far into the lake and is dotted with small villages and the ruins of a few medieval Armenian monasteries and churches. Just off of the road that winds from the mainland to the tip of this peninsula sits the partially destroyed Garmravank or Red Monastery. Further down the road, is the village known in Kurdish as Kanzak, where two adjacent churches are now used to store hay. Around a bend in the shoreline is the dilapidated Monastery of Saint Thomas, which sits on the top of a hill, and then the road finally ends in the village of İn. Along this one road, the variety of visible Armenian churches, some destroyed, others restored, and still others re-used, demonstrate some of the different ways in which Armenian ruins are treated by state officials and local inhabitants, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three.



Figure 4.1. View from Sarkis's field (*Zeviyê Sarkis*) near Gevaş. August 19, 2016.

As Murat, Evin, and I gaze out at the lake, Murat begins to recount a story that took place along the Deveboynu peninsula about treasure hunters seeking gold yet being thwarted in the end:

There was a very big treasure here, in the area near Kanzak on the way to İn. Some people—local Kurds—were working with an Armenian to find it. The government was aware of this—that is, the people were paying money to the soldiers, and the soldiers were keeping watch for them. So the Armenian comes, they make an agreement, and they go, and finally, they arrive in the area where the gold is supposed to be, and they come to a hillside, and the Armenian says that the gold is buried just beyond the hill. Then these people say to the Armenian, “Now you leave. Your work here is done.” These are our people, trying to betray him. The Armenian says, “Wait, didn’t we agree to come here together and retrieve it together?” There was apparently some kind of bowl with religious motifs and he said, “I only want that. Whatever treasure there is, you can keep it.” They say that there was a ton or so of gold. So they tell [the Armenian] to leave, and he leaves, saying, “What can I do, they will kill me. Never mind, my life is more important than this.” This man goes back to Armenia. And they continue, they dig, and they are about to reach the spot where their machines and metal detectors are showing where it is. But just then, the shovels stop working, and try as they might, the shovels won’t dig, and they break. So it means that there is magic there. Then a black snake comes out of the ground. They chase after it, but they can’t find it. Then it comes back, it stops near a rock. They say it was huge—a gigantic black snake. This is a true story, and it all happened five or six years ago, it was recent. So they somehow corner the snake, and then the soldiers and the treasure hunters all shoot it with their guns, and the black snake dies. They kill it. Then they start digging again with their shovels, but it’s not working. And this time the metal detector isn’t showing anything either. Finally, they have no choice, they call the Armenian, the same one who had read inscriptions for them. They call him, and as soon as he answers the phone, the Armenian says, “Did you find the black snake?” They say, “Yes, we found it.” He says, “I hope you didn’t kill it.” They say, “Actually, we did kill it.” He says, “In that case, forget about it. Now you will never be able to find it. That treasure has been buried again into the darkness and is gone.” And indeed, they couldn’t find it. The Armenian says, “Look, why did you chase me away, I hadn’t told you everything.” Of course. And now they realize their mistake and they say, “Oh no, why did we betray you?” He was sad too, and says, “Why did I give up and leave without putting up a fight? Now that treasure is lost.

In this story, all sides lose out. Because the Kurds betrayed the Armenians, the treasure is lost, and no one is able to collect a reward. In some ways, this account reflects the historicization of the past century as recounted by many of my interlocutors in Van, in which Kurds betrayed their Armenian neighbors a century ago and are still today suffering the consequences (see Chapter Three). After Murat shares this story, he goes on to recount another instance in which locals who were searching for treasure found a buried clay jug, and when they opened it, a swarm of bees flew out. Terrified, they dropped the jug and fled. This was unfortunate, Murat comments,

because this is just a type of enchantment in which, upon being unearthed, the gold turns into bees. What people don't realize, he adds, is that in order to break the spell, one must touch the bees and then they will all turn back into gold and fall to the ground. But, instead, because they don't know, people are afraid and run away, and the treasure is lost.

This motif of buried gold turning into something else upon being unearthed by those who are not its rightful owner was one that I had heard during earlier fieldwork that I conducted in the province of Elazığ in 2012 during the restoration of two Armenian fountains in the village of Habap, a project carried out by the Istanbul-based Hrant Dink Foundation. In this instance, villagers in Habap had recounted stories to me in which treasure hunters, upon digging in places where treasure was believed to be, found buried earthen jars, and when they opened them, dirt would spill out or a terrible smell would emerge, or, in one story, a black cat jumped out of the ground and scampered away. Von Bieberstein, in her account of treasure hunting in Muş, writes that “treasures can also evaporate into dust or ladybugs in the absence of the right spell-break” (von Bieberstein 2017, 184). Charles Stewart, writing on island Greece, also mentions that if the correct protocol is not followed after finding treasure, which may include keeping it a secret or using part of it for a specific purpose, then the gold may turn to coal, rusted iron, or another worthless substance (Stewart 2012). In the case of Kurds hunting for Armenian treasures in Turkey, this loss of the treasure through its transformation suggests an implicit recognition of the moral ambiguity of the spoliation of the property of a community whose possessions had already been in large part appropriated through processes of mass violence and dispossession. It also suggests an acknowledgment that the seeker is somehow undeserving of the spoils, and thus unable to benefit from them.

This sentiment that Kurds seeking the buried wealth of the destroyed Armenian community are undeserving of that wealth or that by appropriating their property they would be transgressing some kind of moral boundary, is expressed in a saying that I heard in Habap, and which von Bieberstein reports from Muş as well – “*ağlayanın malı gülene yar olmaz*,” meaning that the property of the one who is crying will not benefit the one who is laughing (von Bieberstein 2017). The sense of this saying is that if one acquires the wealth of another who has been unjustly wronged or deprived of their property, then the property of the victim will not benefit the new possessor. In Habap, this saying was used specifically to discuss those who sought Armenian treasure and to explain how those who found Armenian treasure often were not only unable to enjoy it, but who suffered because of it. For instance, in one case, a man who found buried Armenian gold used his newfound wealth to buy a tractor, but then while driving the tractor he crashed into a tree and died. While I never heard this specific saying in Van, a similar sentiment was often expressed as disapproval of treasure hunters for attempting to unjustly appropriate wealth that they did not deserve. The stories of gold turning into dirt, bees, or a cat and thus escaping the seeker seem to echo this sentiment that the wealth buried by Armenians fleeing genocide a century ago is somehow morally off-limits for those trying to profit from finding it today.

When I first heard Murat’s story of the black snake in Gevaş, I understood it within this genre of stories of gold transforming into an animal by means of an enchantment. However, I later came upon another possible interpretation that resonates within the folklore compilations that were collected among the communities of Armenian immigrants who left the Ottoman empire and came to the U.S. in the early twentieth century. One of the early collections was a 1925 publication by Mardiros Ananikian on Armenian Mythology, in which he explains that

“ancestral spirits [...] usually appear in the form of a serpent. As serpents they reside in and protect, their old homes [...] They all haunt houses as protectors or persecutors; live in ruins, not because these are ruins, but because they are ancient sites; [...] possess subterranean palaces, realms and gardens, and dispose of hidden treasures; [...] They are hungry and thirsty and have a universal weakness for milk” (Ananikian and Werner 1925, 73). He also mentions that “The house-serpent brings good luck to the house, and sometimes also gold. So it must be treated very kindly and respectfully” (Ananikian and Werner 1925, 76). This motif is further documented in Anne Avakian’s annotated bibliography of Armenian folklore, where she lists multiple sources in which the snake or serpent is a symbol of wealth and the spirit of the home or keeper of the house (Avakian 1994, 9, 57).

The figure of the house-snake was further elaborated in one of the short stories written by William Saroyan, the Armenian-American author who was born in Fresno, California to parents who emigrated from the Ottoman province of Bitlis, just west of Van. In an evocative short story entitled “Najari Levon’s Old Country Advice to the Young Americans on How to Live with a Snake,” an old man from Bitlis named Najari Levon describes the snake that lived in his childhood home back in Bitlis to two young Armenian children in Fresno: “In our house in Bitlis lived a very large black snake, which was our family snake. [...] No proper family was without its proper snake. A house was not complete without a snake, because the long snake crawling back of the walls held the house together. [...] Our snake had great wisdom, it was the oldest house snake in Bitlis” (Saroyan 1988, 76). Najari Levon then explained to the children that having a snake in the house was good fortune and described the snake as “ten times the length of a walking stick,” and “as big around as a saucer, with a very sensitive face, very large eyes—not the little eyes of English people, but the large eyes of Armenian people. And Kurdish people”

(Saroyan 1988, 77). In this story, Najari Levon explains that in the spring, when the snake emerged from its winter hibernation, he would feed the snake a large bowl of milk, echoing Ananikian's mention of snakes having a weakness for milk. Elements of this story are also found in Kurdish folklore from Turkey, such as the folktale of a Kurdish shepherd who befriended a snake that each day would leave him a gold coin in exchange for a bowl of fresh milk (Edgecomb et al. 2008). Charles Stewart also mentions that in island Greece, there is an understanding in some folktales that "serpents guard treasures" (Stewart 2012, 204).

These motifs of the snake as protector and guardian of the family wealth that appear in Armenian folktales suggest another possible interpretation of Murat's account of the black snake in Gevaş. Perhaps the black snake that emerged from the ground was not simply the gold turning into an animal by means of enchantment. Instead, perhaps the snake had been the house-snake of an Armenian household, like the one in Saroyan's short story. Perhaps during the war, the Armenian family had, in fact, buried their wealth, and when they left their ancestral home, perhaps the snake stayed behind to guard and protect its family's property. Perhaps the snake was the keeper of the gold, rather than the transformed gold itself. Perhaps it held the key to the gold but simply needed to be placated with a bowl of milk. Instead, not understanding the century-old bond of the family snake with the wealth of the home, the treasure hunters shot the snake, thus destroying their chance of ever retrieving the bounty that they sought.

Regardless of the origin of the snake, whether mythical or real, its position in the story highlights the moral transgressions of the treasure hunters in multiple ways. Firstly, owing to the fact that the Kurdish treasure hunters were not privy to the knowledge necessary to access the gold, they were unable to successfully interpret the snake as the gatekeeper, and instead of negotiating with it, they killed it. Secondly, the treasure hunters were attempting to appropriate

the wealth of the victims of mass violence, and when confronted with an obstacle, responded with further violence in the killing of the snake. Finally, their betrayal of their Armenian associate, whom they threatened and sent away, carries echoes of the betrayal of the Armenian community by their Kurdish neighbors a century ago, when Kurdish groups collaborated with the Ottoman government first in the deportation and slaughter of the Ottoman Armenian community, and then in the expropriation of their lands and property.

Each of these themes—of betrayal and deception; of signs mapped onto the landscape; of the need for an Armenian insider to interpret the signs and show the way; of enchantment making the treasure inaccessible; and of almost finding the gold but of being thwarted at the last minute—were echoed in other narratives of treasure hunting that I heard throughout my fieldwork in Van. Each of them gives a clue into the ways in which Kurdish locals in Van today imagine the history of the Genocide in the present, through an active search for the material traces left behind by that violent history in search of economic gain but accompanied by a deep discomfort and ambivalence toward that same search. In the following sections I explore the narratives and practices of a number of avid treasure hunters along with the stories that circulate around this practice in order to illustrate the ways in which the history of the Genocide is engaged through treasure hunting both as a recognition of a violent past, as well as an active aspiration for a more secure future.

Mapping the Future

In the villages and towns around the Van region, I met many men (and it was almost always men) who dabbled in treasure hunting, or at least enjoyed daydreaming about the prospect. Of all of the treasure hunters that I met, from the would-be to the tried-and-true, the most unabashed

and zealous was a middle-aged man named Zeki, who was from Çatak, a small town south of Van. Zeki was introduced to me by his nephew, Ahmet, an acquaintance who frequently and adamantly proclaimed that he was definitely *not* a treasure hunter, yet seemed to be inordinately interested whenever the topic of treasure hunting was brought up. On the day that we encountered Zeki, Ahmet and I had met for tea in a smoky cafe on the top floor of a run-down shopping center. The place also doubled as an *Okey* Salon, where men sat at square card tables with blue table cloths, playing *Okey*, a locally popular, tile-based game.

Just as Ahmet and I sat down at an empty table in a corner of the room, Ahmet noticed a relative of his sitting at another table. Ahmet called out to him and waved him over to join us, then turned to me and explained, “Uncle Zeki is an avid treasure hunter.” The man who approached our table was short, thin, with sun-browned skin and a thick, neatly-trimmed black mustache. He looked to be in his mid-fifties or sixties and had thinning hair, a big smile, and sparkling eyes. Ahmet introduced him to me saying jokingly, “Anoush, this is your enemy. He is a treasure hunter.” Then Ahmet introduced me to his uncle, “This friend is American, she’s studying history.” Even though Ahmet did not say that I was Armenian, Zeki was immediately excited by this announcement and said, “If she has the information we need, that would be excellent!” Ahmet retorted, “Well, Uncle, she is not a treasure hunter, but she is curious, and so I said, ‘here is a treasure hunter for you!’” Zeki smiled impishly and laughed. He was clearly comfortable with this appellation and made no protest, so I asked him, “How long have you been into these sorts of things?” He replied, “It’s been about twenty-five years.” Ahmet interjected, “And he never found anything.” Zeki repeated, “And I never found anything!” I asked, “Why do you keep looking if you never find anything?” With great conviction, he replied, “I will find

something. I know where the things are, I just can't get to them." He explained that he has the information, he has maps, but he can't understand what's written, he can't crack the code.

The undecipherable code that Zeki mentioned, which he saw as the barrier standing between him and the treasure that he sought, was the Armenian alphabet, and he hoped that I might be able to help him to decrypt this cipher. Many times while I was in Van, locals would ask me if I could read the "signs," "symbols," or "codes" that they saw carved on rocks or churches. Most often, these were simply either Armenian religious or funerary inscriptions, or sometimes the sign of a cross or a decorative animal carving. Because the community who carved those inscriptions and who could read them vanished a century ago, the Kurdish-majority residents of Van today are left with indecipherable signs but no one who can translate them. Thus, they are no longer considered an alphabet like any other but instead become a collection of cryptic symbols, a mysterious code to be deciphered. Thus, any Armenian writing, which usually is simply the name of the deceased on a tombstone or the information regarding the benefactor who paid to restore a church, is seen as possibly containing some mystic power or instructions regarding accessing a treasure.

Zeki began to describe to me his current endeavors, all the while eyeing me eagerly, his eyes full of hope that I might be able to provide him the key that he needs to decipher the unintelligible writing, symbols, and signs. First, he told me about two churches for which he had been searching. He described how one of the churches has a stone in the dome that is eight palms long, has a lizard carved into it, and is painted green. He explained that there is a treasure hidden behind that stone. He then described another church that is supposed to be located fifty-six kilometers away from Van in the direction of the qibla (the direction of the Kaaba, the sacred

building in Mecca, towards which Muslims turn to pray). This church also apparently houses a treasure, but thus far he has been unable to find either of these locations.

Zeki then pulled out his phone and began to show us a series of photographs of carvings of animals on rocks and on the walls of caves – bears, lions, snakes, and camels, all which supposedly point to the location of buried treasure. He showed us one photograph of a carving of a wolf, saying, “Behind this wolf, there are eleven pups, and behind that, there is a cave. The wolf is looking in the direction of the treasure.” Zeki’s fascination with carvings of animals echoed the narratives of many other treasure hunters with whom I spoke. Overall, it seemed that the specific type of animal did not necessarily make a great difference—though there was some speculation in this direction—but rather the presence of an animal in itself was the main point of significance. On the other hand, in many cases, it was not necessarily a distinct carving of an animal or a written inscription at all, but rather simply a crack in the rock, or a stone with an unusual shape that was interpreted as a sign of treasure. This type of interpretation is demonstrated by Murat and Evin’s explanations of the various natural features that we encountered on the landscape of Sarkis’s field, as discussed above. In general, it seemed that any aberration in the landscape, anything out of the ordinary, provided grounds for conjecture, for imagining that a crack in a rock might very well lead to an underground treasure trove.

After Zeki finished showing us the plethora of photographs of animal carvings that supposedly led to buried riches, he laughed and said, “My phone is a treasure trove, but I haven’t found anything!” I countered, “How does anyone find anything?” His eyes gleaming, he replied, “The sources of the treasure are usually Armenians. For instance, an Armenian comes and says that there is treasure in a certain place.” He looked at me expectantly, as if dreaming that I might be the guide for whom he has been waiting. Here Zeki’s statements demonstrate a fundamental

dilemma of the treasure hunters. They are seeking the treasure of Armenians who were unjustly dispossessed, yet they need Armenians to return so that they can access that treasure. This is because they believe that only Armenians can decipher the “codes” (i.e. inscriptions in the Armenian language and carved symbols) and also because Armenians are imagined to have received knowledge about buried family treasures from their elders, who may have passed down maps and other instructions to their offspring.

Zeki’s suggestion that an Armenian might come and guide a local hunter to buried treasure was echoed by many of my acquaintances in Van, who implied the same underlying assumption when they asked me if I might have a map, know the whereabouts of my great-grandparent’s buried treasure, and if they might help me in my search. All such questions were predicated on the assumption that I was of course involved in some kind of treasure hunt, because why else would I, a young, unmarried Armenian-American woman with a comfortable life in the United States, trek half-way across the world to spend so much time in Van? According to local logic, barring the only other possible explanation—that I might be some type of spy—then obviously I must be there to find my ancestor’s buried treasure. Even if I was not there on a treasure hunt of my own, then I was assumed at the very least to possess the occult knowledge that might help other treasure hunters in their hunt—in particular, knowledge of the Armenian alphabet, and hopefully also the secret hiding places of gold along with the spells and enchantments used to obscure those sites.

Zeki then went on to describe another source – an old Jewish man who lives in Izmir, in the west of Turkey, and who apparently has extensive knowledge of where buried treasure is to be found. Zeki is in touch with the man, who has given him instructions about a certain destination near his home-town of Çatak, which he described to us:

He says that there is this certain cave in Çatak, with a bear on the roof. I was there in the fall. He says you must take five kilos of diesel fuel, and a bag full of some kind of thick cloth, and you will wipe the entire wall of the cave with the fuel, from the ground up to a meter in height. You will find a tiny carving of a bear the size of a coin. When you see that, you will break the wall there, and you will find a prize there. Then, he said, in the middle of the cave there is a carved stone. He swore an oath, and said, 'I'm telling you, in this cave, there are four tons of gold.'

In this narrative, Zeki went into great detail describing the steps one would need to access the treasure, adamant that if one just followed these instructions, one would certainly find a bounty of wealth. Here Zeki strays from the narrative, more common in Van, of the figure of the Armenian as the guide, and instead describes an old Jewish man, which highlights the way in which Jews and Armenians, in the post-Ottoman context, are associated with money, business, and gold. In the Ottoman case, these stereotypes are rooted in the fact that historically, non-Muslims—including Greeks, Armenians, Jews, and Levantines—were disproportionately represented in the merchant classes and banking institutions in the large cities, in comparison to their Muslim countrymen (Suny 2015, 51). Historically, Armenians in Turkey have also been known for their prowess in the craft of gold and silver smithery (Houshamadyan). In Istanbul today, a large number of Armenian goldsmiths still work in the famous Grand Bazaar (Bal 2014). In Van, Armenian metalworkers were well-known particularly as silversmiths and were famous for their technique of decorating silver with niello (*savat* in Turkish), a black compound of sulfur mixed with lead, copper, or silver (Guzeloglu 2015; Tokat 2010). Because of these historical concentrations of Armenians in the trade of jewelry-making, and of Armenians and Jews both overrepresented in the merchant and business classes, in post-Ottoman Turkey, both minority groups continue to be associated with ideas of money and gold. Though most Ottoman Armenians were poor villagers, over-taxed by both government officials and local Kurdish

feudal lords, the idea that Armenians have a good business sense and are rich in material wealth has proved to be an enduring stereotype in Turkey.

Outside of the post-Ottoman context, negative stereotypes about Jews being associated with money and usury have also been widespread historically in the European and American contexts (Foxman 2010). As Jan Gross writes, “associating Jews with money or with gold [...] is one of the most prevalent anti-Semitic clichés” (Gross and Gross 2016, 11). Gross’s work is itself deeply resonant with the issue of Kurds hunting for buried Armenian gold, as he writes on the issue of Catholic Polish villagers digging for gold in the mass graves of the Jewish victims of Nazi extermination camps in the countryside of Poland in the decades after the conclusion of the Second World War. In both cases, local communities, who were themselves deeply implicated in the mass murder of the eradicated minority group, in the aftermath of the genocide seek to extract gold and other valuables from the sites of destruction.

Though today in Van there is no remaining Jewish population, locals still remember the Jewish community that was centered in the nearby town of Başkale, and which had its own synagogue and rabbi until the community migrated to Israel between the 1950s and 1980s (Şanlı 2018). Between the prevailing memories of disappeared local Jewish and Armenian communities, the continued presence of those minority communities (if radically diminished) in western cities such as Istanbul and Izmir (Brink-Danan 2011), and the persistent stereotypes regarding these communities as associated with money and gold, it is understandable that an old Jewish man might seem a reliable source for local treasure hunters such as Zeki, who are eager to glean actionable information from wherever he can.

After hearing Zeki’s description of the old Jewish man’s instructions, along with the assertion that the cave contains four tons of gold, Ahmet laughed dismissively, commenting that

these tales were so exaggerated that they were not believable. Determined not to lose our confidence in his account, Zeki protested hotly, “No, no, there are maps!” Zeki then pulled out his telephone and showed us a photograph of a map. Pointing to the screen, he said, “Look at this map, see how it is real? There are others that are real just like this one.” He recounted to us that a certain man had spent thousands of dollars to buy this map from someone in Armenia, but then he was unable to figure it out and so sent the photograph to Zeki in the hopes that he might have more success (Figure 4.2).



Figure 4.2. Zeki’s photograph of a treasure map with text removed. Date and origin unknown.

The map was hand-drawn on a piece of tattered cloth, its edges fraying and ripped in places. The map lay on a dark surface, and next to it, a black watch had been placed for scale. The map itself was drawn in black ink and depicted drawings of features of the landscape, buildings, numbers, arrows, and roads. In the background, there are craggy mountains and a fortified castle wall with a tower. In the foreground, there are modest houses, two churches, a

windmill, and piles of what might be rocks, shapes that could depict small bodies of water, and a large urn. There is one small stick-figure of a human next to the windmill, and at the very bottom of the map, there is a monster-like figure with three human heads and feet that resemble those of a chicken. There are two drawings of keys on the page, as well as a depiction of a clock showing 3:00, with a crescent moon next to it. Finally, in the bottom right corner, there are six lines of text written in Armenian.

It is the text that was Zeki's main concern. This is the code that he needs to crack in order to reach the bounty, and he is hoping that I will be the key that will unlock the cipher. He asked me excitedly if I could help him read it, adding pointedly, "Don't worry, you will get a share too." "I don't want anything," I protested. At this, Ahmet guffawed, saying, "You can have two tons!" Insisting that I did not want any part of any treasure, I studied the text, slowly sounding out the hand-written letters and piecing together the phrases in my less-than-perfect Armenian. The first line was a word that I did not understand, which could have be a place-name. Below that, I read and faithfully translated the text aloud as follows:

My Treasure
Not accessible by strangers.
The treasure is enchanted
My secret is passed on to
my sons Armen, Mesrob, Gurgen

Underneath the text was the drawing of a key and an arrow pointing to the three-headed creature. On the left side of the map as another single word, which I read and supposed to be another place-name.

Zeki and Ahmet both hung on my every word as I attempted to decipher the map for them. Their eyes shone as I read the words "treasure," but when I finished, they were not satisfied. There was no concrete information upon which they can act. The two place-names

were unfamiliar to them, and thus they were back where they had started. Zeki had hoped that the text would include clear instructions of exactly where to go, what to look for, and precisely how deep to dig. Instead, the vague and cryptic lines on the map left him with more questions than answers. Again and again, he asked me what else the map says, convinced that there must be more information, and I wondered again, as I had with the villagers in Muradiye, if he suspected me of keeping some information to myself. Perhaps he thought that there is more of the text that I understood but chose not to share with him, and that I might use the information to search for the riches that he imagined to lie in his future.

This map represents a mystical cartography, a document that itself creates the mystery, rather than providing a key to decipher the mystery. The shapes, figures, and text, instead of illuminating the landscape and demonstrating a path, serve to obscure and conjure further obstacles. Zeki hoped that in translating the text, I might provide him a clear direction, but instead, I offered only further obfuscation. This demonstrates another dilemma of the treasure hunter. They need the Armenian guide to decipher the signs, yet once they share any of their closely guarded material, there is then ground for suspicion of the other's motive. This is a common theme in tales of treasure hunting in multiple contexts, such as in the plot of the 1948 Western adventure film, *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, in which paranoia and greed prove to be the downfall of a trio of American gold prospectors. Jan Gross also reports this as a concern among the Polish villagers digging for gold in Nazi death camps: "Death-camp harvesters usually worked alone, lest a lucky find provoke envy from a neighbor"(Gross and Gross 2016, 25).

Zeki's map represented a dilemma that I encountered during my fieldwork, in relation to the maps that treasure hunters shared with me. Unlike other images, such as images of Armenian

ruins, landscapes, or cityscapes, a treasure map is a particular type of document, and it is valuable because it is particular. It is precious because it is rare; because only a few select individuals possess it, and thus possess the potential to uncover the treasure. One should not share their treasure map with others, in order to protect the possibility of finding the treasure oneself. But in this case, a Kurdish treasure hunter (Zeki) felt compelled to enlist the help of an Armenian interpreter (me) to read his map. When Zeki showed me the map, he was careful to ask that I not share the map with others, lest they decipher it before him and find the treasure that he sought. During my fieldwork, I was faithful to his request and did not show the map to anyone in Van who might be remotely interested in pursuing such an endeavor. However, nearly two years later, when I was writing about my fieldwork, I wanted to include the image of the map as a text to explore how locals in Van map the past onto the present and how they imagine Armenians and the history of the Genocide embodied in the landscape. My initial solution to this ethical dilemma was to digitally erase the text of the map, so that I could use the image but without any identifying information, much like assigning a pseudonym to my interlocutors when I write about them (for instance, Zeki and Ahmet are not the real names of the people that I write about here).

Long after I had met with Zeki and Ahmet, when I was back in Los Angeles writing about this encounter, a friend suggested that I try a reverse image search on google. I did and was surprised to find that the very same map that Zeki had been closely guarding had been shared by someone else on one of the many online Turkish treasure hunting chat forums. The person who had shared the image of the map wrote that his friends were searching with this map in the west of Turkey and asked if any experts could help decipher it. Multiple members of the chatroom chimed in: one pointed out that it contained Armenian writing, another declared it fake because it

contained the symbol of a clock, and a final commenter blamed the influx of refugees from Syria into Turkey for the recent increase in fake maps. Finding the same map available online partially relieved my hesitation about the ethics of including the image of the map in my dissertation, but I decided still to use the redacted version in order to maintain the commitment that I made to Zeki not to share the map as a viable source.

While Zeki and I were busy discussing the map, Ahmet, meanwhile, had entered into his own reverie. As much as Ahmet had previously insisted to me that he was certainly *not* a treasure hunter, hearing his uncle's stories and seeing the photograph of the map with its tantalizing inscription prompted him to daydream aloud, and he voiced to us what he imagined he would do with such riches:

Uncle, you're talking about *four tons* of gold. With four tons I will buy all of Istanbul, I will never look back at Çatak. I haven't even seen a quarter gram of gold, and you're talking about *four tons*. If I had this gold that you are talking about, I would go to Istanbul and build two or three towers. I wouldn't waste my time in Van. For years I have been wasting away here. If I had what you are talking about, I would go to Istanbul, I would build two or three thirty-floor buildings, sell the apartments one by one for three hundred thousand lira each and save myself. I would secure the future for my family and kids. Look, Uncle Zeki is talking about four tons, how can I not be tempted.

Here, Zeki demonstrates to us his fantasy of a future, one in which economic success and security is defined by real estate in Istanbul. He also partially discards his attempt to feign disinterest and reveals his eagerness to obtain such dazzling wealth. Some days later I met another relative of Ahmet, a cousin who is a musician from Çatak. When I mentioned Ahmet's impressive knowledge of the Armenian sites in the region, the cousin replied, laughingly, "He knows all of the historical places because he's dug in all of them! We call him 'Ahmet the Mole,' because he's dug everywhere!"

Though Ahmet and Zeki presented themselves in opposing manners, the prospect of untold riches serves to dissolve any facade of disinterest in the question of treasure hunting.

While Zeki was openly enthusiastic about the process, Ahmet carefully cultivated an air of indifference, even of disdain towards treasure hunting as unjust spoliation. However, because of his very real condition of economic precarity, the promise of fabulous wealth eventually became too attractive to disregard, and Ahmet too gave in to the fantasy of the hidden treasure, voicing aloud the future that he fantasized about for himself and his family, secured by the possibility of finding buried gold. For Zeki and Ahmet, finding treasure represents a possible, aspirational, and desired future that would save them from their current position of economic hardship and insecurity. In this case, in a twist of fate, the imagined gold, which is understood to be the remnants of the history of the Genocide, here becomes a path to economic salvation and deliverance. Thus, a violent past becomes translated in the present through its material traces into a fantastic future.

A Landscape of Symbols

In the following sections, I elaborate on the ways in which the Armenian history of the region is imagined by Kurdish locals through the notion of buried treasure, and how these ideas persist through the stories that circulate in Van. I introduce multiple characters whose experiences, narratives, and understandings of the phenomenon of treasure hunting demonstrate the ways in which the violent history of Van is understood today to be congealed in the mythical riches buried underground, and which are seen as possible gateways to future success.

Mecit is a Kurdish man who teaches literature at a public school in Van. He is sympathetic with the historic suffering of the Ottoman Armenian community, but also quite open about his own efforts at treasure hunting in the not-so-recent past. We met one afternoon over an extended tea at a cafe, and he recounted to me his understanding of the local history. He began

by explaining how Kurds had participated in the massacres of 1915, but then, after the Armenians had been eradicated from the area, how the state turned on the Kurds and began subjecting them to violence and deportations. This historic reversal of the role of the Kurds from perpetrator to victim, he emphasized, made them starkly aware of their role in the earlier destruction of the Armenian community. He continued his narrative as follows:

After that, Kurds understood what happened, because this time Kurds were being massacred. Now, more than understanding Armenians, we empathize with them. We are ashamed of that history. We realized that we did the wrong thing. Because of that, we see Armenians as an oppressed people who suffered genocide. Now we see them as brothers. In 1915 around one and a half million Armenians were driven from here, from eastern Anatolia towards Syria. They say that 500,000 people died just from lice [typhus]. They died from contagious diseases. And people say that the Armenians sold their property and their possessions for gold and buried the gold in the hope that they would return. They could not take their animals with them, so they sold them for whatever price they could get. And they could not take their valuables with them on the road because they would be robbed. That's why people say that they buried their gold before they left.

Here Mecit underlined the direct connection between Kurdish participation in the Genocide, their later sympathy with the Armenian's plight, and their current understanding of the existence of buried gold waiting to be unearthed. Intrigued by his mention of the rumor of gold, I asked Mecit if anyone had ever found anything. He replied, saying, "Many people have. I know because I was involved in treasure hunting for a while. In fact, I learned about where the Armenians made their burial grounds and about the symbols that the Armenians used to show where they put their treasure. I figured that out and even found two of your graves. God forgive me, but I didn't find anything inside." Mecit was clearly somewhat ashamed and uncomfortable with admitting to me, a descendant of Armenians from Van, that he had intentionally dug up two Armenian graves, which he referred to pointedly as "my" graves. Though I was surprised by both the original actions of grave-robbing and disturbing remains and his willingness to admit it, I did not want to make him feel more self-conscious since he was generously sharing his experience with me, and

so I ignored that statement and asked him instead how he could understand the symbols that he mentioned. He continued:

There are special symbols. Armenians developed a symbol language amongst themselves so that even if they themselves couldn't return, at least one of their people could find what they had hidden. For example, a horseshoe, a cross, a jug. For instance, if a certain cross has a certain symbol underneath it then that means that there is treasure. A chick, for instance. These are carved on rocks or boulders. There are hundreds of symbols like this. If you find three symbols in a certain area, then it means that there is gold in that area. There are many people who found things with this method. And still there are people who are looking for treasure who would give anything to meet an Armenian- they hope that they would come and tell them the place of the treasure. And there are legends about this.

Mecit goes on to describe the types of legends that are told about Armenians coming back to search for their ancestor's hidden riches, stories that often include the Armenian either tricking or being tricked by the Kurdish or Turkish locals with whom they enter into a partnership to find and split the bounty:

You know how these stories started? In the 1950s and 1960s, many Armenians came here and worked together with locals to retrieve what they had buried. Some of them were tricked and got killed. Because of these stories, everyone thinks that every Armenian who comes here has come to retrieve their gold. Why else would they come? Besides that, many Armenians have come and tricked the people here. They come and they say, "My father, my grandfather buried gold here. If you give me this much money, I will break the spell that was put on it." Then they take the money and leave. They say that Armenians always use magic to retrieve their treasure — they call it "black priest's magic" (*kara papaz büyüsü*). It is a legend among the people here. Because of this, there are Armenians who took advantage of this and tricked people. They say, "I know where the gold is but there is a spell on it, so I have to go bring a priest from Yerevan." They take the money and never come back. Now, because of the difference in religion people believe in the stories about magic and spells. Educated people don't believe this, but ignorant people believe it. If an imam makes an amulet (*muska*), they don't think that is magic, but they think that what other religions do is magic.

Indeed, Mecit's explanation regarding how locals assumed that all Armenians who came to Van had come to retrieve their forefathers' buried gold rang true with my experience, as I described earlier in this chapter, demonstrated by how frequently I was asked whether I possessed a map, was looking for treasure, had found any gold, or would be willing to help out with such an

endeavor. These types of assumptions also in some ways continue the violence of the Genocide in presupposing that Armenians do not belong there, and if they are present there, it must be in the service of some shady endeavor. Additionally, Mecit's story about the local belief in the idea that Armenians had enchanted their treasure before they left was repeated time and time again by various individuals, as is represented above in the story regarding the black snake in Gevaş.

These types of stories demonstrate how Armenians are viewed as suspicious outsiders, who both do not belong yet also possess some kind of occult power which is both desired and feared.

Mecit's story of *kara papaz büyü* or *papaz büyü* (black priest's magic or priest's magic) was also mentioned by multiple acquaintances, most notably by one of the very few Christian pastors currently residing in Van, who we addressed as Davut *Abi* (Brother Davut). Davut was a local Kurdish man who had grown up Muslim, but in his early adulthood, while living in western Turkey, had converted to Christianity, along with his wife, Hediye. A decade ago the couple moved back to Van and founded a small but growing Protestant community. On one of our many meetings sitting around the kitchen table in the apartment where they held their church gatherings, Davut and Hediye recounted to me how, when they had first moved back to Van to found their church, nearly every day local Muslim Kurds would come knocking on their door, wanting to speak with them. At first, Davut and Hediye were excited, believing that these locals were eager to take advantage of this new opportunity to learn about the teachings of the Gospels and the Christian faith. Soon, however, the couple realized that these visitors were seeking a different kind of salvation. They were coming with the fantasy that these newly arrived Christians would somehow lead them to buried treasure. This expectation arises because locals in Van understand that Armenians are Christian, and thus often assume that all Christians who come to the area must be Armenian. While this assumption that Christian and Armenian are

interchangeable categories is in itself incorrect, the local fixed categories of religion and ethnicity are overturned and further muddled by historical processes of conversion. In the majority of conversion cases in the area, the stories are of Armenian survivors of the Genocide converting to Islam and assimilating into Kurdish and Turkish communities. Davut's case, of a Muslim Kurd, voluntarily converting to Christianity, with no connection to any Armenian heritage or community, is considerably rare, and thus is the cause for much confusion and speculation on the part of locals.

Davut explained that aspiring treasure hunters would come and say, "We know where the treasure is, but it is enchanted (*büyülü*). We need an Armenian to come and pray there and get rid of the spell." Others would come with photographs of old coins or old books and ask for help in reading texts or inscriptions in Armenian or other languages, assuming that because they were Christian, Davut and Hediye could read Armenian. Finally, others would come and ask for *papaz büyüsü*, or "priest's magic," as a solution to their personal problems, which they believed to be stronger than the charms or amulets that Muslim clergymen could provide. One by one, Davut would turn them away, saying, "Look, I don't make magic, it is against our religion. I can pray for you, I can advise you, but I can't make magic." After the first few months, the flood of interested locals at their door slowed to a trickle, and now it is only on rarer occasions that Davut is solicited to help in the search for buried gold.

Both Davut and Mecit's narratives demonstrate the ways in which the Armenian past of the area is imagined through the enigmatic categories of gold and enchantment, represented by the symbols and writing that are illegible to locals and which further obscure that history and add to its air of mystery. Religious and ethnic outsiders like Davut, the converted Christian pastor, the Jewish man in Izmir, or a returning Armenian such as myself, are seen by local Muslim

Kurds as possible gatekeepers to the esoteric knowledge necessary to access the treasure, and thus are approached with a mix of excitement, suspicion, anticipation, and fear. Such outsiders are seen as both necessary and valuable guides, yet also possible sources of danger, of deception, or of some occult power, such as *papaz büyüsü* (priest's magic). These sentiments are expressed not only in interactions with outsiders but also within the Kurdish community of Van, as locals suspect each other of finding gold. In the following section, I further elaborate on the ways in which the belief in the existence of buried treasure is nourished and interpreted not only through historical narratives and maps but also through the pervasive rumors that circulate in Van.

Materializing the Past

Selim is another Kurdish man who teaches social sciences at another high school in Van. We had known each other already some months through our mutual friend, Azad, when Selim asked if I might help him read a text that he thought was Armenian. At first, he had been reluctant to admit his intentions, but after first consulting with Azad if it would be appropriate to approach me about this issue, he finally confessed that he was involved in treasure hunting and that he had gotten his hands on a source that he hoped would provide him a lead. One evening, he, Azad, and I gathered in his apartment, where we sat in the living room, sipping bottles of a popular Turkish beer, *Bomonti*, and cracking hazelnuts and almonds.

Looking around the room, I couldn't help but notice the color palette that Selim had chosen for his interior design. Two opposite walls were painted a solid Crayola green, while the other two were painted canary yellow. The drapes over the window were also yellow and green, matching the walls. The couch and armchair set, however, was bright, fire-engine red, resulting in the whole living room being made up precisely in the Kurdish national colors - *kesk û sor û*

zer, green and red and yellow. These three colors in combination signified an affiliation with the Kurdish movement and, as such, the PKK, and, if ostentatiously displayed in public, could often bring unwanted attention from state authorities. When I remarked about the colors, Selim answered casually, “Yes, it turned out that way.” Seemingly indifferent to the intensely political connotations of the colors, he explained that he had originally ordered a yellow and green couch set to match the walls, but the store had not had it in stock, so he ended up with a red set instead.

It was clear that Selim had other things on his mind that were more important than the supposed nationalist color scheme of his armchairs. He was anxious to find out what his source said, and he eagerly showed me a photo on his telephone of what looked like a rough, hand-drawn map of a landscape on a piece of leather hide. It included a red circle at the top, some squiggly lines that could denote either mountains or water, and various square shapes with sections marked within them, that could represent buildings. At the bottom was a rectangle with a roughly drawn church and graveyard. In two different sections of the map was writing that at first glance looked similar to Armenian letters, but at closer examination was illegible. I told Selim as much and suggested that it might be a forgery. He was disappointed and suggested that perhaps it was in a language that I did not understand. Not wanting him to think that I was keeping valuable information from him, I explained that the writing looked as if someone who did not know Armenian had tried to write something that looked as if it were Armenian. Selim asked me a few more probing questions, hoping that he could obtain any useful information about the map, but finally gave up and began instead to share with me his thoughts on the ubiquity of treasure hunting in Van:

Treasure hunting is about believing. For instance, something that might sound ridiculous to us might sound logical to a treasure hunter. For instance, they talk about magic and spells. They say that you have to dig in a certain place at a certain hour early in the morning. When you hear these things all the time you also start to believe a bit. And

around here there are many reasons to believe in these things. Ultimately you know that Armenians used to live here and that they were involved in goldsmith work. Because of this people believe very quickly. And of course, there was migration. Because when people are forced to migrate of course they aren't going to take their property and possessions. What are they going to do? They are going to leave them behind, and before they go, if there is a possibility that they might come back then they will put them somewhere. And for these reasons, for treasure hunters, of course, it is very logical to look for gold here.

Here, Selim demonstrates the fundamental link between the history of the Genocide and the lively economy of treasure hunting today. As his narrative shows, the belief in the existence of underground treasure today is predicated on a deep understanding of the violent history of the region, the details of the former Armenian community's livelihoods as being involved in jewelry-making (as discussed above), and the circumstances of their forced exile from their ancestral land. Selim continued to explain another reason why such beliefs persist:

And of course, there are those who found things. We don't know for sure, but there are people who used to be villagers or shepherds and then became very rich. People say this about many of the rich families in Van. And if someone hears of someone finding anything, the story gets exaggerated a thousand times in the retelling. But there are really people who found things. For instance, everyone knows that the Van castle is full of holes because of this. But as I said, if someone is rich, people say that they must have found gold. It's a bit like a fairytale. I mean, someone might have a business but people don't know what kind of business he has and so they say that he must have found gold.

Indeed, throughout my time in Van, I heard many tales illustrating the rumors that Selim was describing: a certain person or family suddenly became wealthy, and the assumed explanation for this sudden change in fortune was that they had found Armenian gold. Interestingly, because Van is located close to the borders with Iran and Iraq, there are illicit ways of becoming rich quickly through the lively economy of smuggling various products across borders. Yet, instead of speculating that a certain family may have a hand in the smuggling business, it is more common to hear musings that they found Armenian gold.



Figure 4.3. The view of Şuşanis village from Ihsan's uncle's field. Dec 3, 2016.

The reverse side of these rumors was illustrated to me on a visit to a historic Armenian village, Şuşanis, which is just east of the city of Van on the Western slope of Erek Mountain. I was there visiting a local acquaintance, Ihsan, who grew up in the village. As we stood in his uncle's field looking down over the village with new cement block houses scattered between the old stone and mud-brick houses, and with the city of Van and the Van lake visible in the distance, he explained to me his family's situation (Figure 4.3).

Our family moved here from Çatak. Altogether we are twelve siblings, nine boys, and three girls. We were all born in houses that remained from the Armenians. My father was working in a government office. Because of that, he had money to build a new mud-brick house. All of the other villagers said that my father must have found gold. Just imagine, at that time, even building a house out of mud-brick was a luxury. So all of the other villagers said that he had found gold and built himself a house.

Just as Ihsan was describing this story, two villagers from a neighboring house were passing by on the way to their field and they stopped to greet us. Ihsan introduced me, saying that I was an

Armenian guest who was studying the history of the area. Without missing a beat, the newcomers said, “Do you have a map? If there any signs around, let’s dig up the gold together.”

Ihsan’s experience demonstrates many common themes surrounding the Armenian material heritage of the area. First, there is the experience of living in an old Armenian house. In many cases, a century ago, Kurdish groups had largely been semi-nomadic pastoralists, who, when not on the move, often lived in settlements in more mountainous areas. Armenian rural communities, on the other hand, had largely been settled farmers, and thus occupied more fertile and flat land around the lake, in valleys, and on the plains. When Armenians fled or were forcibly driven from their homes and villages in 1915, they left behind empty villages full of stone and mudbrick houses all over the region. During the violence of the First World War and the Russian occupation of the area, many of the Muslim Kurds of the region evacuated the area as well and sought refuge in western Anatolia, even as far as Konya and Izmir, a temporary exile that they refer to as *muhacirlik*. After the war ended, they returned to the Van region, and many of them settled in the now-empty Armenian villages (U. Ungor and Polatel 2013). Thus, for many Kurds in Van today, having been born in and growing up in an old Armenian house is a common experience. Over time, these houses, especially those built of mud-brick, began to deteriorate, and villagers began to replace them with newly available construction materials. One by one, they began to tear down the old Armenian houses and built new homes of concrete blocks and cement, with new amenities such as indoor plumbing and electricity.

I have heard many stories of Kurds who, when dismantling the foundations of their old, formerly Armenian, homes, found gold or valuables hidden in the floor or walls. While many of these stories may be rumors about others assumed to have found gold, such as the story that Ihsan tells about the rumors told about his family, it is also believable that some may have in fact

found gold in old houses. As Mecit explained above, when Armenians were fleeing the area or being deported, they could not take all of their valuables with them, either because they might be robbed on the road or because they could not carry them. Thus, a logical choice would be to bury the valuables or hide them in the wall of the family house, with the assumptions that after the conclusion of the war it would be possible to return and retrieve them.

This practice has also been corroborated by Armenian memoirists such as Souren Aprahamian, whose family escaped the war by fleeing from Van over the Russian border to Yerevan. Aprahamian writes of his family hiding their family valuables, such as bibles and an accordion which they could not carry with them as they fled by foot, in secret hiding places that they fashioned in the wall of the family home in the village of Lezk (now Kalecik), just north of Van city (Aprahamian 1993). Such a story was also recounted to me by an elderly Armenian acquaintance of mine in Los Angeles in 2015, whose parents had come to the United States from Antep, a city that today is known as Gaziantep and is located in southeastern Turkey on the Syrian border. He explained to me that his family had been very rich and had owned vast pistachio orchards in Antep. When they fled during the war, they hid all of their gold coins in the walls of their large house but were never able to return. Decades later, a descendant of the family who was visiting Turkey went to Antep and located the old family house, but it had already fallen into ruin and it was assumed that locals had found the gold that had been buried there.

Here there are overlapping layers of rumor, heresy, as well as possible actual finding of gold, although those who find gold are likely to not announce their find in order to avoid jealousy or theft. Anthropologists and folklorists have written on the question of rumor in relation to myths and legends, demonstrating the ways in which rumors are formed and persist in having explanatory power or reflecting social and historical realities for certain communities. For

instance, folklorist Patrick Mullen wrote the following about the similarities between rumor and legend:

Legend can be true or have factual elements, and the same can be said of rumor. The actual correlation of rumor and legend is not their falsity or accuracy but the fact that people believe both to be true. Both legend and rumor spring from reality, and both have an air of plausibility. [...] Reality and plausibility must be present for a story to be accepted, and it must be accepted to be a legend; a rumor must also be at least partially accepted before it is passed on. [...] There are various ways in which tales can be made plausible. Most legends give concrete detail which grounds them in reality; place names are mentioned, names of people are given and details of setting are described (Mullen 1972).

The function of rumor within specific contexts has been further elaborated by folklorist Patricia Turner, who, in her work on rumor within African American communities, demonstrates how rumor has functioned as a response to ongoing historical processes of racism and racial violence (Turner 1993). The function of rumor in fueling the belief both in the existence of buried Armenian gold and that certain individuals have enriched themselves thereof is reminiscent of what Jean and John Comaroff's have termed "occult economies." They discuss widespread anxieties concerning "mysterious modes of accumulation" in South Africa, in which individuals are suspected of witchcraft or other magical means of production because of their seemingly sudden acquisition of wealth (J. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 282). A similar process is at play in Van, where individuals who display conspicuous material wealth are suspected of finding Armenian gold.

There are many reasons why these folk beliefs and rumors persist so strongly in Van and the surrounding areas. As Selim explained, locals know that some Armenians historically were involved in the gold and silver business and were merchants or landowners, and thus had money. As discussed above, this represented only a small minority of the late-Ottoman Armenian population, as most were poor peasants who suffered from being double-taxed by both state tax

collectors as well as by local Kurdish feudal lords, as discussed above (Hovannisian 2000; Suny 2015). In addition, there are stories that circulate of specific Armenians individuals who buried their gold a century ago, and who either returned to retrieve the gold themselves or whose descendants returned. There are also accounts of Armenians who survived the massacres by converting to Islam and assimilating into the local Kurdish or Turkish populations (as discussed in Chapter Three) and who are purported to know the location of their family's buried valuables. In the following section, I illustrate these themes of those converts who remained and those Armenians who returned decades later.

Remnants and Return

One afternoon in the spring of 2016, I was walking along a hillside in Van with my friend Azad, his maternal grandmother, his maternal uncle and his paternal aunt, who happen to be married to each other. This family was originally from Yüksekova, the almost exclusively Kurdish town three hours south of Van. They were living in Van temporarily at the time because, along with the rest of the civilian population of Yüksekova, they had been forced to evacuate their homes due to an around-the-clock curfew enforced by the Turkish military. The government had announced the curfew on March 13, 2016 and it continued for 78 days while the army mounted extensive military operations inside the city with the goal of eradicating the resistance being carried out by the Kurdish militants of the PKK and their local supporters, as described further in the Chapter One (HDP 2016). When this two-month siege was finally over and the family returned to Yüksekova, they found their house and the shop that they owned burned to the ground and their entire neighborhood reduced to unrecognizable rubble. The seventeen-member

family was forced to find lodging in the cramped quarters of a rented apartment as they attempted to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.

On this sunny spring day in Van, however, we tried for a moment to forget about the ongoing fighting in Yüksekova. Instead, we focused on our current mission, which was to collect the wild oregano that grows on the hillsides at this time of year, and which would be dried and stored for winter, when it is used for seasoning meat. The sun was out and there were thousands of small wildflowers blooming in yellow, blue, white, pink, and red. As we wandered along, looking out over the hills, the uncle said to me, jokingly, “Tell us if you know where the gold is buried.” The aunt joined in, saying, “Isn’t there gold in the church in our village? I’m sure there is lots of gold there, of course!” Skeptical of their claims, Azad asked, “People have been digging for a hundred years, wouldn’t all of the gold be finished by now?” His aunt replied confidently, “No, it wouldn’t be finished, there is still plenty of gold.” Cheerfully, his uncle chimed in, saying half-jokingly, “Our Armenians were wealthy. They were thinking of us too, that’s why they left so much gold.” Wistfully, his aunt continued, “Just think of it, how rich the Armenians must have been...”

The conversation between this uncle, aunt, and nephew demonstrates further some of the ways in which Armenians are viewed in relation to money and gold. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Armenians, like Jews, have historically been associated with business and money, often accompanied by the negative connotations of greed, avarice, and cunning. On the other hand, the same association of Armenians with economic prosperity is often narrated by Kurds today in a decidedly positive light, as Armenians are described as being hard-working, productive, and successful. This view is demonstrated in the uncle’s comments which position Armenians not only as prosperous, but also as benevolent, generous, and prescient—Armenians magnanimously

buried their gold as an insurance policy for their Kurdish neighbors, who might access it at a later date during a time of material scarcity. While this comment was made humorously, it contains the not-uncommon supposition that Armenians were not only materially well-off but also wise and forward-thinking. Taking the dire financial insecurity of the uncle's family into consideration, his comments can be read as a fanciful wish that economic salvation from their desperate situation might come from some unexpected place, such as from an underground stash of gold left by Armenians a century ago. He is aware of the past violence that drove the Armenians away, and within his own present precarity, he sees in that past a glimmer of possibility, a seed of hope for a more secure future.

Just after this conversation had unfolded, the grandmother, who had been silent on this topic until then, began telling a story of her own, which demonstrated another important aspect of the tales told about buried treasure—that of the Christians who survived the war, converted to Islam, and assimilated into local Muslim communities. Her story was about a Christian woman from the area of Hakkari, south of Van, where the Christian community was made up primarily of Assyrians and Nestorians, with fewer Armenian communities. This woman survived the massacres, became Muslim, was given the name Helima, and married into the grandmother's village. She recounted as follows: "In my village, there was a woman who we called Helima *Bafileh*. She married one of our relatives from Xelkan village." As the grandmother explained, the woman was known as *Bafileh*, which in Kurdish means "of a Christian father," and denotes someone who was born Christian but converted to Islam, usually as a result of the violence of the First World War. The appellation is still used today for descendants of converted Christians, often in a derogatory manner and to suggest that the person in question is not fully Muslim (Celik 2015). The grandmother continued her story, explaining that Helima apparently had

knowledge of where members of her former Christian community had buried gold during the war and that everyone in her new village was anxious to learn this information:

Everyone would come and ask her where the gold was buried, even the police came and asked, but she wouldn't tell anyone. She knew where the gold was buried but she wouldn't tell anyone. She would say, "*Mirov dîn dibe, xwîn nabe* (A person can change their religion but can't change their blood)." That's why she wouldn't tell. She would say, "I don't have children, I don't have descendants, why should I tell anyone where it is?"

Christian converts such as Helime are sometimes referred to locally in Turkish as *kılıç artıkları*, or "remnants of the sword," a clear reference to the genocidal violence that destroyed their communities (Sivaslian 2013; Navaro 2017). These new converts to Islam from Christianity, mostly women, and children, were produced through the violence of war, deportation, and were literally the leftovers of massacre and expropriation. They were left behind with no family and no kinship connections, stripped of their language, their religion, and their names. Still, they were often considered to be among the lucky ones who avoided the fates of their co-religionists of either massacre, deportation, or exile, as they assimilated into local Muslim communities.

This phenomenon also highlights the gendered history of the Genocide and the circumscribed possibilities of survival for those "remnants." The kinship systems of Turkish and Kurdish Muslim communities are patrilineal, meaning that descent is passed through the male line. Thus, Christian women are assimilable into Muslim families and their offspring claim descent through the father's line. However, on the rarer occasions in which male Armenian children were adopted into Kurdish families, they may convert to Islam, but their children can still be called *Bafileh* and viewed by others as not fully part of the new community (Celik 2015). Additionally, in the case of survivors who converted during the Genocide, their adherence to their new faith may have been particularly suspect because their conversions may have taken place under conditions of coercion or out of necessity for survival, rather than based on a

heartfelt conviction. As we see from the example of Helime, even long after her death, she is remembered by the label *Bafileh*, marking her as less than fully Muslim, an outsider, a convert. Similarly, she herself, as a convert, did not consider herself to have been fully assimilated into her new community, as she expresses through her words: “a person can change their religion but can’t change their blood.” Though she had married into a Kurdish family and took on their religion and a new name, she did not have any children and thus did not feel tied by blood to her new community. Because they were not her blood relations, she refused to reveal the hiding place of the treasure and she took the secret with her to the grave.

Stories like these, of converted Christians who know of the place of buried gold or who corroborate such stories, serve to fuel in the local imagination the idea that there may be not only Helime’s gold still buried, but the valuables of many other families hidden all around the countryside, just waiting for a lucky person to find them. Such stories, recounted by local Kurds, of converted Christians who remained close to their ancestral lands and claimed to know the location of — and in some cases perhaps retrieved — their family’s valuables, are further supplemented by further stories in which Armenians from elsewhere (whether Istanbul, Armenia, Europe, or beyond) purportedly return to Van in search of their buried gold. I heard one such story on a trip to the remote, mountainous town of Bahçesaray (“Miks” in Kurdish and “Moks” in Armenian), located three hours south of Van. On this visit, I was chatting with the Kurdish owner of a small gas station, and he recounted to me the following story of a woman who returned to her birthplace in the attempt to recover her family’s buried gold:

There is a place called *Dêra Kavê* (Kavê Church). Years ago a one-hundred-year-old woman came from Armenia and we took her there. She said that when she left that place, she was fourteen years old. She said that they buried their gold there, in the place where they had kept their beehives (*arı kovanları*). We went and looked - a barn (*ahır*) had been built there. So it seems that the place was now under the barn. Two of her sons had come as well. One was from Armenia, the other was a goldsmith in Istanbul. They said it was

definitely that place. They left but they came back two or three times. Anyway, it was a bit of a crowded village, and they were nervous about soldiers as well as the villagers, so it would have been difficult to dig there. They came a few times, and my father tried to help them. But they couldn't dig because now that place is surrounded by houses. The lady was a bit sick when she came, and she passed away some years ago.

In this narrative, a descendant of the family that originally buried the gold, who could be considered to be the rightful heir, returns to collect her property but is unable to retrieve it and it stays buried. To local Kurds, such incidents prove beyond any reasonable doubt the possibility of many more similar instances of fleeing Armenians burying their gold, thus suggesting an endless possibility of wealth to be discovered. In stories such as this, the past violence is made present through the return of the Armenian exile, who seeks to reclaim her family's assets. These types of stories are not uncommon, and demonstrate a personification of Freud's "return of the repressed," as a survivor of the officially denied, forgotten, and repressed genocidal violence of 1915 returns to the scene of the crime to reclaim the property of which she was dispossessed (Freud 1913).

Unearthing the Past

The stories that circulate about treasure hunting in Van are not limited only to fanciful tales of untold riches, rumors that those who suddenly became wealthy had found gold, or stories of almost reaching the treasure but being foiled at the last minute by either enchantments, theft, or the too-watchful eyes of local villagers. There are also indeed stories of individuals actually finding buried valuables, though in most cases, these moments of discovery occur by accident, for, as one aspiring treasure-hunter remarked, "The gold will find you, you can't find the gold." One such story of an accidental discovery was recounted to me on a visit to a village on the northern side of Ereğ Mountain, just east of the city of Van. The village is known officially today

in Turkish as Sarmaç, but before 1915, it was known by its Armenian name, Goghpants. Among the Kurds who inhabit the village today, it is called “Kopanis,” a version of the Armenian name (see Chapter Two for discussion of place name changes). On the eve of the Genocide, the village housed a community of over two hundred Armenians and the thirteenth-century Monastery of Surp Grigor (Kevorkian 2013; VirtualANI 2005). The monastery is now in near-total ruin, as is a small chapel that sits on a forested hill above the site of the monastery. I visited the village on an early spring day in 2017 when there was still snow on the mountain and the air was chilly. There I met Metin, a middle-aged man who owned a grocery shop at the entrance of the village. Standing at the door of his small shop, we gazed out at the snowy peaks of the mountain rising up into the blue sky, and he recounted to me a story of how a man from the neighboring village, Çorevanis, had found treasure.

According to his tale, fifty years ago, there was a landowning villager (*ağa*) from Çorevanis who had a servant (*xulam*). The *ağa* sent the servant to collect some dry grass to make a cooking fire in the hearth in his home. The servant climbed up the hill where the chapel was and found a certain dry plant that burns well (*geven*, wild licorice). He began to dig it up to take back for kindling. When he pulled up the roots of the plant, he discovered a large stash of gold that had been buried there. He was unable to unearth it by himself, so he went back to his master’s house and told his master. He said, “I found gold. Make me some *axaf* (flour halva), and I will tell you where the gold is.” The *ağa* said to his wife, “Make him some *axaf*, and I will go check the place.” He left, and the servant stayed at home to eat his meal. Meanwhile, all of the village began to hear about what had happened and they went after the *ağa*, but by the time they arrived at the spot, the *ağa* and his brother had together dug up the gold and gone back to Çorevanis by a back road. Then the *ağa* went to his servant and said, “You tricked us. You’re

lying. There is no gold there,” and thus they gave him nothing. Metin concluded his story by explaining that the man had tried to keep all of the bounty for himself, but then his son-in-law stole half of it from him. Nonetheless, the family became very rich and now has houses in the city center. For years, Metin recounted, the *ağa* kept this all a secret, but just recently he finally began to tell the story.

Such accounts of people actually finding buried valuables are much less common than the stories of people searching for treasure, but nonetheless, enough similar success stories circulate to encourage the endless stream of aspirational diggers. I heard another such accidental success story on a visit to a village just north of the city of Çatak, located one hour south of Van. This village, like Kopanis, was also an Armenian settlement prior to the Genocide and housed the seventh-century Armenian Church of the Holy Lady or *Surp Digin* (Collectif 2015). As mentioned above, during the First World War and the Russian occupation of the area, much of the Muslim Kurdish population of the region evacuated their homes and sought refuge in western Anatolia, a temporary exile that they refer to as *muhacirlik*. After the war ended, they returned to the Van region, and some of them settled in the now-empty Armenian villages, which were in more desirable locations than their former settlements (U. Ungor and Polatel 2013). It was some of these returnees who settled in the village of *Surp Digin*, which they continue to this day to call “Sortikin,” from the name of the church, though officially, it has been renamed in Turkish as Elmalık.

It was late summer when I visited the village, and as I was taking photographs of the half-destroyed church, a gregarious local villager approached me and began to describe to me how the church used to look some decades ago, and how it had come to its present dilapidated state (Figure 4.4). He introduced himself as Zülküf and led me to duck through the low doorway as we

entered into the interior of the church together. The floor of the church had been entirely dug up by treasure hunters, but the dome was impressively still intact after so many decades of neglect (Figure 4.5).



Figure 4.4. Seventh-century Armenian Church of the Holy Lady or *Surp Digin*. August 29, 2017.



Figure 4.5. Interior floor of the Church of the Holy Lady or *Surp Digin*, dug up by treasure hunters. July 30, 2014.

Zülküf pointed to one large hole that had been dug in the floor and a rectangular gap in the wall where a stone had been removed. He explained that there had been an inscribed stone there in the wall, and people had seen it and believed it to be a sign of buried gold, so they dug below it. When they found nothing, they removed the stone to dig in the wall behind it. Worried that they would break the stone in the end, Zülküf took it and put it in his shed to protect it. Shaking his head reproachfully, he said, “I think it is a shame to break these stones, they are beautiful.” After we exited the church, Zülküf took me to his shed to view the stone, which was lying on the packed earth floor next various plastic and metal containers full of pickled herbs, cheese, and other stored foodstuffs (Figure 4.6).



Figure 4.6. The stone from the church wall in Zülküf’s shed. August 29, 2017.

We then walked over to the large cliff-face that rose up almost vertically from the ground and formed the western border of the village. As we approached, I could see the shapes of crosses that had been carved on the wall (Figure 4.8).



Figure 4.7. Crosses carved on the wall of rock in Sortikin village. August 29, 2017.

Again, pointing to clear signs of digging in and around the wall, Zülküf complained that people see such symbols on the rock, and they dig, thinking that there is treasure hidden in the rock. “How absurd,” he commented, “How could anyone hide anything in a solid wall of rock?” I followed him as we continued to pick our way along the uneven ground at the bottom of the cliff-face, until he stopped, pointing up to a naturally forming crack in the rock, high above our heads (Figure 4.9).

Do you see that crack up there in the rock? Years ago, my grandfather saw an eagle up there and he threw a stone at it. The stone hit something that made a strange sound, so my grandfather climbed up to see what it was, and he found a collection of beautiful pots, bowls, and trays. They were all yellow and decorated. Whether they were gold or not, I don’t know. We had them until ten years ago, but they had gotten a bit worn and so they sold them all to a peddler and that was that. My grandfather found them when they returned from *muhacirlik* and were settling here.



Figure 4.8. The area of the rock-face where Zülküf's grandfather found the stash of hidden plates and trays. August 29, 2017.

In this instance, it is plausible to imagine that the Armenians who inhabited the village until 1915 may have hidden some of their valuable household items high up, out of reach, in the hopes that they might return to retrieve them. Instead, when the local Muslim Kurds returned to the area after months or years of being internal refugees in western Anatolia, they found the Armenian population gone and their villages empty. They slowly settled in their former neighbors' homes and appropriated their land and property, and after some time, by accident, came upon the valuables that they had hidden and made use of those as well.

In Zülküf's case, his family had been subject to their own fate of exile and forced migration, and the instance of the changing hands of these few precious plates does not represent a clear moral equation of one community destroying another and then appropriating their property. Instead, there it was the property of one community of exiles being found by another

group of returning refugees. This account demonstrates how the story of the material relationships between the Ottoman Armenians and present-day Kurdish communities is one complicated and indeed overdetermined by overlapping processes of genocide, war, expulsion, migration, expropriation, appropriation, and return.

Conclusion

Because the 1915 Armenian Genocide continues to be officially denied by the government of Turkey to this day, the question of the material remains of the Armenian past in Turkey is particularly fraught. Yet, in eastern Turkey, the search for Armenian gold—that is, for remnants of that violent history—continues unabated. As I have argued in this chapter, the search for buried treasure is predicated on a recognition of the genocidal violence of 1915. The Genocide is officially denied, yet through the search for the objects left behind, it is materially recognized and made present. Buried treasure, whether it is ever found or remains elusive, becomes a medium for the interaction between a past defined by genocide and a present that continues to be shaped by state violence and economic precarity. Kurdish locals today imagine this violent history to be embodied in the form of precious buried objects and interact with it through physically digging in the earth for this obscured and officially unspoken past, as they act on the aspiration that finding its material traces will guarantee their future security.

Building on the foundational writings of Walter Benjamin on the Paris arcades, recent anthropological work on life among ruins demonstrates the ways in which past and present violence are intertwined in unexpected ways and embodied in the material world (Gordillo 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Stoler 2013). For instance, Shannon Dawdy's work on New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina illuminates how destructive events produce a ruptured time, and

how, for the inhabitants of the post-hurricane city, the landscape of ruins represents what she calls, “a material archive of their historical experience” (Dawdy 2016, 2). Describing the widespread stories of haunting and a collective attachment to old objects, Dawdy demonstrates how in New Orleans, “the past is both spectral and real” (Dawdy 2016, 8). The context in Van is different from New Orleans because in New Orleans the population could and some did return to their original homes, while in Van, the Armenian population that left was unable to return. The similarity is that in Van, like in New Orleans, the present and the future are imagined in relation to a catastrophic moment of temporal rupture. That is, the past in Van is frequently separated into a pre-1915 and post-1915 era. Additionally, the landscape of ruins and the imagined underground labyrinths filled with treasure represent a material archive of the historical experience of the last century. Indeed, the treasure hunters themselves may be seen to be amateur archeologists engaging in something like what Dawdy calls “a profane archeology,” as they search for the material traces of the pastness all around them (Dawdy 2016). In many cases, the treasure hunters are the local experts on the Armenian heritage of the area, the ones who, like Ahmet the Mole, know all of the historical places because they have dug in all of them.

In this chapter, I have demonstrated that this search for hidden objects is a tangible engagement with an invisible underground world, and one that is rooted in a historical understanding of place and landscape as well as a vision of a more desirable future. I argue that the search for buried treasure represents a material recognition of a taboo and denied past, and illuminates the ways in which historic violence, present endeavor, and future possibilities are congealed in the fetish objects that are believed to be lying underground (Apter and Derby 2010). The ongoing search for these objects both materially enlivens the past in the present and also enables an imagined future. Through the idea of buried Armenian gold, the violent history of the

Genocide is reimagined by the local Kurdish population as the source of an underground world of riches and is thus valued in the present as future opportunity.

Thus, for treasure hunters, conceptions of Armenian gold and memories of a violent past produce a historically informed approach to the local landscape that renders the underground a site of potent possibilities. But, as we have seen from Murat's narrative, the gold is not a passive prize waiting to be collected. Instead, it is itself agentive and takes on a life of its own in the present, as it quite literally becomes alive. In this way, the underground is not only a space of limitless possibility but also houses a kind of vibrant materiality (Bennett 2010). These enchanted objects that come to life as bees or are guarded by snake-spirits then produce new effects, engagements, and entanglements with those who seek them. Thus, through both the ongoing search for and the liveliness of these buried objects, the history of the Genocide of 1915 does not remain past, but instead takes on new lives and afterlives as it continues to be sought after and re-animated in the present.

The narratives that I have presented in this chapter illustrate the complicated ways in which Kurdish locals in Van today interact with the material past of the Ottoman Armenian community through stories and practices of treasure hunting. As they seek to unearth valuable objects buried by those fleeing mass violence a century ago, they are at once performing a material recognition of an officially denied past and enacting in the present their aspiration to secure a desired future. Thus, through this material engagement of treasure hunting, the past, present, and future of Ottoman Armenians and contemporary Kurds in Van are intertwined and congealed in the fetish objects lying underground. As Kurdish locals imagine the legacy of the Ottoman Armenians to be embodied in valuable subterranean objects today, the palimpsests of past violence become valued materially in the present. In this way, the violence of the Genocide

of 1915 is turned into gold one century later in the local imaginary. This historical alchemy, this transmutation of violence into gold, turns a violent past into an opportunity to be activated for future salvation.

Finally, the search for the objects lying under the ground, for those traces left behind after historical violence, also highlight the contradictions of the afterlives of a history of genocide in the present. Zülküf's narrative above, for instance, underlines the ways in which the lines between victim and perpetrator become blurred in a present that is still defined by state violence. As discussed above, some may be tempted to suggest that treasure hunting is simply an ongoing, contemporary expression of the violent dispossession of the Ottoman Armenian community that began in 1915 and in many ways continues through the ongoing denial of that history by the government of Turkey and the continued destruction of Armenian material cultural heritage. There are aspects of validity to this argument, considering that those who crafted, owned, and hid those valuables were violently dispossessed of their ancestral lands, driven from their homes and into exile, or in many cases, massacred or forcibly assimilated. The argument is further bolstered by the historical participation of some Kurdish groups in carrying out the Genocide and appropriating Armenian properties afterward. Thus, a century ago, many Kurds were indeed guilty in the original destruction of the Armenian community that prompted some Armenians to bury what valuables they had before they fled their homes. However, in post-Genocide Turkey, with the Armenian community destroyed, Kurds were repositioned as the next victims of state violence and have since suffered their own century of forced migration, displacement, massacre, and expropriation. Still today, Kurds in Turkey continue to suffer from being structurally disadvantaged and economically, politically, and socially marginalized by state policies. As

Azad's uncle jokingly suggested, perhaps the Armenians buried so much gold on purpose, somehow foreseeing that their Kurdish neighbors would eventually need it.

So then, is the contemporary appropriation of buried Armenian gold by Kurdish villagers an extension of the violence, destruction, and plunder that characterized the Genocide of 1915? Or is it a source of possible salvation for a community that has suffered its own century of forced displacements, massacres, and political oppression? Through the ethnographic accounts that I presented in this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate that the story of treasure hunting in Van today cannot be explained simply by one or the other explanation, but oftentimes both, and sometimes more than that. The story of treasure hunting in Van cannot be reduced to an equation of historical victim and perpetrator, nor can it be fully explained simply by the current hardship of Kurdish villagers desperate for a remedy for their economic precarity. The stories of enchantment, magic, spells, and of gold turning into bees, of becoming alive and escaping those who seek them, speak to the ways in which the afterlives of past violence continue to shape everyday lives in the present and activate future imagination.

CHAPTER FIVE

Remaking Landscape: The Politics of Names and Monuments

Introduction

This chapter deals with the questions of the politics of landscapes, monuments, signs, and naming. As discussed in the previous chapters, Eastern Turkey represents a contested landscape with a contested past. Its geography and history are claimed at once by Turkish, Kurdish, and Armenian nationalist imaginaries, which each posit the land as their ancestral and rightful homeland. It is viewed and named alternatively as Eastern Turkey, Western Armenia, and Northern Kurdistan (Leupold 2017). The government of Turkey continues to deny the histories and cultural rights of Kurdish and Armenian communities, and some nationalist Armenian groups outside of Turkey continue to demand the restitution of the lands of Eastern Turkey to Armenia, with little or no acknowledgment of the millions of people who currently live on those lands. The government of the Republic of Armenia, on the other hand, has officially disavowed any territorial claims on the Republic of Turkey. Finally, on the ground in southeastern Turkey, some Kurdish political groups have begun articulating an alternative to exclusionary nationalism, as they advocate for a more inclusive vision of the past, present, and future (See Chapters Two and Three).

Chapter Two of this dissertation addressed the question of how state actors interact with Armenian cultural heritage through policies of restoration and destruction; Chapter Three discussed how local Kurds in Van today engage with the ruined spaces of an Armenian monastery; and Chapter Four explored how treasure hunters search for the traces of the past Armenian community underground. This chapter builds on these discussions of the politics of past and of the material landscape in the present but addresses the question of this contested past

through a different angle. Instead of looking at how state actors and locals engage with already existing historical structures and objects on the landscape—buildings and materials that have survived the ravages of time and are visible today as remnants of a contested past—this chapter engages with the question of how that history is negotiated today through the erection of new monuments, signs, and other markers of territory by state and local officials, in an attempt to shape the historical narrative through materially superimposing a historical understanding on the landscape.

This contest between official and local understandings of the past and present is played out materially on the landscape all over Turkey, and especially in the southeast, where the state-imposed historical narrative is often not only radically different from local understandings but actively attempts to silence and negate local historical narratives. In direct contrast to this official silencing, in recent years local Kurdish parties have fashioned themselves as protecting, promoting, and celebrating the multicultural past and present of Turkey that state narratives usually elides. For instance, as I discussed in Chapter Two, in 2013, the city government in Diyarbakir, which was at the time in the hands of the Kurdish party, the BDP (Peace and Democracy Party, or *Bariş ve Demokrasi Partisi*), built a “Monument of Common Conscience” (*Ortak Vicdan Anıtı*). The monument included a sculpture of a torn book being engulfed in flames and one eye shedding a tear, along with the words “We shared the pains so that they are not suffered again” in Kurdish, Turkish, English, Armenian, Arabic, and Hebrew, in an effort to represent the diverse communities that historically inhabited that city. At the opening ceremony, the mayor of the old city stated that they, as Kurds, apologized in the name of their ancestors for the massacres and deportations of the Armenians and Assyrians in 1915 and called on the Turkish government to do the same (Akkum 2013).

I begin this chapter by addressing these overarching issues of the politics of monuments and the production of space on the local level in Van, and explore how state actors and local Kurdish groups negotiate both contemporary political conflicts and diverging historical understanding through practices of marking, naming, and labeling space and place. In the second part of the chapter, I describe two monuments that represent opposing visions of Turkish-Armenian relations, both built on the Turkish side of the Armenia-Turkey border, in the provinces of Kars and Iğdır. I address these two sites in order to demonstrate the importance of monuments in relation to the politics of the past in eastern Turkey on a broader scale.

Contested Histories and the Production of Space

Recent work by anthropologists and others has built on work by geographers such as Henri Lefebvre, Doreen Massey, David Harvey and Edward Soja in approaching space and place as socially produced and also a medium that produces, shapes, and constrains social relations and social action (Lefebvre 1992; Soja 1989; Harvey 2019; Massey 1994, 2005). In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre examines spatial practices relating to economic processes and social reproduction as a way to examine the production of space. Lefebvre's examination of space relies on the understanding of a dialectical relationship between everyday, local practices and, large-scale capitalist processes. His primary claim is that "(social) space is a (social) product," and he examines how social space is lived, conceived, and perceived (Lefebvre 1992, 26, 40). In this way, Lefebvre formulates social space in a dialectic process that both is defined by social relationships and actions and a factor that limits and contains those same actions. Lefebvre brings a decidedly historical dimension to his argument about space as he posits that since space is produced, and not a natural given, it is thus a product of history (Lefebvre 1992, 46). In this

way, Lefebvre's analysis highlights how exploring the production of space can illuminate the dynamic relationship between past and present in relation to capitalist processes.

Doreen Massey, another foundational theorist of space and place, suggests that we approach space "not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'" (Massey 1994, 2). Massey argues that social relations are always imbued with power and that "the spatial is an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" (Massey 1994, 3). Like Lefebvre, Massey contests that "the identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple" (Massey 1994, 5).

Another author whose work on the construction of place illuminates the relationships between place-making, social relations, and history is Keith Basso (1996) who provides a rich ethnographic account of Western Apache places, place names, and histories. His work incorporates the importance of narration in place-making, as place-making is performed as a narrative art within a historical theater, in which history is brought into the present and dramatized through the invoking of the names of places. Basso describes how the Western Apache self-consciously construct the past through narrating places with historical significance. Like Lefebvre, Basso conceives of places and spaces as historical constructs, as realities produced through social relationships and everyday practices. Lefebvre's formulation illuminates the importance of large-scale global capitalist processes, while Basso's account highlights the centrality of narrative in the construction of place, past, and present.

The work of these authors on place-making and narrative is useful for thinking through the context of contested spaces in the borderlands of southeastern Turkey, as these spaces are

claimed by various groups and are negotiated upon the material landscape and through the marking space and place. Authors Zeynep Gambetti and Joost Jongerden have taken up the issue of the production of space in the contested geography of southeastern Anatolia through the issue of the spatial dynamics of the Kurdish movement. The authors describe the various aspects of how contests between the Kurdish movement and state actors are played out in various ways through negotiations over space:

Struggles over space take hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms. Appropriating or hegemonizing space means gaining a foothold within a given social imaginary. Power is in part constituted through control over the visibility of signs. If power is not only structural but also performative, the formation and subsequent reproduction of hegemony requires a series of micro and macro strategies that include the spatial ‘staging’ of a form of discursive categorization. The effectiveness of certain discourses in hegemonizing social spaces, on the one hand, and the varying degrees of visibility and invisibility of other discourses, on the other, partially depend on the success or failure of this staging. Strategies to create or destroy the *lieux de memoire* of political regimes, nations or culture include inscriptions onto natural or built spaces. The visibility of signs of power (or the corresponding lack of visibility of marginalized groups or cultures) serves to reinforce the founding of a social imaginary of strength and superiority by materially reiterating it. (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011, 382)

Here Gambetti and Jongerden discuss the way that power is enacted through appropriating space, through marking it with visible signs, and through creating or destroying *lieux de memoire*—places or sites of memory, after Pierre Nora’s formulation (Nora 1996). The authors’ framing of the ways in which power and memory are negotiated through the landscape is instructive of the way in which state actors and opposition movements in Van negotiate their political struggle through space.

Gambetti and Jongerden also emphasize the specificities and heterogeneity of actors in the political struggle over past and present in the Kurdish regions in Turkey, where “the dialectics of power and resistance, appropriation and re-appropriation, symbolization and re-symbolization operate in manifold ways.”

No single grand narrative can capture the complexity of strategies employed by state agents (including the state's ideological apparatuses) and Kurdish contesters in response to each other, because neither of the stylized proponents of this tug-of-war is monolithic. The term 'Kurdish movement' may include actors such as the outlawed PKK, the legal BDP and a panoply of civil organizations related to these—or, quite unceremoniously, people of Kurdish descent who spontaneously find themselves confronting state forces without belonging to any formal organizational structure. Likewise, state agents may include the army, the police and the political elite, but also would-be lynching crowds or contracting businesses—to say nothing of the arrangements and practices that constantly reproduce state ideology, from school curricula to mass media editing policies. (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011, 379)

In their formulation, the myriad actors who make up the various aspects of the conflict, both official representatives and tangential bystanders who may sympathize with one side or the other, all make up part of the ever-evolving and shifting negotiation over past, present, and future, as I also outlined in Chapter One.

In his work on activists within the Chicano movement in Oakland, California, geographer Juan Herrera developed the notion of “cartographic memory” to discuss the way in which activists' political claims to power operated through space and how they inscribed their memories of struggle onto the landscape. “Cartographic memory is not just an act of remembering,” writes Herrera.

It is a political remaking of urban geography and therefore a *selective* mapping of the neighborhood to emphasize the contributions of certain groups, while rendering others less visible. Activists' cartographic memories also performed the important function of summoning to life some of the places and agencies that no longer existed. Cartographic memories reveal the political nature of place-making and the centrality of space in negotiations of power. (Herrera 2015, 51)

Herrera draws on Massey, who discusses the way in which Western-type maps give the impression that space is a flat, static, and homogenous surface. Instead, Massey asserts that space is defined by interconnected and heterogeneous practices and processes, and is constantly being shaped and reshaped (Massey 2005). Following Massey's critique, Herrera discusses the way in which the activists that he discussed remembered their neighborhood and drew maps thus:

“A map comes to represent certainty and fixity, instead of revealing the contested process by which territory is measured and given an artificial form. Activists’ cartographic memories defied the fixity inherent in the production of maps. In contrast to the erasures that maps typically present, activists’ memories operated fundamentally as a technology for remembering” (Herrera 2015, 53). Herrera describes these maps as a “spatial technology of remembering.”

In the following section, I discuss these processes of the political remaking of social geography in relation to the contests over space and memory in Van between state actors and the Kurdish movement. Building on the above authors, I explore the political nature of place-making and the centrality of space in the negotiation of power through processes of naming, signage, and the building and destroying of monuments. I approach these processes by looking at the contests over landscape, monuments, and space in two villages in the province of Van—Kopanis and Xorkom. Both villages were populated by Christian Armenians prior to the Genocide of 1915, and both are now inhabited by Muslim Kurds, who settled there after the First World War. In each site, the Armenian material history of the village is remembered and narrated to some extent by the local inhabitants, yet also while undergoing various degrees of erasure. At the same time, certain aspects of each village have been memorialized by actors of either the state or the Kurdish movement, as part of various attempts to inscribe a certain understanding of past and present on the landscape.

Kopanis: Remembering and Forgetting on the Landscape

Kopanis is a village located on the northern side of Ereğ Mountain, just east of the city of Van. Before 1915, the village had an Armenian name, Koghpants or Goghbants, and today is known as “Kopanis” among local Kurds. During the wave of name changes in the region (as discussed

in Chapter Two), the village was renamed with a Turkish name: Sarmaç. Just before the Genocide, Kopanis was an Armenian village that housed 218 Armenians and the Monastery of Surp Grigor (Salnabadi Surp Grigor Vank). The monastery included two churches, Surp Karabet and Surp Astvadzadzin, which were built in the 13th century (VirtualANI 2005; Kevorkian 2013) (Figure 5.1). All that remains of the two churches today are the apse of Surp Karabet, one corner of the wall of Surp Astvadzadzin, and a few large chunks of brickwork (Figure 5.2).



Figure 5.1. “Saint Krikor Monastery (Salnabad Monastery) (Source: Mekhitarist Order, San Lazzaro, Venice. Courtesy of Father Vahan Ohanian).” Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From <https://www.houshamadyan.org/en/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van/kaza-of-van/religion/churches-and-monasteries-3.html>.



Figure 5.2. Ruins of the Monastery of Surp Grigor in Kopanis village. November 4, 2016.

The site of the ruined monastery lies at the edge of the village, in a narrow valley between two steep hills on the slopes of Erek Dağı, or Mount Varak, the craggy mountain east of the city of Van. It is a beautiful site, snowy in the winter and green and full of wildflowers in the early summer, with two natural springs that bubble up from the rocks and from which clear, cold, water flows and forms a small stream. Locals from all around come there to fill jugs of the sweet water and to picnic in the springtime.

Beyond the Armenian history, which is of less interest to most locals other than zealous treasure hunters, and the free source of potable water and picnic area, Kopanis has another special significance that makes it a local tourist attraction. The village is a pilgrimage destination for local Muslims because it was a site where the Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian, Said Nursi, lived for some time in the early 1920s in a small abandoned chapel on the hill above the monastery (Balci 2013). Said Nursi, also called by the honorific “Bediüzzaman” (Arabic: Wonder of the Age), wrote an extensive Qur’anic commentary known as the *Risale-i Nur*. His writings and teachings inspired a religious movement that has many followers in Turkey today, known as the Nurcu Movement or *Nurcu Cemaati*. Said Nursi is especially well-loved in Van, where he spent many years of his life.

A few years ago, in order to commemorate the time that Said Nursi spent in the village of Kopanis, the Special Provincial Administration (*İl Özel İdaresi*), which is connected to the governorship (*valilik*) and in the hands of the AKP, built a small mosque at the base of the hill and laid a stone-paved path leading up to the top of the hill where the chapel sits (Figure 5.3). On each step leading up to the top of the path, there is a wooden pole from which hangs an oval wooden sign with a quote from Said Nursi engraved upon it, the text in the original Ottoman-Turkish but written in modern Turkish (Latin) letters (Figure 5.4). The municipality in charge of

the area (Ipekyolu), which was in the hands of the Kurdish party at the time, installed benches and trash receptacles along the path. The name of the municipality, written in Kurdish, was prominently engraved on each bench: *Şaredariya Rêya Armuşê* (Turkish: *Ipekyolu Belediyesi*, English: Silk Road Municipality).



Figure 5.3. New mosque built to commemorate Said Nursi in Kopanis village with the ruins of the Monastery of Surp Grigor visible on the left of the image. November 4, 2016.



Figure 5.4. New path leading up to the site of the ruined chapel, with quotes from the writings of Said Nursi on wooden signs. September 11, 2016.

The area around the mosque and the path are relatively well-cared-for and clean and even have a full-time caretaker. The paradox in the situation is that while this effort has been made in order to commemorate Said Nursi, the actual site where he had lived and taught, the small chapel at the top of the hill, is in ruins (Figure 5.5). There is no sign or commemorative plaque marking the spot, and no effort has been made to protect the site. All that is left of the structure are two crumbling walls, and the area around them is full of freshly dug holes that are a testament to the tireless activity of treasure hunters. Additionally, the ruins of the Monastery of Surp Grigor sit only 500 meters away from the recently built mosque. An overgrown, muddy dirt path leads to these ruins from the main road, where the work of many treasure hunters has left a landscape entirely full of holes. On each occasion that I have visited the site, I have seen freshly dug holes, whether it be winter or summer. The vision of neglect and ongoing ruination of the monastery and the chapel is made even starker by the well-kempt pilgrimage site and mosque just a stone's throw away.



Figure 5.5. Ruined chapel on the hill overlooking Kopanis village with the ruins of the monastery visible below. May 29, 2016.

On one of my first visits to the village with my local friend Azad in 2016, we encountered a gregarious man from the village, Şefik, who was eager to share his knowledge of the village with us. It was March and there was still snow on the hills around us. We were standing on the platform next to the new mosque where we could see the ruined church, the village, and the stream running through the valley away from the village and towards the city of Van. Şefik had been doing some yard work and was holding a long rusty saw in one hand, which he gestured with enthusiastically as he spoke. We asked him about the church, and he told us that unfortunately it had been destroyed by treasure hunters. We were then joined by the caretaker of the mosque, Bekir, who was also a friendly local villager. Şefik was tall and thin with silver hair, while Bekir was short and stocky, with a wrinkled and sun-weathered face, and wearing yellow rubber boots and a reflective vest. The two of them recounted to me how in the 1980s villagers had torn down one of the churches and used the stones to build part of a mosque for the village. One of the walls collapsed, however, and they concluded that it must be inappropriate to use church stones to build a mosque, so they used the stones to build the village school instead. Indeed, on a later visit, I found the school—a small, one-room schoolhouse—with visible crosses carved into the stones in the outer walls.



Figure 5.6. View of Erek Mountain from Kopanis Village with the rocky outcrop of *Kevirê Mijo* (Mijo's Rock in Kurdish) in the foreground. November 4, 2016.

Şefik was a very enthusiastic raconteur and explained that his grandfather used to talk about the times when Armenians and Muslims lived as neighbors. “They were very hardworking, he used to say. They weren’t like us. Wherever they went, they built things, and they left their names behind, so we remember them.” He then pointed to a large rocky outcrop across the small valley and said, “You see that rock? They call that rock ‘*Kevirê Mijo*’ [‘Mijo’s Rock’ in Kurdish] (Figure 5.6). Mijo was an Armenian man and it is named after him. You see, in the old days, people left their names behind, but not anymore,” he mused. At this, Bekir jumped in and contradicted Şefik, saying “There’s more to the story than that. In the old days, during the war, there was an Armenian man named Mijo and they took him and his whole family up to that rock and threw them off into the valley and killed them that way. That’s why they call it *Kevirê Mijo*.” Şefik seemed not to hear Bekir’s comment and continued with his narrative: “The Armenians left their names behind, like the names of our villages, they are all left from the Armenians. For instance, this village is called Kopanis, and there are a lot of other villages like that – Shushanis, Ermanis, etc. And do you know where these names came from? A long time ago there was an Armenian woman named “Nis” who was extremely wealthy, and she owned 100 villages! She had villages from here all the way to the border with Iran, and all of the villages were named after her. That is why they are named KopaNIS, ShushaNIS, etc.”

Şefik was not alone in his suggestion about the origin of the “Nis” endings of many of the names of the villages in the region. I heard a similar conjecture from multiple other individuals in Van. This tale demonstrates another layer of the politics of naming and memory in Van. Over the past century, as discussed in Chapter Two, the government officially changed non-Turkish, “foreign” place names to Turkish names, thus that most villages in the southeast that had names of Armenian or Kurdish origin were changed to Turkish names. While the names on official

maps are the Turkish names, local Kurds continue using the original, non-Turkish and unofficial name. However, in the case of Armenian-origin place names, sometimes the original name contains a letter that does not exist in Kurdish and is difficult to pronounce. Additionally, because there are no local Armenian language speakers left, the current Kurdish residents become severed from the original pronunciation and the meaning of the names of their villages. Thus, over time the pronunciation of many names has morphed into a Kurdish-ified version of the original Armenian name.

Though not the case for all, many former Armenian villages have similar endings. For instance, the original Armenian name of Şefik and Bekir's village was Goghbants or Koghpants, while the names of three nearby villages were Zrvandents, Tsorovants, and Shushants. The ending of these names comes from the medieval Armenian plural ending “-ants” or “-ents.” In Kurmanji Kurdish there is no “ts” sound, and so often the “-ants” ending has come to be pronounced “-anis.” Thus, these villages are known by local Kurds today as Kopanis, Zirvandanis, Çoravanis, and Şuşanis. They also each have an official Turkish name: respectively, Sarmaç, Karpuzalanı, Kavuncu, and Kevenli.

In the republican era, the names of these villages were changed from their original, “foreign” name, to a Turkish name, as were the names of many other villages and towns in Turkey. In Van alone, 552 out of the total 731 place names were changed, making a total of 76% changes in place names (Nişanyan 2011, 51). As I discussed in Chapter Two, the changing of place names was part of the widespread state attempts to Turkify the geography of Anatolia over the past century (U. U. Ungor 2012; Öktem 2008), a process which went hand in hand with the building of nationalist monuments and the inscribing of nationalist symbols on the landscape.

The question of place names demonstrates various aspects of the politics of post-Genocide memory in southeastern Turkey. Firstly, it highlights the degrees of separation between the current inhabitants from the history of the land in which they dwell, as well as the ways in which landscape itself serves to preserve some aspects of local memory. Kurds who live in these villages continue to use the old names in their everyday lives and speech, and more often than not express an understanding that these names are remnants of a time in which Armenians lived there. At the same time, in the decades after the Armenian inhabitants disappeared and there were no speakers of the Armenian language left in the area, the original meanings of the names become obscured, pronunciation changed, and new interpretations for the names began to circulate. These changing dynamics demonstrate the disconnect between those who live in the villages today and the history left by their predecessors. Finally, the continued vibrancy of the older names and their current variations, side by side with the official names, which are often simply ignored by locals, demonstrates the ways in which official efforts to erase undesirable history and remake the national geography remain fragmented, incomplete, and in constant contest with the messy and complicated relationships between people and the places and things in and around which they live their lives, remember the past, and imagine the future.

In most historically Armenian villages in the Van region, the local history often remains invisible, save for the carved crosses that were repurposed as building blocks in houses and garden walls. In other cases, Armenian architectural heritage is left to decay and crumble while, simultaneously, new monuments are built to celebrate the Turkish and/or Islamic past of the region. This is the case in the village of Kopanis, where not only the history but also the very geography and landscape of the village were de-Christianized as they were Islamicized. The next example that I will discuss is of the village of Xorkom, a site where representatives of the central

government and of the Kurdish movement overtly engaged in a contest over the local past through manipulating the material landscape. This case is a rare one in that the local Armenian history was overtly acknowledged and commemorated by one local government administration, even if that commemorative monument was later partially dismantled by the next administration.

Xorkom: A Village of Beaches and Bones

Xorkom, in the district of Edremit, west of Van's city center, was an Armenian-populated village before the genocide and was the birthplace of the world-famous Armenian-American painter, Arshile Gorky. Born in 1904 in the village, Gorky lived a life full of hardships. He survived the 1915 Genocide with his mother but lost her when she succumbed to starvation along with many other destitute refugees in Yerevan after the war. Ending up in the United States, Gorky became a world-famous painter, only to commit suicide at the age of forty-four after his wife left him and took their children with her. Gorky spent his early childhood in Xorkom, at a time when the village was home to 435 Armenians, a church, and the Surp Vartan Monastery (Nişanyan).

In Xorkom, like in Kopanis and many surrounding villages, years after the Armenian inhabitants of the village were driven out of their native homes, the name of the Armenian village was officially Turkified, and became "Dilkaya." Just as the original Armenian name was erased from the map, over the subsequent decades the Armenian churches, monasteries, homes, and cemeteries were also dismantled and repurposed by the Kurds who later settled there. In what follows, I present four snapshots of the village of Xorkom from four separate years in order to illustrate the way in which the landscape became the scene on which history is contested, and how various actors (local villagers, members of the Kurdish municipality, and state representatives) remember, highlight, appropriate or erase the local past.

First Snapshot: 2011

My first visit to Xorkom was in 2011, when my local guide took me to see Arshile Gorky's birthplace, and also to see the local church. The church had been tucked between the village houses and our guide was confused when he could not find it. He called out to a local woman who was working in her garden, "Aunty! Where is the church here?" She pointed to a newly built house nearby and said, "It was there, but they destroyed it and built that house" (Figure 5.7). Visible in the wall of the house was an Armenian *khachkar*, or carved cross-stone, nestled amongst the stones of the foundation (Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.7. The now-abandoned house built on the site of the destroyed church in Xorkom village. September 16, 2017.



Figure 5.8. Armenian Khachkar (carved cross-stone) visible in the foundation of the abandoned house. July 9, 2011.

A man who heard us talking then emerged from the neighboring courtyard and recounted the story of the house to us as follows. Six years earlier the villager who owned the property on which the church was standing wanted to build a new house in its place. The local imam warned him against this, advising him that that he should respect the church as a holy site. The man, not heeding the imam's warnings, demolished the church and used the stones to build a new house for his family. Shortly after the house was completed, in quick succession the man's wife and younger son died, while his older son became paralyzed, and the man himself fell ill with a mysterious affliction that left him bedridden. Our host concluded his solemn tale by affirming that the whole village knew that such bad fortune had befallen the man because he had destroyed the church.

The Armenian past of the village remains alive in the memories of the villagers and shapes how they understand the space of their village and the material remnants of the Armenian community. A destroyed church wrought its own destruction on the man who had destroyed it. Thus, here, the material environment is not understood as mute, dead, or simply an artifact of the past to be disposed of. Instead, it has its own agency and represents what Lefebvre formulates as social space, which dialectically is both shaped by social action and shapes social action (Lefebvre 1992).

Second Snapshot: 2016

My second visit to Xorkom was in the spring of 2016 when I visited the village again to see the Edremit municipal government's newly constructed memorial fountain, built to commemorate the birthplace of Arshile Gorky. This was a remarkable monument considering the policy of denial, destruction, and the rewriting of history that has been dominant in Turkey since the

founding of the Republic, as described in the preceding chapters, and visible in the Iğdır monument discussed above. This memorial fountain, a monument to Arshile Gorky, was another example of an oppositional monument built by a municipality controlled by a Kurdish party (at this time the DBP, *Demokratik Bölgeler Partisi*, Democratic Regions Party). Like the Monument of Common Conscience in Diyarbakır (discussed in Chapter Two), the monument in Xorkom served to confront the state-driven denialism by highlighting and celebrating an Armenian of local origin.

This fountain was part of a larger effort by the Edremit municipal government's attempt to acknowledge and promote the Armenian historical presence in the area in the spirit of democratic inclusiveness and as a way to confront the official erasure of minority histories. With small but visible public gestures, the municipal government attempted to both acknowledge the Armenian history of the area and to influence local historical consciousness. For instance, they erected signs at the entrance and exit to the district with a welcome message on one side and a message reading "Have a good trip" on the other, as well as a sign marking the municipal government office written in four languages: Kurdish, Turkish, Armenian, and English (Figure 5.9). Through making visible the Armenian and Kurdish languages, along with Turkish (the official language of the state) and English (the international language for tourists), the municipality attempted to reclaim and make visible the region's multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic past and present. As part of this same effort to celebrate and promote the Armenian history of the area, in 2016, in the village of Xorkom, the municipal government decided to officially commemorate the local Armenian past by building a commemorative fountain memorializing the life of Arshile Gorky.



Figure 5.9. Road signs in four languages (Kurdish, Armenian, Turkish, and English) installed by the Edremit Municipality.

Before I visited the village to see the fountain, I met with one of the municipal officials, Sami, who had been part of the team that planned and carried out the project. First, I asked him about how the project began. Sami explained to me that he had been part of a group that had visited the village the previous year as part of a project to create an inventory of historical sites in Edremit. During the visit, he explained, the group was surprised when locals brought them to drink water from a natural spring which they called the “Gorky Spring/*Gorki Çeşmesi*.” They were confused about the name at first, but after asking further questions, they learned the story of Arshile Gorky and that he was born in the village. Inspired by this story of a local Armenian man becoming an internationally-famous artist, they decided to build a fountain atop the spring and install a sign next to it that provided a short biography of Arshile Gorky in Armenian, Turkish, Kurdish, and English. Sami described that first encounter to me thus:

We went to the village in the summer. We got thirsty, and we had the municipal mayor with us, and the villagers said ‘Come, mayor, come drink from Gorky’s spring (Turkish: *Gorki’nin Çeşmesi*). One of the people with us asked, “Who is this Gorky?” The villagers said he was an Armenian man, and they explained that Gorky was born there, and this spring belonged to his family. From then until now they call that place *Kanîya Gorky* [Gorky Spring in Kurdish]. When we heard this we were surprised, that in the village of Dilkaya, Xorkum, there is a Gorky Spring (*Gorki Çeşmesi*). After that, we did some research, and we decided to build the Arshile Gorky Fountain. We thought we should do it specially to demonstrate our perspective on history a little bit. At that time there was just water flowing there [from the ground]. Of course, we wanted to make it a little bit in line with Armenian architecture. We made it somehow.

Sami further elaborated on what he meant the “perspective on history” of his municipality and that of other Kurdish-run local governments, and how they came into conflict with Turkish nationalist critics as follows:

We, as the Edremit municipality, along with other DBP municipalities, are trying to raise awareness about [minority histories]. For instance, our signs are in multiple languages. After the elections of March 30, 2014, we started putting up signs in multiple languages, and then the Turkish media started a smear campaign against us. They said that we were trying to revive the Armenian spirit in this region, but we didn’t care. After all, Armenians were a people who lived in this geography. They said, are you trying to bring Armenians here? I mean, what would happen if Armenians come? Now, when Armenians come for the Akhtamar service they put a huge Turkish flag on the boats, what is the meaning of that? You’ve already killed and exiled these people.

Here Sami was openly defiant against what he identifies as “the Turkish media,” which espouses the nationalist sentiment of portraying Armenians as a threat, and as not belonging to that land. Instead, Sami emphasized that Armenians are a people who are native to that geography and whose historical presence should be recognized. Sami was adamant that the fountain was an important monument and one that represented the municipality’s democratic and inclusive vision of history. He hoped that it would become a site of remembrance and of building understanding, a place in which Kurds and Armenians could come together and commemorate their shared past. Towards this goal, he hoped to get in touch with the descendants of the Gorky family and to invite them to come to the opening ceremony of the fountain. Unfortunately, however, Sami was

never able to make contact with the family, and because the completion of the fountain coincided with the reignition of the conflict in the southeast, the opening ceremony was indefinitely postponed and ultimately never took place.

While Sami's rhetoric echoes that of many other Kurdish officials, such as the Kurdish mayors of Diyarbakır discussed in Chapter Two, Sami also had another connection to the Armenian past beyond the feeling of shared suffering between Kurds and Armenians and a desire to right the wrongs of the past. His own great-grandmother had been an Armenian who had survived the massacres and deportations, was absorbed into a Muslim Kurdish family, and converted to Islam. He explained this connection thus: "For instance, I am Kurdish, and my grandmother was Armenian. During the period of deportations, they killed the men and seized the women. During that time many Armenian women were seized (*el koymak*). Many of the families with roots here had an Armenian woman [among their ancestors]. Many people here have Armenian blood."

Sami explained to me that he, like many others, did not know about his Armenian ancestry when he was growing up. He only found out after the assassination of Hrant Dink, an Armenian journalist from Turkey, in 2007. When his mother heard the news on television, she began to cry. Surprised, Sami asked her why she was crying. She replied, "He was an Armenian. He was a good man." Sami replied, "You are Muslim, usually Muslims don't cry for Armenians." His mother then told him that her own grandmother was Armenian. After that, he explained, he worked for some time as a reporter and began to write stories about churches that were in disrepair. Every time that he would write about a church, people would say to him, "what, are you Armenian?"

Sami's own experience of being descended from a converted Armenian survivor of the Genocide most likely contributed to his sensitivity towards the issue of the local Armenian past, but he is by no means alone. Many Kurdish politicians, officials, and others in Van, who have no Armenian ancestral connection are equally adamant and active in their attempt to counter Turkish nationalist denial of Armenian historical presence and strive to highlight the importance of the Armenian community within the past and present of the region.

During our interview, Sami also shared with me the result of the fieldwork that he and other municipal workers had conducted in their effort to create an inventory of historical sites in Edremit. The Edremit Municipality had published a brochure, entitled *Guide to Edremit's Historical and Touristic Places*, which was written in both Turkish and Kurdish, and which was distributed at various public events. The guide began with a brief history of Edremit, which included a specific section entitled "The Place and Importance of Armenians" and another section entitled "Historical Demographic Information" that listed the number of Armenian and Kurdish households in Edremit before 1915. Along with other historical landmarks in the Edremit district, the guide listed multiple ruined Armenian sites found in nearby villages, some of which are largely unknown compared to those Armenian churches that are more frequent destinations for both local and foreign visitors alike. Along with the better-known and recently restored Edremit Church (discussed in Chapter Two), the brochure listed a ruined church in the village of Bakacık (Keşişoğlu), a ruined church and monastery in the village of Gölkaşı (Meşketang), and a site of carved Armenian gravestones. In addition, the brochure listed the Arshile Gorky Fountain, which it described as such:

This fountain, found in the Dilkaya (Xorkom) neighborhood of our Edremit district, is commemorated with the name of the world-famous Armenian painter, Arshile Gorky. It is known that the world-famous painter Gorky lived in this village before the 1915 Armenian exile with his family. Next to the house where he lived together with his

family, there is a natural spring with the feature of having cold water in the summer and warm water in the winter. The fountain was used by the Gorky family at that time which is why the fountain is commemorated with the name of the famous painter. Currently, it is still known as “Gorky Fountain” by the citizens living in Dilkaya neighborhood. The fountain is still used by the villagers. (Edremit Belediyesi)

These efforts of commemorating, naming, listing, and marking these spaces of Armenian material heritage, such as the fountain and the churches represent what Juan Herrera calls “spatial technologies of remembering,” methods of marking and remembering the past through specific places and inscribing those memories onto the landscape. They also echo what Herrera calls “cartographic memory,” as through marking and labeling the landscape, they reclaim the space of their district and remake the social geography through recalling and reanimated a silenced past (Herrera 2015).

Throughout my explorations of the Xorkom fountain project, I was impressed by the commitment and motivation of the Edremit municipal officials, both of Sami and others, to mark and commemorate the Armenian history of the region as a defiant political statement against the assimilationist policies of the state, as well as an effort to create an inclusive present through memorializing the past. However, I noticed a number of inconsistencies within their narrative and the project plan. First of all, the artist being commemorated was not born with the name Arshile Gorky. His name at birth was Vostanik Manoug Adoian. He began using the name “Arshile Gorky,” in reference to the famous Russian writer Maxim Gorky, after immigrating to the United States as he attempted to reinvent himself and begin a new life. Thus, the villager’s explanation that there was a spring that for a century had been known as the Gorky Spring after the family of Arshile Gorky seems to contain some historical inaccuracies. Still, whether or not there may have been some artistic license involved somewhere along the way in the development of this narrative, the municipal workers acted on the information that they had in the service of

their broader ideals of confronting the silencing of history and remembering the local past. Thus, they built the Gorky Fountain in an attempt to make an impact on the local discourse about the regional history, and also to leave a material mark that would both commemorate a local minority figure and also represent their commitment to historical justice.

I went to see the fountain with two local Kurdish friends, Zeynep and Azad. Zeynep, whose family is also from Xorkom but now lives in Van's city center and has a long-standing interest in the Armenian history of the area. When we first spoke about the fountain before our visit, she expressed skepticism about the story presented by the municipal official with whom I spoke, as she said that she had never heard of the name Gorky in relation to the local spring in question. When we arrived at the site of the memorial fountain together on our first visit, she was immediately critical at the structure of the fountain itself. It was a four-sided brick structure built on a square plan, with a pyramidal overhanging roof covered with green asphalt shingles, and a tap on each side (Figure 5.10). Zeynep complained that it was built of cheap construction materials and looked too much like a *hayrat*, or a fountain built as an act of pious Islamic charity.



Figure 5.10. Memorial fountain for the Armenian painter, Arshile Gorky, and accompanying sign with biography, built by the Edremit Municipality. May 6, 2016.

Even more curious than the design of the fountain were the inscriptions. On each of the four faces of the fountain, there was a decorative design (which itself did not have any obvious relation to any Armenian or other local visual motifs). Inside of the design was an inscription with the name of the fountain in four languages, one on each side of the fountain. In English it read “Gorky Fountain.” In Turkish it read “*Gorky Çeşmesi*” and in Armenian it read “Գորկու շաւրվաւն (Gorku shadrvan)” both meaning, “The Fountain of Gorky.” In Kurdish, it read “*Kanî Gorky*.” The Kurdish inscription was puzzling to us because it was grammatically incorrect. Zeynep was irritated by this and began to complain about the incompetence of the municipality. “How absurd!” she exclaimed, “Here they are, Kurds, trying to make a statement about how democratic and progressive they are by building a fountain for an Armenian, but they go and build a *hayrat*, and they can’t even write correctly in Kurdish! At least learn to write in your mother tongue!”

The problem with the Kurdish inscription is that “*Kanî Gorky*” means “Fountain Gorky.” It should have been “*Kanîya Gorky*,” which would be “The Fountain *of* Gorky.” Indeed, this seemed to have been an error, as in the brochure published by the municipality, the fountain is labeled as “*Kanîya Arshile Gorky*.” While Zeynep was irked by this seemingly careless error that she saw as representative of systemic dysfunctionality in the Edremit municipal government, our second companion, Azad, pointed out another possible layer of meaning. “*Kanî Gorky...*” he mused, “Maybe they did it on purpose! Maybe they are trying to get people to think about the Armenians’ absence.” Indeed, we then realized the unintentional double-entendre. *Kanî*, in Kurdish, is the word for both the noun “fountain,” as well as the interrogative word, “where?” Thus, the grammatically correct translation for the inscription, “*Kanî Gorky*” can be read as “Where is Gorky?”

This accidental error turned the fountain into more than just a monument commemorating the birthplace of one individual Armenian painter, it became a possible site of interrogation, a space to ask critical questions: Where is Gorky? Where are the Armenians? What happened to them? Why are they absent? Where did they go? The inadvertent omission of two letters opened the space to interrogate the official history of erasure and to reimagine local history in new and more inclusive ways. Additionally, the grammatical mistake also points to ongoing structural violence against the local Kurdish community. The fact that the monument, built by a Kurdish-run municipality, contained a grammatical error in the Kurdish inscription, is a stark reminder of the ongoing suppression of the Kurdish language and the result that most Kurdish adults are not fluent in the reading, writing, and grammar of their own mother tongue.

Despite the minor inconsistencies in the narrative of the construction of the fountain and the grammatical error in the inscription, the overall story of the Gorky Fountain demonstrates the ways in which the Edremit municipality, like other Kurdish-run local governments, attempted to challenge the denial of minority histories through the construction of a monument. Both intentionally, and unintentionally (through the grammatical error), the monument served to acknowledge the Armenian past in the region and to question the Armenians' present absence in the village.

Third Snapshot: 2017

This brings us to the third snapshot of Xorkom in the summer of 2017. In order to understand the changing context of the politics of memory and landscape in Xorkom since the previous year, we must consider the dramatic changes that had occurred in both Van city and province, as well as in Turkey more broadly. As discussed in Chapter One, when I arrived in Turkey to begin my

research on July 16, 2015, the two-year peace process between the Turkish state and leaders of the Kurdish movement was still ongoing. This peace process and ceasefire came to an abrupt end just days after I began my research, and, as discussed in earlier chapters, the subsequent escalation of the conflict resulted in massive destruction in the majority-Kurdish southeast.

At the time of my second visit to Xorkom in Spring 2016, the two-month-long curfew in the nearby city of Yüksekova was ongoing, clashes there were raging and tens of thousands of locals from Yüksekova had come to Van to seek shelter (as discussed in Chapter Four). At that time, a majority of the municipal governments in Van were run by the Kurdish DBP, and despite the crisis situation, the DBP-controlled Edremit municipality, along with the other local Kurdish municipalities, continued pursuing their local projects, such as the building of the Xorkom fountain. This all changed after the failed coup attempt of July 15, 2016, which had aimed to oust President Tayyip Erdoğan from the ruling AKP (Justice and Development Party). After the coup attempt, the government announced a national state of emergency, during which time tens of thousands of civil servants, teachers, doctors, academics and others were suspended or fired from their jobs, and journalists, activists, and politicians were imprisoned on charges of “supporting a terrorist organization.” This purge initially was applied to followers of the so-called “FETÖ” terrorist organization (those following the self-exiled cleric Fethullah Gülen, whom the government charged with instigating the coup attempt), but soon came to include leftists and those even remotely related to the Kurdish movement or sympathetic to the Kurdish cause (Hansen 2017).

Eventually, this purge came to the DBP municipalities of Van and the southeast. The democratically elected mayors of the Edremit municipality and tens of other DBP municipalities were removed, many arrested, and a government trustee, or “*kayyum*” in Turkish, was appointed

in their place (Tastekin 2018). In Van province, the *kayyums* were often the district governor (*kaymakam*) or the deputy governor (*vali yardımcısı*). In the months after their appointments, these *kayyums* began to implement major changes in the areas previously administered by the Kurdish party. Firstly, they fired most of the municipal workers who had ties to the Kurdish party. They also closed most if not all institutions connected with the Kurdish movement, especially those relating to Kurdish language teaching. Finally, they endeavored to erase the public signs and symbols relating to the Kurdish movement and visibly Turkify the public space in Van.

As discussed above, the DBP Edremit municipality had made a conscious effort to include Kurdish as well as Armenian language in public space, and these were among the first targets of the new regime. The earlier signs of the Edremit municipality were removed and replaced with new signs. These new signs were written with prominent Turkish script along with English in a smaller font. On some signs, Kurdish was included as well but only as a small subscript to the main Turkish text. Armenian script was not included. Beginning on the first anniversary of the coup attempt, on July 15, 2017, and repeated on subsequent anniversaries, the streets of the city center were draped with Turkish flags that remained in place for months (Figures 5.11-5.12). Over time as well, the curbsides of the main thoroughfares cutting through the city center were painted in red and white and new street lamps were installed with red and white lights, such that the city streets themselves became imprinted with the colors of the Turkish flag, reflecting the red and white banners hung across them. Little by little, the public markers indexing the Kurdish movement were replaced by symbols of the Turkish state, including ubiquitous posters of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.



Figure 5.11. Turkish flags strung across a main road on the first anniversary of the coup attempt. July 15, 2017.



Figure 5.12. Turkish flags strung across a main intersection for the third anniversary of the coup attempt. July 24, 2019.

These changes in tone and tenor of what was and was not displayed in public space were visible not just in Van city center, but in the surrounding towns and villages as well, including

the nearby district of Edremit and the village of Xorkom. The memorial fountain commemorating Arshile Gorky, built in the spring of 2016, had been accompanied by a sign with his biography written in Armenian, Turkish, English, and Kurdish. One year later, in the summer of 2017, the elected DBP mayor had been removed by decree under the state of emergency and the Edremit municipality was in the hands of a *kayyum* appointed by the AKP.

During that period Van was full of roadside billboards extolling the work ethic of the *kayyum* and the newly AKP-controlled municipality. They displayed new roads and children's playgrounds being built by the *kayyum* in an attempt to create a positive public image about the new municipal leadership. Meanwhile, what was not mentioned on the billboards was that the *kayyum* was also busy firing most of the municipal workers who had been hired under the DBP municipality and closing all Kurdish movement-affiliated institutions.

Of all the new projects that the *kayyums* carried out purportedly in the service of the people, the one that the Edremit municipality advertised most was the highly anticipated “*halk plaji*,” or public beach (Figure 5.13). This was the first free public beach to be opened in Van, and it was to be opened in Xorkom. Xorkom is indeed situated on beautiful sandy beaches and is a nice location to swim. The *kayyum* opened the beach to the public with a ceremony on July 22, 2017, and I went one week later to investigate the new establishment. They had created a “women's beach” enclosed by a blue plastic tarp, a men's beach, and a mixed beach. They had also renovated a defunct building that had been built as a village school and then abandoned as a cafeteria. Additionally, they had a paved parking area and road and set up multiple restrooms and changing cabins. Specially for the opening, strings of Turkish flags had been strung all along the parking lot and entrance to the beach (Figure 5.14).



Figure 5.13. Sign advertising the opening of the public beach in Xorkom. July 30, 2017.



Figure 5.14. The newly opened public beach in Xorkom adorned with Turkish flags. July 30, 2017.

Upon my arrival, I noticed the principal problem with this project. Right between the cafeteria and the mixed beach is a large earth mound, which comprises the “*Dilkaya Höyük*” or “Dilkaya Mound” and which has the legal status of a first degree protected archeological site in

which historic artifacts dating to 3000 BC had been found in previous archeological digs. In Turkey, it is categorically forbidden to build on or change in any way a protected archeological area (*sit alanı*), and the local government, appointed trustee or not, did not have the authority to unilaterally decide to create a beach on the site.

Additionally, the area in the immediate vicinity around the mound was some kind of large cemetery. When I had visited the area in 2011, I had seen human bones and skulls that had been exposed in the hillside facing the lake due to the effects of erosion. While this village had indeed been populated by Armenians before 1915, and this could have been an Armenian graveyard, it could also have been a cemetery belonging to a much earlier period as well. Regardless of its origins, the graveyard with its exposed human bones had now become half parking lot and half women's beach.

This fact quickly came to the attention of a pair of young reporters from *Dicle Haber Ajansı*, an opposition media outlet, who quickly published a damning article entitled, "The *kayyum* planted a toilet on a historic mound and Armenian cemetery" (Van/Dihaber 2017). This news quickly spread across the internet, and the Edremit Municipality responded with a statement on its official website stating that this news was a lie. The statement expressed that there was no Armenian cemetery in the area and that they had protected the historic mound by putting a wire fence around it. Additionally, the statement read, "There were no buildings built for the public beach. There was already a school left from 1960 that the villagers were using as a barn. The school was renovated, and no other construction was undertaken. The shower stalls and changing cabins were built from wood, and only on the beach. Even the toilets are only portable." The statement added, "This news is meant to smear us because our citizens are appreciating our services, especially our public beach" (Van Edremit Belediyesi 2017).

The day after this news came out, I went with a group of friends to visit the beach again and take a closer look at the beach and the graveyard. When we arrived, we were turned away by guards at the entrance, who said that that the beach was closed for the day so that they could carry out “cleaning and disinfection” (*temizlik ve dezenfeksiyon*). However, looking around, we could see heavy construction vehicles moving piles of earth in the areas that had been mentioned as the graveyard (Figure 5.15).



Figure 5.15. Bulldozers “cleaning up” the public beach in Xorkom. August 2, 2017.

In direct response to the *kayyum*’s denial of the existence of the graveyard, the young reporters then found an eighty-year-old local villager as a witness who could tell them that the area was, in fact, a graveyard. They published an article, including the villager’s full name, in which he states that he is a witness to the fact that it was an Armenian graveyard (Yeni Özgür Politika 2017). A few days later I heard from another local friend from Xorkom that this elderly man had been detained by the police and questioned because of his statements in this article.

The media frenzy caused by the story of a toilet being built on an Armenian graveyard reached such heights that the Armenian member of parliament from the pro-Kurdish HDP (the Peoples' Democratic Party, Turkish: *Halkların Demokratik Partisi*), Garo Paylan, traveled to Van to visit the site of the graveyard and make a press statement. In an article published in *Agos*, the Istanbul based newspaper published in Armenian and Turkish, Garo spoke about his visit to Xorkom. He said that after his visit he had no doubt that the area was an Armenian graveyard. He explained that residents of the village said that there were Armenian gravestones in the area of the graveyard until the 1940s and 1950s. Paylan reported, “I clearly saw the area of the cemetery around the historic mound. One area had been flattened by a bulldozer. Wherever I scratched [the earth] with my hand I came upon human bones. In a clear way a *mescit* (small mosque), a toilet, and a cafeteria were built on a cemetery area. I felt sad that we were not able to protect the bodies of our ancestors” (Kazaz 2017). Paylan also visited the memorial fountain built to commemorate Arshile Gorky. He reported that the sign next to the fountain, which had contained Gorky’s biography, had been removed, and the water supply to the fountain had been cut off. Regarding the situation in Xorkom, Paylan concluded, “They dismantled and threw away all of the information and documents relating to Armenian life” (Kazaz 2017).

Whether or not this was an Armenian or a much more ancient graveyard, there is no question that the *kayyum*’s agenda in Xorkom was not one of preserving and protecting historic sites or local memory. On the contrary, the actions of the *kayyum* in Xorkom highlight an effort to erase Armenian and Kurdish traces and establish in its place the physical presence of a benevolent Turkish state bringing services to its people (whether or not they were welcome). As Paylan noted, in tandem with the construction of the beach, the authorities removed the sign that accompanied the Gorky fountain that displayed Gorky’s biography in four languages (Figure

5.16). Additionally, at the entrance to the village, they removed the signs placed by the former DBP municipality, which displayed both the older Armenian names as well as the newer Turkish names of Xorkom/Dilkaya and the neighboring village, and replaced them with signs in only Turkish advertising the beach and a newly-built horseback riding arena.



Figure 5.16. The Gorky memorial fountain after the sign with Gorky’s biography in four languages had been removed. July 30, 2017.

This final move of replacing signs took place not only in Xorkom but across Van province. For instance, as mentioned above, the signs welcoming visitors to Edremit in four languages were removed and replaced with signs privileging Turkish over English and Kurdish and completely omitting Armenian. In the previous few years, the DBP municipalities in Van had put up signs in neighborhoods and villages all around Van, marking space with two names. In Edremit and Ipekyolu, the two out of three municipalities in the Van metro area controlled by the DBP (Tuşba municipality being the third and controlled by the AKP), the format of these signs itself carried a particularly politicized message. The sign itself was an oval with a green

background, a red border, and a yellow line bisecting the middle. These colors, red, green, and yellow, are the colors of the Kurdish movement and as such carry strong political connotations in Turkey (Figure 5.17). As discussed in Chapter Four, these colors were at times banned, and many people have been arrested simply for wearing or displaying them.

The text displayed on the signs carried an equally pointed message. Above the yellow line, in white lettering, the text read *Hûn bi xêr hatin*, which means “Welcome” in Kurdish, with no Turkish or English translation. Below the line, the locally used name of the village was written, which often was an Armenian name—for instance, Xorkom, Şuşanis, or Zirvandanis. Below that, in parenthesis, was the official Turkish name of the village—in these cases (Dilkaya), (Kevenli) (Karpuzalanı). These signs were a direct material and symbolic challenge against the state-driven and overt erasure of local names, which was part of the large-scale state policy of the Turkification of Anatolia over the past century, as discussed in Chapter Two. With these signs, the DBP municipalities marked public space in Van both with the colors of the Kurdish movement and reclaimed the local names of villages and neighborhoods that had been deliberately erased from all official maps and signs. Additionally, they privileged the local Kurdish/Armenian name and relegated the official Turkish name to a parenthesis at the bottom of the sign. After the coup attempt, the *kayyums* of Van province removed many such signs. In Xorkom, the green, red, and yellow signs listing the old names of the village were replaced by brown and white signs pointing to the beach and the other local project of the *kayyum*, the Edremit Olympic Horseback Riding Facility (*Edremit Olimpik Binicilik Tesisleri*) in the neighboring village of Köşk (Figure 5.18).



Figure 5.17. Village signs listing both the local and official Turkish names along with a message of welcome in Kurdish. May 7, 2016.



Figure 5.18. New signs in Turkish replacing the earlier signs that had included Kurdish. July 30, 2017.

Fourth Snapshot: 2018

In September 2018, I visited Xorkom again for a final time. I found that the public beach had been dismantled and all traces of it were gone from the landscape, except the permanent building of the cafeteria. I walked along the beach, and though the white plastic lounge chairs were gone, the bleached-white bones protruding from the eroding hillside were still visible, a testament to how the archeological record, the archive of bones, sometimes has a will of its own beyond the mercurial whims of political authorities. At the entrance to the village the sign pointing to the public beach was also gone, and in its stead was another sign, which, along with the sign to the horseback riding facility, pointed in the opposite direction to the neighboring village of Köşk. This new sign read “Camp and Trailer Center,” (*Kamp ve Karavan Merkezi*). While the public beach had been disassembled in the wake of public outcry and negative publicity across Turkey, the *kayyum* had continued building new touristic facilities in the area. These new facilities, built side by side outside of the village of Köşk, were adorned with Turkish flags and guarded by large armored vehicles.

After this visit I met with Sami again, the man who had formerly worked for the Edremit Municipal government and had participated in the building of the fountain. Like most of the other municipal workers in the municipalities controlled by the Kurdish party, Sami had been fired after the coup. We discussed the evolution and devolution of the public beach, and he told me that one of the two reporters who had published the story of the graveyard, a young Kurdish woman, had been arrested and was now in prison on charges of promoting propaganda for a terrorist organization (a common charge leveled against many journalists and others for pursuing stories critical of the government).

The changing landscape in Xorkom demonstrates the political nature of place making and the centrality of space in the negotiation of power, history memory (Herrera 2015). In each vignette, state actors and officials related to the Kurdish movement sought to inscribe their own understanding of history onto the landscape. Fountains were built and signs were installed and dismantled. The signs of the public beach had disappeared, and a new touristic camping center had been built next to the horseback riding arena. Yet the bones protruding out of the ground continue to unsettle the narrative espoused by the *kayyum*'s efforts at turning the space into a de-historicized tourist destination. And just along the road that led to the beach, the house with the cracked walls that was built on the site of the destroyed church continues to stand empty, an unmarked, uncommemorated ghostly presence. The house is a site of ruination on many counts, of the Armenian community, of the church, and of the family for whom it was built. It remains a silent monument and a reminder of a violent history, the material traces of which continue to persist despite the whitewashing efforts of those officials who would that such a history be forgotten.

These four vignettes of the changing landscape in Xorkom between 2011 and 2018 demonstrate both the ways in which the Armenian material remains of the region are understood locally and in the national arena, and how landscape becomes a site in which the struggle over history is negotiated. The first snapshot shows how in Xorkom, like many other villages in the Van region, locals interact with Armenian material remains in various ways, through reuse, destruction, and ideas of the lingering effects of historical violence in the form of the curse (as discussed further in Chapter Two). The second snapshot demonstrates the ways in which the Kurdish-run municipality sought to materialize its more inclusive understanding of history on the landscape through the building of a monument and erecting signs. The third snapshot illustrates

how the central government, once it seized control of the local administration, attempted to erase the former officials' attempts to mark the landscape, through dismantling signs and enacting their own form of political landscaping. Finally, the fourth snapshot shows both the fragility and the immutability of the material landscape, and the disconnect between geological time and the changing political fads of the day. These snapshots also demonstrate the ways in which in each case of officials attempting to superimpose their understanding of history onto the landscape, there always exists a crack in the narrative, as the material landscape itself has a more complicated story to tell.

In the following section, I build on the above discussion of the ways in which history is negotiated through space, place, and the landscape in the province of Van through an exploration of two monuments in the provinces of Kars and Iğdır in northeastern Turkey, both of which border the Republic of Armenia.

Kars: A Monstrous Monument

In January 2011, then-prime minister of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan made a splash when he called for the destruction of a monument in the province of Kars, the province located in the most northeastern corner of Turkey that immediately borders the Republic of Armenia to the west. The monument that had become the object of Erdoğan's ire was the Monument to Humanity (*İnsanlık Anıtı*), a 30-meter tall concrete sculpture depicting two halves of a figure, one extending a hand to the other (Figure 5.19). The monument had been commissioned in 2006 by the then-mayor of Kars, Naif Alibeyoğlu, as a gesture of reconciliation between Armenia and Turkey. As anthropologist Oguz Alyanak writes, the mayor "talked about this statue as 'his dream,' through which he would be able to bring the 'brothers and sisters' of the two nations

together” (Alyanak 2012). The sculptor, Mehmet Aksoy, designed his sculpture to promote peace and brotherhood, and described the statue as follows: “I depicted the situation of a person that is divided in two. This person will be ‘himself’ again when these two pieces are reunited” (Erbal 2016, 212).



Figure 5.19. Monument to Humanity by sculptor Mehmet Aksoy in Kars, before it was dismantled.

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Monument_to_Humanity_by_Mehmet_Aksoy_in_Kars,_Turkey.jpg>

From the beginning of the statue’s construction, however, local members of MHP, the Nationalist Movement Party (*Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi*) protested the monument. The provincial head of the MHP, Oktay Aktaş, complained that the statue represented a capitulation to Armenia, and argued that it was built to counter another monument in the nearby province of Iğdır (discussed below). These protests managed to halt the construction of the monument, thus that the large, concrete hand, meant to symbolize the rapprochement between the two countries, was never mounted, and lay on the ground beside the statues. The statue was still unfinished when prime minister Erdoğan visited Kars in January 2011, and made a statement calling the statue it a

“monstrosity” or “freak” (*ucube*) (CNN Türk 2011). Besides criticizing the statue on aesthetic grounds, Erdoğan also complained that it overshadowed a nearby historic Islamic shrine (Erbal 2016). In his remarks, Erdoğan stated that the municipality would demolish the statue and build a park on the site (Hurriyet 2011). These remarks sparked protests from many groups critical of Erdoğan and the MHP, including those who favored reconciliation with Armenia, as well as those who defended the statue on the grounds of artistic freedom (Barsoumian 2011). Shortly after Erdoğan’s remarks, however, the dismantling of the statue began, and its demolition was completed in June 2011. The debate over the statue as well as its eventual decapitation and dismemberment were covered widely in both the Turkish and international press and became a symbol for the ongoing tensions between Turkey and Armenia

Sociologist Meltem Ahıska writes on the topics of monstrosity, power, and memory in relation to the building and destroying of monuments in contemporary Turkey, including both the Kars monument and others thus:

The depiction of monstrosity with regard to monuments in Turkey not only resonates with the terms of a current public debate on monuments, [...] but also invites a new discussion on memory/counter-memory. The term “monster” points to unacceptable forms of life, cast aside as “abnormal,” and can be of use in tracing how certain memories are crushed or abandoned and become aberrant. I contend that remembering cannot be understood as a process of invoking the past in its entirety; instead, it should be studied through its destruction, hence through the fragmented traces in the present. This is important not just to introduce plurality into the field of memories, but also to notice the workings of both constructive and destructive dynamics of power in the process. (Ahıska 2011, 11)

Here Ahıska points to the politics of memory inherent in the creating and destroying monuments, and the ways in which exploring the building and destruction of monuments can serve to unsettle what she calls “the oppressing imperative of official history” (Ahıska 2011, 11).

Iğdır: A Martyrs Monument

The second monument in question, referred to by Aktaş above, is a monument that stands on the outskirts of the town of Iğdır, in the province of the same name, a two-hour drive southeast of Kars, and just a 20-minute drive from the Alican border gate with Armenia, which has been closed since 1993. This lesser-known monument, though never the object of a nation-wide debate like its counterpart in Kars, and never threatened with destruction, nonetheless participates in the same symbolic debate over the contested past in the borderlands between Turkey and Armenia that is manifested on the landscape.

I stumbled across the Iğdır monument by accident, on my first visit to eastern Turkey in July 2010. I had been driving with friends from Van to Kars, and we passed through the town of Iğdır on the way. We had heard that there was a replica of Noah's Ark nearby that makes for a nice photograph with the magnificent Mount Ararat as the backdrop and decided to visit it on our way. The ark replica was not on the main road heading towards Kars, however, and so we had to make a slight detour, turning onto smaller local roads and stopping a few times to ask directions from passersby before we finally found the ark. It was a modest structure, built relatively recently of reddish-colored, lacquered wooden planks (Figure 5.20). It was definitely not to scale, as it looked as if it could only fit one elephant at maximum. Still, it made for a picturesque view with the snowcapped mountain in the distance behind it and green fields nearby. The ark was located in the corner of a grassy park beside the road. When we finished taking our photographs, we looked around and realized that the park was home to another monument as well, one that was much larger and dwarfed the unassuming ark. The centerpiece of the park was a massive thirty-six-meter-high silver tower pointing up to the sky, installed atop an impressive

mound-shaped platform with four sets of stairs leading to the top (Figure 5.21). Curious about the significance of this monumental structure, we decided to investigate before moving on.



Figure 5.20. Replica of Noah’s Ark in Iğdır with Mount Ararat in the background. July 12, 2010.



Figure 5.21. The Iğdır Monument. July 7, 2011.

Upon climbing the stairs to the base of the huge monolith, we discovered that the tower was actually designed in the form of five swords with their blades facing outwards and their tips connecting at the top. The base of the monument was made up by the hilts of the swords, which were engraved with the images of howling wolves, medieval Turkic warriors, rearing horses, two-headed eagles, and modern-day soldiers. In the center of the circle of swords was the star and crescent of the Turkish flag, displayed in a red circle atop a pyramid (Figure 5.22). With no signs or explanation visible, we were at first confused at the seeming disjuncture between the ark and the monument, with its extensive repertoire of militant Turkish nationalist symbolism. We soon understood the significance of the site when we descended to the other side of the monument and found ourselves outside a door with a sign reading “Memorial and Museum of the Martyred Turks Massacred by Armenians” (*Ermeniler Tarafından Katledilen Şehit Türkler Anıt ve Müzesi*).



Figure 5.22. Base of the Iğdır Monument replete with nationalist imagery. July 12, 2010.

The door beneath the sign was locked and the museum seemed to be closed. We looked around and saw a groundskeeper watering the lawn. We approached him and asked about the museum and whether we might be able to enter. He told us that it was currently closed, but that he had keys and could let us in to look around if we wanted. He opened the door and we entered and began to browse the museum's collection. Inside the various small rooms were exhibits of archival photographs showing scenes of massacres, with mutilated bodies strewn across the ground, and captions that read "Muslims assassinated by Armenian bands." These were augmented by photographs of Armenian revolutionary bands with rifles, which were captioned, for instance, "Armenian bands arrested in Diyarbakir and their arms and ammunitions." There were also more recent photographs of newly uncovered skulls and bones labeled, "Collective grave extraction." A few color photographs showed the face of a wrinkled, elderly man, which was labeled "Slaughter witness." Finally, there was a dramatic black and white drawing of a scene of a massacre, in which a black-robed, bearded priest, with a cross around his neck and a rifle in his hand, urged armed Armenians to slaughter helpless Muslim civilians. This drawing was captioned, "A representative picture of the Armenian massacre of Turks."

These gruesome photographs, along with a few ancient rifles in glass cases, were accompanied by texts outlining the purpose of the museum, the process of excavation of mass graves, and the oral histories provided by local witnesses of the massacres. These texts explained that the construction of the monument-museum began on August 1, 1997, and that it was opened on October 5, 1999. They stated that the museum was "founded for the memory of the Turks killed by Armenian gangs," which they labeled as "the Turkish genocide," and they highlighted the archival documents and scientific data obtained through archeological excavations in the region as the factual basis of the museum. The website of the Iğdır Province Culture and

Tourism Directorate has a page for the “Iğdır “Genocide” Memorial-Museum,” which describes the museum as such:

Iğdır and its villages were one of the regions most heavily affected by the Armenian massacres in the years 1915-1920. During that period a large portion of the people of Iğdır (more than eighty thousand) were massacred, and the survivors were forced to abandon their homeland. For this reason, the erection of the “genocide” monument in Iğdır arose from a natural demand. The Iğdır “genocide” monument is now Turkey’s tallest monument, with its height at 43.5 meters.

From these explanations, from the sign above the entryway, and from the contents of the exhibits, we understood that this was a monument built to express the official stance of the Turkish state—that of denial of massacres of Armenians on the part of Turkish government—in addition to a counter-accusation that Armenians instead carried out a genocide of Turks. The monument-museum in some ways serves as a counter-monument to the Armenian Genocide memorial monument built on the hill of Tsitsernakaberd in Yerevan, Armenia in 1967, and the accompanying Armenian Genocide Museum-Institute opened on the same site in 1995. The Tsitsernakaberd memorial serves as a symbol of Armenian Genocide remembrance and its museum presents the history of the destruction of the Ottoman Armenians to thousands of visitors every year. In the same way, the Iğdır monument-museum attempts to craft its own narrative as it presents the converse side of that same contested history.

Historian Taner Akçam’s work provides an important resource to understand the mutual accusations of genocide between Turkish and Armenian sources. In his book, *A Shameful Act: The Armenian Genocide and the Question of Turkish Responsibility*, Akçam addresses both an audience based in Turkey as well as an international readership, as he addresses the issue of the violent destruction of the Ottoman Armenian community. He writes extensively on the issue of Turkish accusations of massacres of Turkish Muslims by Armenians in the historical context of the Armenian Genocide and the violent regional upheaval of the First World War and the

redrawing of borders. He describes in detail the retaliatory massacres and acts of violence against Muslim civilians by Armenian and Russian militant groups in areas under their control in the years immediately after the bulk of the deportations and massacres of the Anatolian Armenians. Akçam describes, for instance, how during the 1916 offensive, advancing Russian forces, along with Armenian volunteers, carried out acts of revenge, killing two to three thousand Muslims in the area of Bitlis, west of Van. In the period of 1919-1920, he continues, Armenians carried out massacres of Muslims in the Caucasus. While frankly discussing the violence committed by the various armed parties in the conflict, including Armenians, Akçam he underscores the importance of recognizing “the scale of the Armenian genocide, which was in no way comparable to the individual acts of revenge carried out against Muslims” (Akçam 2006, 2).

Akçam’s perspective is essential in understanding the magnitude of violence inflicted on civilians from the many sides of the protracted conflict on the Ottoman Eastern Front during the First World War and the subsequent conflict over memory that is played out through the building and destruction of monuments. Akçam describes the way in which Turkish official history selectively commemorates certain events as follows: “Turkish national historiography [memorializes] massacres of Muslims by Armenian, Greek, Bulgarian, and other ethnic-national groups while making no mention of suffering inflicted by Muslims on non-Muslim groups, such as the massacre of Christians, let alone the Armenian genocide” (Akçam 2006, 1). Akçam makes his own assessment regarding the massacres of Muslims during the First World War, after documenting the bloodshed and destruction and weighing the documentary evidence in relation to the dominant historical narrative in Turkey, as follows:

Certain considerations bear emphasizing. It is important that we do not equate these events with the Armenian genocide. It is a frequent mistake to “equate” or “balance” the massacres in the Caucasus with the genocide, an error often made in Turkish histories, which cite acts of Armenian revenge as proof that the murders of 1915 were not

genocide. Previous massacres are never a justification for subsequent massacres. Or, in the Turkish case, subsequent massacres can never justify earlier genocide. The second problem is the reliability of the sources. Most of the figures cited are freely invented by the authors. (Akçam 2006, 329)

Here Akçam makes the essential point that though it is important to investigate and recognize acts of killing and atrocities carried out by all sides during the war, not all acts of violence are of an equal scale or magnitude, and one does not justify, excuse, or negate another, whether in advance or retrospectively. Akçam's account also provides important context for the Iğdır museum, which was built with the express purpose of materializing the Turkish government claims of both historical innocence as well as victimhood, and negating Armenian claims of suffering genocide.

Beyond the archival photographs of massacres and the enumeration of data from archeological excavations of mass graves, meant to bolster the museum's message through the presentation of scientific evidence, there was another, more contemporary political claim made by the museum's exhibits. In a corner of one of the museum's rooms, mounted on a stand, there was a sign reading "Turks martyred abroad by Armenian terror organizations between the years 1973-84." On the wall to the right of this sign were the photographs and short biographies of individuals who had been killed in the numerous attacks carried out between the 1970s and 1980s by ASALA, (the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia). ASALA was an Armenian militant organization that was active in the 1970s and 1980s, with the stated goal of forcing the Turkish government to acknowledge responsibility for the Armenian Genocide, pay reparations, and cede territory from the eastern provinces that were historically home to Armenian communities for the purposes of the establishment of a Greater Armenia. ASALA employed high-profile acts of terrorism to publicize its message on the international stage, as its

members carried out bombings and assassinated Turkish diplomats (Göçek 2011; Tololyan 1992; De Waal 2015).

ASALA's activities began to wane in the early 1980s, just around the time when the newly formed Kurdish militant group, the PKK, began to become active, carrying out its first armed action against Turkish forces in 1984. Because of this timing, because both groups were active in Lebanon, and because both groups were overtly hostile towards the Turkish state, Turkish government propaganda and sympathetic scholars have painted a picture of an intimate collaboration between ASALA and the PKK, and indeed, a teleological evolution in which "Armenian terror" has been seamlessly carried on by "Kurdish terror," all of which are represented as having the same goal of destroying Turkey as we know it (Gunter 2007, 1988; Manaz 2015). Historian Ayşe Hur offers a critical account of this narrative, espoused by the Turkish state, of an insidious conspiracy between Armenian and Kurdish terror groups:

The Activities of ASALA [...] between 1975 and 1984 caused the media [in Turkey] to be fully involved in the ideological struggle. Thousands of articles were published along the lines of the official theses of the state. These articles shared the feature of connecting ASALA's activities to the activities of the Kurdish PKK movement. The intelligence circles, in particular, often claimed that in 1979–80 in Lebanon, an alliance between the PKK and ASALA was established with the leadership of Greece and Syria to sabotage Turkey's Cyprus policies; the ultimate aim of that alliance was to found the "Armenian-Kurdish Federal State." In this way, both the Kurdish and the Armenian demands were made illegitimate. (Hur 2008, 11)

As Ayşe Hur explains, Turkish state organs emphasized the connection between the PKK and ASALA to delegitimize both groups along with the broader minority communities from which they emerged.

Anthropologist Serap Ruken Şengül writes on the ways in which state propaganda organs have emphasized the connections between the PKK and ASALA in order to demonize the PKK to the public in the early years of its conflict with the Turkish military. Şengül points out

that there were, in fact, multiple overlaps between the PKK and ASALA, as both were radical militant groups active in Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s:

There were indeed certain relations between the PKK and the ASALA. They were contingent products of intersecting world-historical processes, such as the counter-hegemony of socialist guerilla struggles and the repercussions of Cold War rivalry in the Middle East in the 1970s, with their particular national agendas. Besides sharing a politico-ideological genealogy, the two organizations had also enjoyed certain, albeit very limited, organizational relationships in the early 1980s. They had shared guerilla camps in the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon, along with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (El-Fateh), alongside whom they fought the 1982 Lebanon war. In 1980 they concluded a protocol of good faith against the Turkish state. (Sengul 2014, 93)

In the mid-1980s, ASALA devolved into infighting among its ranks and disintegrated, while the PKK continues its struggle today and has evolved over the four decades of the war it has carried out against the Turkish state. Regardless of the historical specificities of the foundation and evolution of these two groups, and beyond any historical basis there may be regarding communication or connection between the PKK and ASALA in the period when ASALA was still active, it serves the propagandists of the Turkish state to conflate the two into a timeless and nebulous monster, perpetually secretly plotting the downfall of Turkey.

This effort, outlined by Hur above, of pro-government propaganda to anachronistically paint all Armenian and Kurdish demands as one-and-the-same terrorist conspiracy was overtly visible in the Iğdır museum. On the wall to the left of the sign marking the photographs of the victims of ASALA attacks were two large signs each containing a long text, one in English and one in Turkish, entitled respectively “Armenian Terrorism,” and “*Ermeni Terörü*” (Armenian Terror). These texts contained a detailed timeline, along with analysis and explanation of the historical roots and contemporary expressions of “Armenian Terror,” beginning with the activities of Armenian revolutionary organizations in the Ottoman empire, continuing through the ASALA period in the 1970s and 1980s, and then ending with the PKK’s ongoing struggle.

The text states that the PKK and ASALA came to an agreement to mutually work to embroil Turkey in a civil war such that Turkey would be divided, an independent Kurdistan would be founded with the territories in the east of Turkey, and the Republic of Armenia would also obtain territories from Turkey. While this timeline does point to historic entities and events, these are embedded in speculative claims and accusations, resulting in a picture of a teleological development of Armenian terrorists morphing into Kurdish terrorists, who both nourish each other while also posing a constant, existential threat to the territorial integrity of the Turkish Republic, and thus justifying any and all action, past and future, against both groups.

Though ASALA is long since defunct, the PKK continues to pose a threat to Turkey, and thus the Armenian connection is mobilized to delegitimize the ongoing movement. This connection is also voiced in other, more corporeal ways, as was reported in *Agos*, the Istanbul-based newspaper published in both Armenian and Turkish. *Agos* reporter Vartan Estukyan writes about comments made by Turkish government officials alleging that PKK militants, killed in clashes with the Turkish army, were found to be uncircumcised, thus implying that they were not Muslim and, in fact, Armenian. Among others, Estukyan quotes a retired general who, in 2006, said “All of a sudden ASALA dissapeared, but its not easy to start a terrorist organization. After that the Kurdistan Workers’ Party, the PKK emerged. [...] During that period, sixty-five percent of the captured and killed PKK militants turned out to be uncircumcised. They were not Kurds, Turks, or Muslims” (Estukyan 2015). Estukyan also quotes another military official, who, in 2009, said “The PKK is not an organization that represents my brothers [and sisters] with Kurdish roots, but is an Armenian organization. This thesis of mine is confirmed by the fact that captured members of the terrorist organization [the PKK], are uncircumcised” (Estukyan 2015).

Şengül further discussed the way in which state officials drew a connection between the PKK and ASALA by claiming that PKK members were actually uncircumcised Armenians:

Under strict state supervision, censure and denial, the PKK entered the Turkish public discourse as “a handful of *sans culottes* terrorists” connected to the ASALA. The most frequent evidence to support this connection was an uncut foreskin supposedly detected on the body of a militant killed here and there. ASALA dissolved itself in 1986. But this did not stop the continuation of state discourses on the PKK- ASALA connection and the Armenian origins of the PKK. Throughout the 1990s, state officials repeatedly underlined the uncut PKK-Armenian link as a key strategy of the counter-guerilla warfare. As the media kept airing news on the being uncircumcised of dead rebels as if it were the most scandalizing trophy from the conflict zones, the military and civilian authorities updated the public about the Armenian origins of the PKK. (Sengul 2014, 90)

Though these repeated claims about the bodies of militants, state propaganda sought to undercut the efficacy of demands of the Kurdish movement by vilifying PKK members as Armenians.

Claiming History Through Museums

The Iğdır monument, as a museum, represents a particular kind of truth claim. Scholars writing on the politics of museums and monuments have discussed the ways in which museums, through their display strategies and architectural designs, present authoritative claims about past and present. For instance, Stephanie Moser points out “the knowledge-making capacity of museum displays” and discusses museum displays as “active agents in the construction of knowledge” which “create compelling narratives about the world and its inhabitants” (Moser 2010, 22). Moser points out the importance of the physical structuring of the museum as well, asserting that, “the architectural style of the building in which exhibitions are presented, and the location and setting of museums are key factors in evaluating the epistemological significance of museum displays” (Moser 2010, 22).

Moser’s emphasis on the importance of display strategy and architecture in her discussion of the museum’s capacity for knowledge creation sheds light upon the logic behind and effects of

the construction and layout of the museum and monument in Iğdır. In terms of architectural strategy, the museum itself is literally buried under a massive monument which serves to define the purpose of the entire complex through clear and repeated nationalist imagery. Moser suggests that “exhibitions housed in great neoclassical buildings, for instance, imbue displays with a degree of authority and influence [...] Neoclassical architecture has a legacy and presence that informs visitors they are entering a “Temple of Learning,” and that what they see is important and true” (Moser 2010, 24) (p. 24). Similarly, an enormous monument bearing symbols of military might and a glorious national past would serve to imbue the museum housed beneath it with the authority to represent historical truth in the name of the nation it represents. Similarly, just as the monument provides the museum with justification for its claims of truth through reference to the nation, the monument draws its own legitimacy through the knowledge housed in, produced through, and disseminated by the museum. Thus, the museum and the monument reinforce each other’s authority.

The idea of the museum as an institution for the production of knowledge has been discussed further by Svetlana Alpers, who explores museums as both “major educational institutions” and “a way of seeing” (Alpers 1991, 31, 27). Alpers comments on a particular exhibit in Holland that was meant to commemorate a discrete historical event—the 1579 Union of Utrecht—but in the resulting exhibit, “the declaration of union itself was overwhelmed and lost amidst a feast for the eyes—documents, decorated plates, coins, engravings, illustrated journal entries, maps, and drawings of land holdings,” such that the exhibit came to focus on not the event but on a variety of images from the half-century surrounding it (Alpers 1991, 28). A similar phenomenon is visible in the memorial and museum in Iğdır. Though the museum claims to focus on a discrete period—the massacre of Turks by Armenians during the First World

War—the array of photographs, documents, and commentary displayed does not illustrate the history of a singular, clearly defined event or period. Rather, the display presents a conglomeration of different locations and events beginning with Armenian revolutionary activities in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire continuing through ASALA terrorist activities in the late twentieth century, and ending with the continued activities of the PKK in the present, thus creating an open-ended meta-narrative of the ongoing treachery of Armenians and Kurds against Turks (as embodied by the national monument).

Carol Duncan further elucidates the power of the museum in making meaning, as she problematizes the purported secular nature of museums and characterizes them instead as sites of ritual. In her discussion of the museum as a ritual space, Duncan analyzes the power of museums by emphasizing “the ideological force of a cultural experience that claims for its truths the status of objective knowledge” (Duncan 1995, 8). A second source of the power of museums is their “status as preservers of the community’s official cultural memory,” and thus, “to control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and its highest values and truths” (Duncan 1995, 8). These processes are visible in the Iğdır memorial complex in that the symbols of militant Turkish nationalism – the wolf, the eagle, the warrior, the flag, the sword – which adorn the monument serve to complement the narrative expressed in the museum display.

Duncan highlights the issues of inclusion and exclusion in museums displays and narratives through their “power to define the relative standing of individuals within that community” (Duncan 1995, 8). She asserts that “those who are best prepared to perform its ritual [...] are also those whose identities (social, sexual, racial, etc.) the museum ritual most fully confirms” and suggests that what we see and do not see in museums “is closely linked to larger questions about who constitutes the community and who defines its identity” (Duncan 1995, 8,

9). This point is starkly visible in the Iğdır monument, as the boundaries of the national community are clearly expressed both by the symbols portrayed on the monument as well as by the museum display. While Turks are glorified and celebrated, Armenians are vilified and denigrated, and Kurds are noticeably absent in the documents and narrative—save a reference to the PKK—their roles in the history of the events in question omitted and silenced, their very existence negated.

In his work on memorials commemorating September 11th and the Pearl Harbor attacks during the Second World War, Geoffrey White contextualizes his analysis by explaining that “memorial sites and ceremonies have long been acknowledged as a basic means of symbolizing identification with the nation” (White 2004, 294). He argues that memorial sites, imbued with meaning through the presence of a specific narrative that marks “the emotion-laden landscapes inhabited by a nation’s dead,” encourage visitors to connect their “own life history to the larger, imagined sweep of national or world events [...] through imagined forms of intersection between personal worlds and historical narrative facilitated by the objects and stories encountered at such sites” (White 2004, 299). White’s reflections shed light on the processes in play in the Iğdır memorial, where the narrative of the martyred members of the nation, alongside the imagery communicating a heroic national past, encourages visitors to imagine themselves as incorporated within the powerful narrative of national glory embodied in the monument.

White also describes the work done by memorials in “refiguring tragedy,” as the tragic circumstances of defeat and suffering are retold in the present to highlight heroism and resilience, and also as an opportunity to emphasize national values and consolidate national feeling (White 2004, 298). In the case of the Iğdır monument, this refiguring of past tragedy becomes an opportunity to reiterate Turkish nationalist claims both of historical innocence and

victimhood, as well as of unity and strength. Though the museum itself does emphasize past violence suffered, the monument, which serves as the dominating feature of the site, has no reference to martyrs, loss, or tragedy. Instead of a mournful tone, the monument unequivocally displays military might, a warrior past and a united future.

Sheila Miyoshi Jager discusses how museums mobilize the past for a national future thus: “in order to recover the ‘lost’ past of a glorious (primordial) military tradition, and hence forge a homogeneous and continuous national subject, [...] what began as a project of commemorating the past thus turns into the familiar task of reconstructing the nation’s future” (Jager 1997, 39). Jager’s writings focus on the Yongsan War Memorial in Seoul, South Korea, and in particular, on the politics of display and the placement of certain objects in the War History Room of the museum. Jager highlights how the anachronistic placement of certain objects, which represent distant periods of Korea’s history and unrelated historic events, serve to send a political message about the present and future. Jager argues that by focusing on historic victories and deemphasizing the period of Japanese colonial rule, and “by inventing a newer, stronger, and militarily more powerful image, the Memorial aims to claim for the present a stronger, more “manly” military past” (Jager 1997, 36). Jager explains that a particular military ship, the Turtle Ship, was prominently displayed to be visible from all corners of the room. Jager explains that “the placement of the Turtle Ship can thus be read as a strategy to create a meaningful past for the present and the future,” and that “by presenting this period in the history of the nation as an example to future generations, the triumphant splendor of the War Memorial itself seeks to legitimize the State” as the “filial” successor of earlier military commanders (Jager 1997, 36).

Jager’s discussion of the Turtle Ship sheds light on the question of the placement of a replica of Noah’s Ark within the bounds of the Iğdir monument to martyred Turks and the

possible connection between these two structures. Building on Jager's suggestion that the Turtle Ship lent legitimacy to the overall national narrative of the Yongsan War Memorial, I suggest that there may be a similar process at play in Iğdır as well. Both the Turtle Ship and Noah's Ark (beyond both being seafaring vessels) symbolize historical claims to both specific territory and righteous political authority. Jager argues that the use of the Turtle Ship represents a "spectacular plea for legitimacy through the "appropriation" of a largely mythologized" past (Jager 1997, 37). While the Turtle Ship references the military might of an important historical military commander, the placement of Noah's Ark may represent a similar "plea" for the legitimization of a historical claim on the land of Anatolia through the merging of a Turkish nationalist past with the tale of Noah and the flood. It is also a rejection and negation of Armenian claims to the mountain, which Armenians have appropriated as a national symbol and which appears on the official coat of arms of the Republic of Armenia.

As Jager argues in the context of the Seoul memorial, through this "merging on a geographically symbolic plane," as the ship and the historical display occupy the same space in the museum, one justifies and supports the other (Jager 1997, 37). Similarly, in Iğdır, the inclusion of the ark, with its religious and historical connotations, in the park, imbues the nationalist monument with further authority, legitimizing the claims of the nation-state and invoking the notion of the God-given right to the land. Finally, by constructing an ark replica in the site of a national memorial, the Turkish nationalist narrative claims ownership of one of the traditions that the represented enemy, the Armenians, call upon in their own claims for a national right to the land and to Mount Ararat. Thus, the physical inclusion of the ark into the boundaries of the memorial at once appropriates the myth and the mountain for the Turkish national narrative and simultaneously negates the claims of any right to the land by Armenians.

Counter-Memory in the Museum

During our visit to the museum, at one point I was in one of the side rooms with one of my traveling companions, David, an American friend who was just beginning to study Turkish. I had been studying Turkish intensively for the previous four months, and even though my Turkish was not perfect, I was reading aloud the captions of the photographs for him and explaining them in English. I was surreptitiously trying to take photographs of the exhibited photographs on the walls when the groundskeeper walked into the room. I quickly put my camera in my bag, worried that perhaps photography was not permitted and that he would chide me. Instead, he asked us where we were coming from. I told him that we were Americans, just traveling through as tourists. He then asked me if I knew anything about the history being presented in the museum. Considering that the museum in which we were standing was promoting an aggressively anti-Armenian message, I decided that it would be safest to feign ignorance, and I told him that I did not know anything. What happened next surprised me. He approached us, and standing quite close to the two of us, with his voice slightly lowered, he said that he would not usually talk to visitors like this, but considering that we were foreigners, he did not want us to leave the museum misinformed.

Following this preface, he explained to us that he was Kurdish and from the area. Next, he pointed out the name of the museum—“Memorial and Museum of the Martyred Turks Massacred by Armenians”—and told us that this whole museum was built on a lie. First, he said, a century ago when these massacres happened there were Turks and Armenians here, but there were even more Kurds. The civilians who were killed, he said, were most likely Kurds, yet they are all labeled as “Turks.” Secondly, he said decidedly, Armenians did commit some massacres, but they were not unprovoked. Instead, he explained, they were justified in their actions because

they were taking revenge for the massacres that the Turkish government had subjected them to in the previous few years. Hearing this coming from the groundskeeper at the museum, I was surprised and unsure if I was understanding correctly with my fledging Turkish. I asked him to clarify, and, assuming that I had no background in the history of the area, he attempted to simplify the complicated story by presenting me with a more easily comprehensible metaphor: Imagine, he suggested, that David has a house. He (the groundskeeper) tells me that I should kill David and that then I can take his house. I kill David and take his house. Then the groundskeeper kills me and takes the house. This, he explained, is what happened to the Armenians, and he elaborated as follows: He, the groundskeeper, represents the Turkish state, while I represent the Kurds, and David represents the Armenians. The state convinced the Kurds that if they killed the Armenians, they could take their land and property. Kurds then participated in the massacres and expropriation of the Armenians and the seizing of their abandoned property. Subsequently, the state betrayed the Kurds, as the government began to carry out repressive measures including forced assimilation, deportation, and massacres against Kurdish communities.

This narrative of trickery, of Kurds being duped into participation in the destruction of the Ottoman Armenian community and then being double-crossed by the Turkish nationalist elite of the newly-formed Republic of Turkey is one that is widely repeated amongst Kurdish communities across Turkey. This discourse of the Kurdish community having been manipulated into collaborating in the crime of Genocide, and then itself subjected to violence by its supposed allies, is also expressed in terms of regret for their betrayal of their Armenian neighbors as well as a feeling of solidarity as victims of a parallel fate (as discussed in Chapter Three). In recounting these stories to my friend and me, the groundskeeper was carrying out an everyday act of subversion against the nationalist narrative represented by the museum, a narrative that

negates and silences the Kurdish community of which he is a part. It is important to note that the museum's narrative may find resonance with some groups in the area, especially perhaps the local Azeri-Turkish community which is known for its aggressive nationalism and support of the state. However, the groundskeeper's individual act of expressing a counter-memory demonstrates the discontents of the nationalist project in Turkey, and the ways in which the last century of forced assimilation of minorities, and state-led attempts at ethnic, religious, linguistic, and ideological homogenization have met with uneven success and continue to be challenged today, even within the halls of state museums that espouse that project.

The Iğdır monument and the Kars monument, as sites representing conflicting claims and aspirations regarding the past and future of relations between Turkish and Armenian communities, demonstrate in stark relief the ways in which monuments are employed to make political claims. These two monuments—one espousing militant Turkish nationalist ideology and one reaching towards rapprochement, and both built strategically on the border with Armenia—show how monuments are used to mark landscape and to tell a specific story about a place. Across Turkey and elsewhere, monuments and signs are used to lay claim both to territory and to the history of a place. In many cases—as in the contested geography of southeastern Turkey with its equally contested past—monuments, signs and other markers of place are employed by different groups as they strive to realize their vision of the past, present, and future of a locality through representing it materially on the landscape.

In my fieldsite of Van, there are a number of local monuments that echo the Iğdır monument. The most well-known is the Zeve Martyrs Monument (*Zeve Şehitliği*), which is built in the middle of agricultural fields outside of the village of Çitören, approximately twenty kilometers north of the city center of Van. The monument was built in the 1970s, organized by

the Van Recognition and Promotion Society (*Van'ı Tanıma ve Tanıtma Cemiyeti*) and funded by local contributions (Siyahaş 2014). It was built to commemorate Muslim villagers massacred in the area during the Russian occupation of Van during the First World War. The monument itself is nineteen-meters tall and consists of a long, thin, four-sided tower built of covered with metal sheets, set atop a three-tiered marble base, and with the image of a Turkish flag affixed to the front of the tower towards the top. The examples of these monuments demonstrate how landscapes, monuments, and marking space is a politicized process that is mobilized by diverse actors in their attempts to lay claim to space, place, and history in Turkey.

Conclusion: An Armenian Snow Tunnel

In this chapter, I have attempted to demonstrate the way in which the contest over history is played out through the building of monuments, the erecting of signs, and processes of naming. In each section, I have shown how both representatives of the central state and the Kurdish movement have tried to mold the material landscape to reflect their divergent political messages and understandings of history. Additionally, I have included anecdotes that demonstrate how locals interact with these same spaces and express memories and understandings of space that sometimes contradict and challenge official historical narratives. In each case, I have tried to show the cracks and inconsistencies inherent in the various attempts to project a certain representation of history onto the landscape. Especially in the case of exclusionary and nationalist state-led erasure of local history, both the memory of the locals as well as the very geography itself constantly unsettle attempts to assimilate both past and present into a singular national narrative.

In lieu of a conclusion, I present one final example that demonstrates this unsettling and the fundamental resilience of place and of the material landscape in the face of state attempts to Turkify and homogenize the terrain of eastern Anatolia. As I discussed in both this chapter as well as in Chapter Two, over the past century state authorities have sought to erase and replace all non-Turkish place and village names across Turkey in order to “Turkify” and nationalize the physical space of the imagined nation (U. U. Ungor 2012; Öktem 2008). Throughout my fieldwork, as discussed throughout this dissertation, countless times I visited villages where the original Armenian or Kurdish name had been replaced with a Turkish name. One day, however, in July of 2017, I found what seemed to be an accidental exception to the rule, during a drive from the city center of Van to one of its provincial towns, Bahçesaray.

Bahçesaray is one of the many towns that was also renamed with a new Turkish name. In Armenian, it was known as Moks or Mogs, while in Kurdish today it is still known as Miks. The town of Bahçesaray itself is located approximately three hours south of Van, in a narrow valley surrounded by 3000-meter-high mountains that are covered in snow for much of the year. Reaching the town of Bahçesaray requires a harrowing trip up and down steep and narrow mountain roads. In the winter, the way frequently becomes completely impassible as avalanches cover the road, and there are frightening tales told of cars being stranded on the icy roads and minibusses slipping and tumbling in the valley below. Because of the difficult road conditions and the severe winters, Bahçesaray is famous for its inaccessibility. Playing on the fact that Bahçesaray is often cut off from Van, the provincial capital, because of snowfall, locals joke that for three months of the year they depend on Van, and for the other nine months, they depend on God (*üç ay Van’a, dokuz ay Allah’a bağlıyız*). They also affectionally call their town the “ninth planet” (*dokuzuncu gezegen*), referring to its remoteness.

On the day that I visited Bahçesaray in July with two friends, we had a clear road ahead of us, although we could still see patches of stubborn snow hanging on near the peaks of the mountains. As we rounded a bend near one of the high-altitude mountain passes, we saw construction going on just below the road. It seemed that some kind of a tunnel was being built, and when we drove closer to the mouth of the tunnel and I saw the name on the sign, my jaw dropped.



Figures 5.23 & 5.24. Entrance to the new Karapet *Kar Tüneli* (Karapet Snow Tunnel). August 29, 2017.

The newly built tunnel had an orange sign over the entrance with shiny silver lettering that read in Turkish: “*Karabet Kar Tüneli 2016*” (Karabet Snow Tunnel 2016). On the side of the road, just to the right of the entrance was another orange sign bearing the logos of the General Directorate of Highways (*KGM Karayolları Genel Müdürlüğü*) and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure (*T.C. Ulaştırma, Denizcilik ve Haberleşme Bakanlığı*), both of which are administered by the central government in Ankara. Underneath the two logos, in bold black lettering, the sign read, “The Karabet Snow Tunnel was a dream/ It became a reality” (*Karabet Kar Tüneli Hayaldi Gerçek Oldu*). On the road leading to the entrance into the tunnel, in yellow paint directly on the road, was written “KARABET” with an arrow pointing towards the mouth of the tunnel (Figures 5.23 & 5.24).

It was a shock to me to see the word “Karabet” on a Turkish government sign. Karabet is a uniquely Armenian male name, and also, Saint John the Baptist is known in Armenian as Surp (Saint) Karabet. Many Armenian churches are dedicated to Surp Karabet, such as one of the ruined churches in Kopanis discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, I could not imagine why the General Directorate of Highways would choose to officially name their new snow tunnel with the name Karabet, a definitively Armenian name. It seemed to be an anomaly amidst the overwhelming sweep of the last century of state efforts to change Armenian names to Turkish names. Still puzzling on this question, we continued our descent from the mountain pass down into the verdant valley that houses the small town of Bahçesaray.

After we arrived in the town, we were having tea with a local acquaintance, Engin, and I asked him about the seemingly strange name of the tunnel. Engin replied that he was surprised by the name of the new tunnel as well. He said that when he had seen that they were building a tunnel, he had expected that it would be named something clearly Turkish, perhaps, for example,

he suggested half-jokingly, “Ahmet Snow Tunnel” or “Mehmet Snow Tunnel” (referring to common traditional Turkish Muslim male names). But, Engin added, there was a history behind the name. As long as he could remember, that pass was known as the Karabet *Geçidi*, or Karabet Pass. His elders had told him that a very long time ago there had been an Armenian man who lived there in the mountains, and the pass was named after him. Still, however, when the government began to build an expensive new tunnel, he did not expect them to name it Karabet. Engin suggested that whatever officials had approved the name must not have known that it was an Armenian name, or else they would certainly have changed it. I concurred, and then proposed my own theory to Engin, that perhaps, not only did the officials not know that it was an Armenian name but perhaps they kept the name because it sounded Turkish. The word for snow in Turkish is *kar*, and the name Karabet begins with the same syllable—*kar*. Thus, perhaps the officials simply liked the sound of the repeating syllables and alliteration in *Karabet Kar Tüneli* (Karabet Snow Tunnel). After our visit, I searched for news about the new tunnel and found multiple articles praising this project that would save Bahçesaray from being blockaded by snow for months at a time, but made no mention of the origin of the name.

As the authors Gambetti and Jongerden wrote in relation to a spatial analysis of the Kurdish question, and as quoted earlier in this chapter, “Struggles over space take hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forms. [...] Power is in part constituted through control over the visibility of signs. [...] Strategies to create or destroy the *lieux de memoire* of political regimes, nations or culture include inscriptions onto natural or built spaces” (Gambetti and Jongerden 2011, 382). The work of Gambetti and Jongerden, and of Juan Herrera, who emphasized how political claims to power operate through space and through “spatial technologies of remembering” (Herrera 2015), serves to illuminate the way in which various actors in Van and in

the surrounding regions seek to lay claim to space, place, history, and memory through building monuments, marking space, and erecting signs.

These struggles to mark space are inscribed onto the landscape as buildings, beaches, and fountains, which in turn constitute new sites of struggle, as they are dismantled, rebranded, and replaced. Yet, as demonstrated by the *Karapet Kar Tuneli* and the bones in Xorkom, beyond the efforts of state actors and Kurdish dissidents to mark space and impose their understanding of history onto geography, the landscape often has a life of its own and continues to embody other histories beyond the purview of the political struggles being played out upon it. As Basso shows in the context of the Western Apache, in many cases memories and histories live on through names that are tied to places on the landscape, and these names serve to unsettle the homogenizing policies of the state and the silencing effects of official maps, as described by Massey (Massey 2005; Basso 1996). Thus, names and landscape become sites over which the struggle over history and memory is fought, yet they are not, as Massey demonstrated, inert surfaces upon which history can be written. Instead, “the identities of place are always unfixed, contested and multiple” (Massey 1994, 5), and as such, they serve to highlight the cracks and inconsistencies in the totalizing narratives that human actors attempt to impose upon them.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion: The Materiality and Temporality of Violence

This dissertation traces the material remains and memories of the century-old Genocide of Ottoman Armenians of 1915 in the present in the region of Van, in southeastern Turkey. It explores these remnants not in isolation, but in relation to the ongoing cycles of violence and material destruction that continue to shape the landscape today. In this way, it brings into conversation the intimately intertwined pasts and presents of Kurdish and Armenian communities through examining the palimpsests of violence that embody their overlapping histories of displacement, dispossession, and material destruction.

Through exploring the complicated constellations of embodied social, material, and historical intercommunal interactions, this dissertation goes beyond accounts that focus on a single community in isolation from the multi-ethnic polities in which it existed. Additionally, this work questions victim-perpetrator binaries by exploring the often contradictory, everyday realities in which communities and individuals live. Historically, some Kurdish groups participated in massacres of Armenians and the appropriation of their property in 1915. Over the past century, Kurdish villagers have dismantled Armenian churches and cemeteries and used the stones to build their houses. But in the ensuing century, and most recently in the 1990s and during my fieldwork between 2015-2017, the Kurdish community in Turkey itself was subject to forced migration, displacement, and expropriation on a massive scale. Kurdish groups were repositioned as enemies of the state, and government forces burned and destroyed those same houses, creating new landscapes of ruin.

This dissertation brings together discussions of material cultural heritage, historical memory, and contemporary political conflict. Local Kurds in Van today interact with both the

memory and the material remnants of the Armenian community through their own contemporary experiences of state violence and political negotiations vis-à-vis the state. Ruins produced by state violence, in addition to facilitating a state-sponsored process of erasure and forgetting, also produce new spaces of memory, new understandings of the past, present, and future, and new possibilities for contesting processes of denial, assimilation, and the rewriting of history.

Through its focus on ruins, my dissertation traces how layered histories of violence are experienced, remembered, denied, and expressed through the material world by examining the interaction between legacies of conflict, memory, and the material landscape. The everyday experience of violence and the lasting material effects and memory of conflict are both part and product of the myriad protracted wars that have characterized much of the Middle East both in recent decades and over the past century. Anthropologists have long investigated questions of political violence and intercommunal conflict (Das and Cavell 2006; Feldman 1991), as well as how the memory of such conflicts are performed and narrated in subsequent years and generations (Hirsch 2012; Taylor 2003; Shaw 2002). Recent scholarship has also included a focus on the relationship between memory and materiality in contexts with histories of violence and the ways in which memory is tied to place (El-Haj 2002; Apter and Derby 2010; Mills 2010; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Slyomovics 1998a). Much of this scholarship touches on historical sites and ruins, and some contemporary scholars have begun to call for a shift away from approaching ruins and the material landscape as static objects but instead towards focusing on ruination as an inherently political process and on ruins that have been violently produced as social nodes in and around which lives are not only destroyed but also lived and made possible (Stoler 2013; Gordillo 2014).

Building on this shift towards approaching ruins as nodes of social activity and political negotiation rather than as static spaces, as well as on the classic work of Walter Benjamin, who explored the Paris arcades as the ruins of capitalism (Benjamin et al. 2002), and the more recent insights from Ann Stoler, my work explores the ways that alternative temporalities can be produced by spaces of ruins, as they blurs the lines between past and present, and alternative histories can be read through and upon them. Benjamin approached the ruin as a dialectical image that exposes the historical contradictions of capitalism, the present, and the commodity form, and thus allows an exploration of alternative temporalities, inequalities in power, and myths of progress. In the case of eastern Anatolia, Benjamin's work serves to elucidate the ways in which a material ruin can disrupt mythical theories of history and teleological progress and expose the inherent historical contradictions embodied in its material form. Approaching the question of ruination produced in contexts of war and violence in Van concretely illuminates the issues of denial and fiction, as histories of destruction and ruination are so often ignored while fictional realities are created and narrated in their place (Sebald 2004; Taussig 1984). Finally, examining the issue of ruination in spaces of violence necessarily raises the question of the body, as the body is the ultimate site of human ruination. Graves and bones represent the material ruins of the body. Analyzing the body as a site of ruination allows for a discussion of the relationship between the body and power, and the ways in which state power is violently inscribed on both bodies and landscape (Coronil and Skurski 2006; Feldman 1991; Foucault 1977).

“They were the breakfast, we are the lunch”

Throughout my fieldwork in Van, my Kurdish acquaintances emphasized the parallel suffering of the Armenian and Kurdish communities at the hands of state actors. As I discussed in Chapter

Three, many people suggested that the Kurdish community was perhaps cursed for having participated in the massacres of Armenians. This idea of a parallel victimhood is expressed in the often-repeated Kurdish saying, “*Ew taşte bûn, em jî firavîn*” (they were the breakfast, we are the lunch), expressing the idea that Armenians were the first to be targeted by state violence, and Kurds were next. In the histories of the Armenian and Kurdish communities in Turkey over the past century, there are many echoes of common experiences of victimization, both in the prologue to the violence, the process of destruction itself, and the subsequent denial on the part of the state perpetrators.

In the Armenian case, before the 1915 Genocide, the Ottoman Armenian community had already been victims of widespread state violence in the 1890s, and the Young Turk (CUP) Revolution of 1908 gave the Armenian community some hope for a more secure future. The Armenian revolutionary parties allied with the CUP (Committee for Union and Progress) in the hopes that the new reformist leaders would bring about positive changes for the empire’s minorities. These hopes were eventually brutally dashed and the dream of a multicultural empire was destroyed with the implementation of the genocidal destruction of the Ottoman Armenian community that began in 1915 (Sunny 2015). As described throughout the dissertation, this violence involved both the largescale massacres of Armenians as well as the confiscation, appropriation and destruction of their material property. The government of Turkey, however, continues to deny both the violence against the Armenian community wrought by the Ottoman state as well as the accompanying spoliation of property. Instead, the official narrative is, in short, that for centuries Armenians represented the *millet-i sadika* (the loyal *millet* or nation) until some dangerous revolutionaries (identified as the Dashnak party and others) allied themselves with foreign powers such as Russia and began inciting revolutionary fervor amongst

the previously innocent Armenian peasantry. This, the narrative goes, created an existential threat for the empire at a time of war, which could not be dealt with in any way other than by deporting the dangerous elements. Any loss of life or property that happened to go along with the deportations was simply due to the hardships of wartime and was of no fault of the state, and besides, many Muslims died during that period as well. As Jennifer Dixon demonstrates through her study of how the Armenian Genocide is discussed or omitted in government-issued high school textbooks in Turkey, the details and elements of such narratives change over time and in accordance with the political climate (Dixon 2010b). Yet they maintain the common theme of innocence on the part of the state and the necessity to act due to the severity of the threat.

In the Kurdish case, the official narrative has changed over time as well. For much of the early Republican era, the official stance maintained that Kurds and Kurdish did not exist as a separate ethnicity or language, and any mention of Kurds was taken as seditious activity (Yegen 2009). After a century of state violence, including massacres, forced relocation, forced assimilation, imprisonment, murders, disappearances, tortures, and the burnings of villages, the so-called “Kurdish Opening” initiated by the AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party) of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in 2009, brought a modicum of hope to the Kurdish community in Turkey. This opening led to peace talks and a ceasefire between the government and the PKK that lasted from 2013 to 2015. In July 2015, the Turkish military began bombing PKK positions in Northern Iraq, and the conflict resumed again. While in the 1990s the state’s counterinsurgency operations had been concentrated in the rural areas of the southeast and entailed the evacuation and destruction of villages, in the new escalation of fighting the military began to focus its destructive attentions on urban areas in the southeast, as described throughout the dissertation. This new chapter of war resulted in massive loss of life as well as internal forced

migration, and the destruction of homes and property. Yet the government downplayed or ignored the suffering that it wrought on its own citizens, instead emphasizing that it successfully protected the nation by crushing an existential threat from militants whom it labeled as terrorists that sought to divide the country.

In the following section, I introduce the story of two families and two homes that were caught in these repeating cycles of violence—one Armenian family who lost their home in 1915 and one Kurdish family who lost their home one century later. Through these two stories, I highlight the themes that emerge throughout the dissertation and the way that the histories of state violence in southeastern Turkey are embodied in layers of ruins on the landscape.

Kalecik/Lezk: 1915

In his memoir, *From Van to Detroit*, Souren Aprahamian describes his childhood growing up in the Armenian village of Lezk (or Ara Lezk), just north of the city center of Van. Aprahamian was born there to a prosperous family in the year 1907. His father, Apraham, had gone to America in the late 1880s, and after working for over a decade, returned around 1900 with the handsome sum of five hundred gold pieces. He used this small fortune to build a large two-story mud-brick house for his multi-generational family in his natal village of Lezk. Aprahamian describes the impressive house thus: “In 1900, Apraham had a magnificent home built on the very edge of Lezk, with an unobstructed view of the city and the citadel of Van, and the magnificent shimmering Lake Van and its seaport town of Avantz. It matched and, by its location, surpassed in beauty any home in the city of Van. The very best builders in Van were hired for this task. The house was two stories high” (Aprahamian 1993, 13).

When violence began in Van in 1915, gendarmes occupied the house and the family had to move to their grandfather's house in the same village. The family managed to stay in Lezk for some months more before they were forced to flee across the border to Yerevan, which was then part of the Russian Empire. At the outset of the war, Aprahamian's father was tortured by Turkish soldiers and eventually died, but his mother managed to shepherd her son safely to Yerevan during the first evacuation of Van, along with much of the surviving population of the city. Throughout the war, Van was periodically occupied by the Russian army, during which times many Van Armenians, including the remaining Aprahamians, returned to their home. Each time they had to leave their home they would seal their house as best they could, and hide their cumbersome valuables in the house. They fled and returned multiple times during the war, each time finding that their house had been looted and that their valuables had been stolen. Apraham and his mother survived the war through multiple harrowing flights and stays in refugee camps, and eventually ended up in the United States, where they finally settled in Detroit, Michigan. Though they never returned to Van, they always remembered their home in Lezk.

In his memoir, Aprahamian includes a photograph of the village in which the house is clearly visible (Figure 6.1). It is a two-story, rectangular structure situated in front of the great rock of Lezk, a natural rock formation in the middle of the village, which had a small chapel on top. In the caption of the photo, Aprahamian writes, "The Village of Ara Lezk. The "H"-shaped building on the right is the house in which I was born. Picture taken prior to 1914. Recent pictures of Lezk show no trace of our house — even though it was still occupied by a Turkish family in the 1960s" (Aprahamian 1993, 4). The photograph was cherished by the family, and eventually one of the descendants painted a painting from the photograph. When I visited Armenia in 2017, I met the family of one of Aprahamian's relatives who had remained in

Yerevan. One of the American relatives had given them this painting, and they proudly displayed it on the wall of their dining room, a reminder of the village and the home that their ancestors had been forced to leave behind a century ago (Figure 6.2).

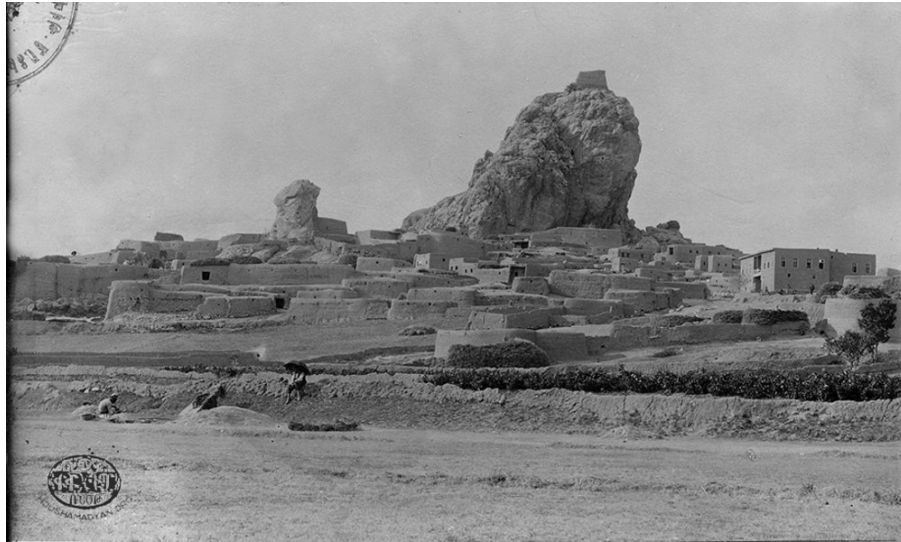


Figure 6.1. “Lezk. A general view. The Holy All-Savior chapel/pilgrimage site sits atop the rock (Source: Mekhitarist Order, San Lazzaro, Venice. Courtesy of Father Vahan Ohanian).” Courtesy of Houshamadyan. From <<https://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayet-of-van/kaza-of-van/religion/churches-and-monasteries-3.html>>



Figure 6.2. Painting of Lezk Village in Yerevan. July 5, 2017.

The village is now officially called Kalecik, meaning, in Turkish, “little castle,” referring to the large rock outcropping that still stands in the middle of the village, though there is no trace now of the chapel that formerly sat atop it like a crown. According to a local Kurdish friend who grew up in the village, the chapel had stood until 1950, when the government had it destroyed. On the eastern edge of the village, there is a field, partially bisected by a road, that is populated by gravestones, each one adorned with a weather-worn cross. It is the cemetery of the Lezk Armenians, still standing after a century, though partially disrupted by the road and not immune to the activities of treasure hunters (Figure 6.3).



Figure 6.3. Armenian cemetery in Lezk village. November 26, 2016.

After reading Aprahamian’s memoir, I visited the village and tried to recreate the angle of the historical photograph to see if I could locate the remains of his home (Figure 6.4). The village now is populated by Kurds from the Bruki tribe (*aşiret*), who migrated to Van from the

area around Yerevan in the early 1920s and mostly settled in the then-empty, formerly-Armenian villages around Van, including Lezk. Today the village is full of recently built cement houses, though in between the new houses the crumbling walls of the old mudbrick homes that used to populate the village are still visible. In the approximate area of where Aprahamian's house is located in the photograph, I found the remains of a large, mud-brick house that could possibly be what remains of the two-story home (Figure 6.5). Only the walls of the first story remain, and inside the walls, the interior is full of grass and other plants (Figure 6.6). The house had clearly been used and repaired over the years, as in some of the sections of the walls the old mud-bricks had been replaced with cinderblocks, but it was eventually abandoned and left to crumble.



Figure 6.4. Lezk village with ruined house visible in front of the rock on the right of the image. March 25, 2018.



Figure 6.5. Ruined house in Lezk village. March 25, 2018.



Figure 6.6. Interior of the ruined house. March 25, 2018.

On the western edge of the village, the Tuşba Municipality, which was at that time controlled by the AKP, had begun to build what was to be a tourist attraction on a scenic hill overlooking the village and the Van lake. The site was enclosed with a stone wall and had a decorative wrought iron gate, above which were the words “Historical Van Houses” (*Tarihi Van Evleri*), and the date 2017. The site contained three large replicas of historical Van houses, built as two-story mudbrick structures, just like the home described by Aprahamian (Figure 6.7).



Figure 6.7. One of the “Historical Van Houses” built on the outskirts of Lezk village. March 25, 2018.

In this village, such houses had been built and inhabited by Armenians a century ago, but in this space, there was no mention of that local history. On the contrary, the site was a decidedly Turkish space. Towering above the newly-built historical replica houses was a large Turkish flag blowing in the wind, and all of the text was in Turkish. Each house was named after a figure relating to late Ottoman history in Van. The house in the middle was named “Cevdet Pasha

House” (*Cevdet Paşa Evi*), and the text stated that Cevdet Pasha was the governor of Van who participated in important struggles during the occupation and liberation of Van between the years 1914-1918 (Figure 6.8). What is not mentioned is that Cevdet Pasha, with his special troops that had been nicknamed “the butcher battalion” (*kasap taburu*), had carried out the brutal massacres of Armenian villagers in the Van region during those same years. These massacres led the Armenians in the city of Van to barricade themselves in certain neighborhoods and fight against the ensuing siege by Cevdet Pasha and his troops for nearly two months before the Russian army arrived and the Ottoman troops retreated (Suny 2015, 253–62).



Figure 6.8. The “Cevdet Pasha House.” March 25, 2018.

In Lezk there are multiple layers of violence, erasure, memory, and the rewriting of history on the landscape. It is a historic Armenian village with an Armenian cemetery visible in the middle of the village, yet there is no attempt to mark or preserve that aspect of its history. The remnants of the one two-story home that existed there is left to crumble, unnoticed, while just overlooking the village, the AKP-run municipality built a touristic, Turkified version of the

same type of house, but one that celebrates the figure of Cevdet Pasha, who was responsible for the death of countless Armenian villagers in Van a century ago. Here the history and the material legacy of the village has been coopted. It has been rewritten on the landscape through the house and as a Turkish space, erasing both the Armenians who lived there a century ago as well as the Kurds who live there now.

Yüksekova/Gewer: 2015

Three hours south of Van is the majority-Kurdish city of Yüksekova, known in Kurdish as Gewer, where my local friend, Azad, was born, and where most of his family still lives today. Azad's family was originally from a village near Hakkari, the provincial capital, but in 1965, because of a disagreement with the local landlord (*ağa*), they left the village. Together, two brothers and a few other relatives purchased the deeds to another village from a second landlord (*ağa*), high in the mountains just west of Yüksekova. Before 1915, this village was populated by Assyrians who were Nestorian Christians. Like much of the Armenian and Assyrian population of the region, the communities of Nestorians that made up the majority of the Christian population in the region now called Yüksekova were destroyed during the violence of the First World War and the Genocide. The village had lain uninhabited for fifty years, being used only as summer pastures by the *ağa*, until Azad's grandfather and his relatives purchased the land and moved there with their families. It was a small mountainous village, and roads became unpassable in the wintertime due to heavy snow. In the 1970s, Azad's grandfather moved with his wife and children to the city center of Yüksekova, where schools were available and his children could receive an education. There he bought a small plot of land and built a mud-brick house, where his children and grandchildren grew up. Many of Azad's relatives, however, stayed

in the mountain village until 1992, when, during the height of the conflict between the Turkish army and the PKK, soldiers forcibly evacuated the village, and Azad's remaining relatives had to abandon their homes and move to Yüksekova. The village was designated as part of a military zone for years and was off-limits to civilians until recently.

Azad remembers being a young child in his grandfather's house in a residential neighborhood in Yüksekova, where he would play with his uncles and cousins in his grandfather's spacious garden. After some years, the children had grown, gotten married, and had children of their own, and the one-story mud-brick house was becoming too small for the family still living in Yüksekova. So, in 2010, after the grandfather had passed away, the children decided to tear down the old, one-floor house and build in its place a new, four-story building with eight identical apartments, one for each of eight brothers. One of the brothers was a master builder and worked in the construction business, and he carefully designed and built the new home that would house his brothers and their families. Over the subsequent years, each family settled into their new apartment, painting it and decorating it to their liking. One brother, who had a creative bent, designed and remodeled the interior of his apartment to be his dream-home with a color scheme of red, grey, and black, and with the walls and curtains matching the furniture and kitchenware. The last unmarried brother, Ozan, got married in the summer of 2015 and finally moved into his apartment with his new bride, Dilek, who was also Kurdish and from Yüksekova. The two were both teachers and had taken out loans to purchase new furniture and appliances to furnish their new home together.

Just after Ozan and Dilek's wedding, hostilities began again in earnest in the southeast along with the disintegration of the peace process and the escalation of fighting. In some cities in the southeast, politicized Kurdish youth had begun to dig trenches and build barricades to

prevent Turkish police and military from entering their neighborhoods. Beginning in September 2015 and continuing for over a year, the army declared round-the-clock curfews in Kurdish-majority cities in the southeast, in each case mounting all-out attacks on the urban landscape. The stated goal was the ousting the Kurdish militants and armed youth who had barricaded themselves in certain neighborhoods, but the effect was the massive destruction of urban space and the killing of hundreds of civilians.

In February 2017, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights released a report detailing human rights offenses in southeastern Turkey between July 2015 and December 2016. It stated that during military operations Turkey's military and police forces killed hundreds of people and detailed how the operations forced up to half a million people to abandon their homes and become internal refugees (OHCHR 2017). One of the first and most devastating curfews took place in Cizre, where for seventy-eight days between December 14, 2015, and March 2, 2015, the city of approximately one hundred thousand people was sealed off and subject to military operations (Bowen 2016). Reporters for the New York Times outlined the destruction during the curfew in Cizre thus:

Witnesses interviewed in the town of Cizre, along the Tigris River in the southeast, described "apocalyptic" scenes of destruction. Investigators were able to document at least 189 people who were trapped for weeks in basements without food, water, medical aid or electricity before dying in fires started by artillery shelling by security forces. Ambulances were prevented from entering the area, causing deaths that could have been avoided. Many of the victims simply disappeared in the wholesale destruction of large residential areas carried out by the military, which attacked systematically with heavy weapons, including bombing strikes. (Cumming-Bruce 2017)

The massive destruction and brutal murder of civilians in Cizre, especially the reports that over one hundred people who had taken shelter in basements had been deliberately burnt alive, terrified communities across the southeast, who feared that their town might be next. Another

reporter from the New York Times wrote the following outline of the renewal of violence in the southeast:

The fighting between Turkish forces and Kurdish rebels renewed in the summer of 2015 after peace talks between the Kurds and the Turkish state broke down. Young Kurdish militants from the youth wing of the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or P.K.K., inspired by the success of Kobani and Rojava cantons in Syria, built barricades in towns and cities across southeastern Turkey and created de facto liberated zones. Turkish forces laid siege to rebel towns and imposed long military curfews, and their tanks shelled the towns without restraint. In the subsequent months numerous neighborhoods in Kurdish cities and towns like Diyarbakir, Cizre, Sirnak, Silopi, Nusaybin and Yuksekova were reduced to rubble in the fighting. The International Crisis Group estimated that at least 2,721 people were killed by April 25, 2017, including 393 civilians, 927 members of security forces, 1,257 P.K.K. militants and "219 youths of unknown affiliation." (Mehta 2017; Crisis Group 2019)

The fighting had massively destructive consequences, both in terms of loss of life and the demolition of the urban landscape. In many places, when residents who had evacuated their homes when curfews were announced returned to their cities after curfews were lifted, they found nothing but rubble. Many homes had been destroyed by shelling and fire, and buildings that had not been destroyed had been ransacked and left in states of filth. Finally, the police and military had written threatening, nationalist, racist, and sexist graffiti on the walls of buildings and homes.

The military and police themselves emphasized the connection between Armenian and Kurdish parallel histories during these curfews. For instance, photographs of the destroyed cityscape of Silopi published by reporters after the lifting of the curfew show graffiti on the wall of a building that reads *Ermeni piçleri* (Armenian bastards) along with the signature of the special operations teams of the police and gendarmes (PÖH, *Polis Özel Harekat*, Police Special Operations, and JÖH, *Jandarma Özel Harekat*, Gendarmerie Special Operations) (Press Haber 2016). Another example emerged in the early stages of clashes in Cizre in September 2015, when a cellphone video was shared widely on social media that shows a view of the city of Cizre

at night during one of the frequent violent firefights. Amid the sound of gunshots and shelling, we hear an announcement made by security forces over their loudspeaker to the Kurds in the city: “*Ermeniler sizinle gurur duyuyor, hepiniz Ermenisiniz!*” (The Armenians are proud of you! You are all Armenian!) (Anadolu Web TV 2015). As I discussed at length in Chapter Five, state propaganda has for decades sought to delegitimize the Kurdish movement by accusing PKK militants of being Armenian. However, beyond such attempts to paint all Armenian and Kurdish dissidents as one and the same ahistorical internal enemy, there are indeed significant parallels and points of intersection between the histories of the Kurdish and Armenian communities. In both past and present, these two communities have been ongoing targets of state violence, dispossession, and forced assimilation, most recently in the renewed fighting between 2015 and 2017.

In Yüksekova clashes and fighting between militants and security forces began in August 2015, but months passed by before a curfew was announced. When rumors began to circulate that curfews would soon be declared in Yüksekova, civilians began to leave the city, taking with them only what they could carry and leaving their houses and possessions behind. When the curfew was finally announced on March 13, 2016, many civilians had already left, and those who had remained rushed to get out of the city before the entrances and exits were blocked by the Turkish military. The curfew remained in place for over two months, ending partially on May 30, 2016.

Ozan and Dilek, the newly married couple that I mentioned earlier in this chapter, had both stayed in Yüksekova until just before the curfew began, and when it was announced they took what they could carry and hastily went to Van. There they stayed with relatives until the curfew was lifted. When the couple finally returned to Yüksekova, they found a post-war scene

of destruction. The city was hardly recognizable. Where there used to be rows of residential family homes and gardens, now there were piles of rubble and debris, destroyed buildings, and the blackened shells of burned-out cars. Their neighborhood was one of the hardest-hit, and they found that their house was one of the many that had been deliberately burned.

A few months after the end of the curfew, I met with Ozan and Dilek over tea, and we talked about what they had lived through during the curfew and the war. Dilek explained her experience as follows:

This business with the trenches started gradually in the period before our wedding. [...] We were nervous during the wedding, and we had to end it early, but it went smoothly. That was in early August. After that, within two weeks trenches were dug everywhere. Then one night they shelled a nearby neighborhood the whole night until morning. We couldn't reach our relatives for a few hours, and we were going crazy. There were even rumors spreading that no one was left alive in that neighborhood. After that, there was a two-day curfew and then everything began to escalate. During the early days of our marriage, we were hearing the sounds of bombs every day. Our lives were turned upside down. Once it became winter, the youth wouldn't allow the snow to be cleared from the roads. Only the city center was clear. Everyone was becoming paranoid thinking that the curfew would begin. Everyone was stockpiling food and water, including us. We were scared; after all, such things had happened in Cizre. Winter passed like this. In March, the police slowly began to enter some of the neighborhoods, and then people began to leave their houses, carrying what they could with them over the snow on sleds. Finally, on March 13, they said the curfew would begin. By that time many people had already left the city. The neighborhoods that had barricades were totally empty [of civilians]. Then there was a stampede to get out of the city. People had to leave, and then they couldn't find places to stay and then rents increased. People suffered a lot.

And our house was burned. When we returned, we found that our house was one of the ones that was burned. They even used it and then they burned it. Of course, they burned our belongings, and that's even not so important, but when we went back, we saw that they had written disgusting things on the walls of our house. This was what really hurt us. We know that our house was used by soldiers and police because there was ammunition there. They came and they used people's houses and their possessions and then they wrote insults on the walls. They used the houses and then they purposefully burnt them. There weren't youth in every house. My house, for instance, they [police] definitely used it and then they burnt it. There were two or three thousand houses that were burnt. There weren't that many youth rebels. They were maybe three hundred people, and all of them were killed in the end. I mean, they [police and soldiers] used the house, and they soiled it and left it filthy, and then wrote horrible, insulting things on the walls, and then while they were leaving, they burnt the house and everything in it.

Dilek continues, explaining her understanding of why this violence was wrought on the city and some of its effects:

They destroyed Cizre and Yüksekova on purpose. [...] Many people who left didn't return. They did it specifically to change the makeup of the city, to change the demography. [...] There weren't that many youths in Yüksekova. People in the villages say that the fighting ended after two weeks, but they stayed two months, because afterwards they burnt and destroyed everything. They claimed that they were conducting searches. For instance, they took the television out of my father's house and broke it. They emptied all of the suitcases in the house. [...] I wasn't expecting that much because there wasn't that much of a resistance there. I thought it would take two weeks, but it took two months. At first [when the curfew was lifted] I didn't go, [my family] wouldn't let me go because I was pregnant. They wouldn't even show me the photographs of my house. I asked my mother and she just told me not to think about it. My husband saw them, but he wouldn't say anything. Then I saw the photographs and I was very upset. Then when I went there and I first entered the neighborhood, my hands and legs became weak, and then I just started to cry, I couldn't stand it. It is so strange, and we are still paying the installments for our furniture.

Here Dilek details the timeline of the war, the escalation of hostilities, and the gritty details of the material destruction of space, place, community, and home. She outlines how the police and military not only occupied, used, and defiled her home, but then burnt it knowingly (Figures 6.9 & 6.10). She conjectures that the destruction of space was purposeful in order to change the very landscape of the city. Finally, she points out bitterly that they are still paying the installments for the new furniture that they had bought on credit after their wedding, and which was all completely burned and destroyed by the police and military.



Figure 6.9. Azad's family's building after it was occupied and burned during the curfew. Photograph taken by one of Azad's relatives just after the curfew was lifted.



Figure 6.10. One of the bedrooms from Azad's family's building after it was burned. Photograph taken by one of Azad's relatives just after the curfew was lifted.

Partway through my meeting with Ozan and Dilek, Dilek's brother, Ismail, arrived and joined our conversation. As we continued to discuss the situation in Yüksekova, both Dilek and her brother emphasized the repeating nature of state violence against both minority communities and the landscape. Dilek underlined the way in which many of the people who had suffered from the evacuation and burning of villages in the 1990s again became internal refugees during this new wave of destruction. She explained thus, "The neighborhoods that were destroyed just now in Yüksekova were all neighborhoods that were built in the 90s because of migration. Now the same people are losing their houses for a second time. The same thing is happening here." Dilek's brother, Ismail, also highlighted the repeating cycles of violence, and conjectured that perhaps the current violence against Kurds was retribution for the past violence against Armenians:

Kurds were made to kill their Armenian neighbors by way of *fetvalar* (fatwas or religious decrees), then they were settled in their places. This is what my grandparents would recount. Of course, the official history doesn't say this. Some new settlements were built on top of Armenian cemeteries, and now it is our cemeteries that are being destroyed. You know, sometimes one has to wonder if the reason that we have suffered so much persecution is because of this [earlier] oppression. The Ottomans made Kurds do their dirty work, after all.

Here Ismail outlines a common local understanding of the history of the massacres and dispossession of the area's Christian community a century ago—that the Ottoman state made Kurds do their "dirty work," referring to the destruction of Armenian and Assyrian communities. After participating in this violence, Kurds were settled in the newly empty villages. The sacred spaces of Armenian churches and cemeteries were appropriated and used as stables or repurposed for building materials. And now, a century later, in a parallel fashion, it is the Kurdish community whose cemeteries are being destroyed, who are being dispossessed of their lands and homes, and who are becoming internal refugees. Considering these layered histories of

ruination, Ismail wonders whether Kurds are suffering persecution today as a result of their participation in the violence against Armenians a century ago. His sentiment echoes the commonly-expressed notions (discussed above and in Chapter Three), that Kurds are now cursed because of their part in the unjust destruction of the Armenian community.

In August of 2018, I visited Yüksekova for the first time since my prior visit in 2014 when the peace process was still ongoing and before the war had reignited. During the visit in 2018, two years after the curfew had ended, I walked with my friend Azad through the neighborhood where most of his relatives had lived and where his uncles had built the four-story family home. The neighborhood was now unrecognizable. Instead of the cozy streets paved with cobblestones and lined with bustling houses and gardens, there were broad, flattened dirt roads from which dust rose like steam in the dry summer heat. On either side of the road, there were empty fields full of weeds and dry grass. On a few plots of land, there was new construction underway, as new buildings were being built where the old ones had been demolished. There were a few ruins and remnants still left from the fighting, buildings with holes in the walls and windows from shelling and bullets, and the burned-out shell of a car here or there (Figures 6.11 & 6.12).



Figure 6.11. A home that was partially destroyed during the curfew in Yüksekova. August 11, 2018.



Figure 6.12. A burned-out car left behind after the curfew in Yüksekova. August 11, 2018.

We walked by the plot of land owned by Azad’s maternal uncle, which had formerly been the site of a mud-brick home where he lived with his large family. Now, the house was gone, but the uncle had fenced in the plot with wire and planted a garden inside, which looked like a small green oasis in the middle of a dusty, desolate landscape of destruction (Figure 6.13).



Figure 6.13. Azad’s uncle’s new garden on the plot of land where his home used to stand. August 11, 2018.

Turning back to the main road, we walked towards the area of the neighborhood where the four-story family house had been. Nothing remained of it. In its place, next to the road, was a field of dry weeds, filled with scattered piles of debris, rocks, and trash (Figure 6.14). Though the building had been burned deliberately by the soldiers who stayed there, Azad explained, it had still been structurally sound after the conclusion of the curfew and could have been renovated. However, along with many other similar buildings in the neighborhood, it had been declared unsound by the official inspectors and was thus razed to the ground. Walking through the empty, ghostly ruins of the neighborhood where he grew up, Azad was pensive. Looking sadly at the empty field, a place where he had many memories of both his grandfather's old house and the recently-demolished family house, he said mournfully, "There is nothing left from my childhood. My childhood is gone."



Figure 6.14. The empty plot of land where Azad's family's four-story home had stood before it was burned and razed to the ground. August 11, 2018.

Cycles of Violence

The two stories of Kalecik and Yüksekova, of two families dispossessed of their homes a century apart by state violence, and the stories of the material destruction of their houses demonstrate the palimpsests of violence, the layers of ruins, and the repeating cycles of destruction imprinted on the landscape in southeast Turkey. These two stories focus on two individual families, but they are echoed in the experiences of countless other individuals and families who were and continue to be caught up in ongoing processes of dispossession and ruination. The past century of state violence in Turkey has been wrought upon bodies in visceral and physical ways, through killing and massacre, torture and imprisonment, and forced migration and assimilation. These histories of violence demonstrate who in Turkey are considered bare life, unmournable bodies, ungrievable lives, and who are out of place within the nation (Cresswell 1996; Agamben 1998; T. Cole 2015; Butler 2010).

However, as I have demonstrated in this chapter as well as throughout the dissertation, these cycles of violence are not directed only against bodies deemed threatening but against the material world that is an extension of those bodies—the spaces and places where they live and die, the material spaces that they have built, and the objects that they leave behind. These spaces are erased and destroyed just as the histories are erased and silenced, and they are at times renovated or appropriated just as the histories are rewritten and revised.

The stories of Kalecik and Yüksekova demonstrate that the processes of erasure do not only concentrate on the rewriting of the historical narrative or the eradication of people through genocide and demographic engineering, but that these processes are paralleled through the violent destruction of space (Gordillo 2014). This happens in myriad ways, such as destroying churches, as in the case of the Narek monastery, or by appropriating and rebranding spaces, such

as in the renovation of the Akhtamar church. This is also paralleled by the widespread seizure and confiscation of property in 1915, as well as the ongoing treasure hunting economy and the authorities who tacitly allow it to continue unabated today (U. U. Ungor and Polatel 2013; von Bieberstein 2017).

Yet, despite a century of state efforts to destroy, Turkify, homogenize and eradicate difference, the cracks in the narrative continue to undermine the efforts of erasure, and the ruins remain stubbornly on the landscape, unsettling the official story. And despite these ongoing processes of destruction, the story is not a one-sided wave of ruination. It is not simply what Benjamin's angel saw as a mountain of debris growing even higher. In and among the debris, and sometimes produced by the debris, lives are lived and stories are told. The past, officially silenced and erased, is remembered and recounted locally. Kurds continue to search for the traces of that material past as they look for riches, sharing amongst themselves their knowledge of Armenian churches and villages. Others continue to make pilgrimages to the ruined sites of Armenian monasteries like Der Meryem. And in some cases, as in the story of the house in Xorkom, despite the efforts of state officials and locals, the material landscape may have an agency of its own, and it is these material spaces left from past violence that continue to haunt the present.

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