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Sectarianism as racism: the collective punishment of Alevi communities in Turkey

DENIZ YONUCU

Abstract: Drawing on the case of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination against Alevis, a historically stigmatised and persecuted ethnosectarian community in Turkey, this article shows that sectarian identities can also be raced. The case of Alevis in Turkey not only indicates how sectarianism can function as a form of racism but also offers an example of the connection between the production of race and the politics of death. Approaching racism as a punitive mechanism and form of collective punishment that punishes racialised communities at different levels and that constantly reminds them of the possibility of what Gilmore terms 'premature death', the article offers a new and nuanced understanding of the multiple modalities of racism in Turkey. Rather than viewing racism in Turkey as merely an imitative form of European racism, this article shows that racism in Turkey is also informed by the country's own imperial past. Turkey provides fertile ground for examining both western and non-western forms of racism and the intersections between the two.

Keywords: Alevis, collective punishment, non-western racism, 'people of the book', politics of death, religious racism, sectarianism, Turkey

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This country is not ours,
It belongs to those who want to kill us.

Tezer Özlü, poet.[1]

Introduction

As the global rise of right-wing politics continues to threaten the lives and well-being of racialised communities, it becomes increasingly critical for us, as anti-racist scholars, to expand the scholarly debate to include uncharted dimensions and territories of racism. In this article, I draw on the case of state-sanctioned violence and discrimination against Alevis in Turkey (a historically stigmatised and persecuted ethnosectarian community) and argue that sectarian identities can also be raced. Like other racialised communities across the globe, Alevi communities in Turkey have experienced racism as a punitive mechanism that encompasses various forms of collective punishment, ranging from affective, everyday forms of punishment to more concrete acts of physical violence that include lynchings, pogroms, massacres and genocidal violence. The case of the Alevis in Turkey not only shows us how sectarian identities can be raced, but it also offers an example of the connection between the production of race and state-sanctioned death.

While there is significant literature on historical formations of European racism and their contemporary repercussions,[2] the literature on non-western imperial and post-imperial forms of racism remains limited and requires further exploration. As Alastair Bonnett asserts, we need to 'deepen the field's critical capacity and extend its geo-cultural range'.[3] With this goal in mind, this article builds on the emergent literature on racism and supremacy in non-western geographies.[4] As Nazan Maksudyan indicates, there has long been a 'racism taboo' in Turkey.[5] Despite the substantial body of literature on Turkish nationalism and its discriminatory and violent effects on the country's non-Turkish populations, the racist elements of Turkish nationalism have remained under-studied until recently. Nevertheless, the growing literature on racism in Turkey and the diaspora helps us to better understand the racist dimensions of Turkish nationalism.[6] This literature, however, has focused almost exclusively on the ethnonational dimensions of Turkish racism and shown that racism in Turkey is informed by and mimics European racism and its colonial discourses. Engaging with the literature which shows that 'new racism' is not actually that new and that 'religious racism'[7] has played a key role in the formation and development of racism, I argue that racism in Turkey is not solely based on ethnic identities but has a sectarian/religious dimension as well. Rather than viewing racism in Turkey as merely an imitative form of European racism, this article shows that racism against Alevis in Turkey is informed by the country's own imperial past. Turkey provides fertile ground for examining both western and non-western forms of racism and the intersections between the two.

The Alevis are an ethnically heterogeneous and historically stigmatised faith group in Sunni-majority Turkey. As in the Shi'a tradition, the Alevis worship Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Mohammed. However, unlike Sunni or Shi'i Muslims, they do not adhere to the formal obligations of normative Islam. They do not go to mosque and in their worship practices, which are held in the places called *cemevi*, they do not follow the gender segregation prescribed in Sharia law.[8] The majority of Alevis ethnically identify as Turks; there are also Kurdish and Arab Alevis. Due to the stigma attached to Alevis, many feel the need to hide their identity. Therefore, the exact size of the Alevi population in Turkey is not known. Researchers have estimated that the Alevi population ranges between 10 and 30 per cent of Turkey's population.[9] Studies on Alevis in Turkey have highlighted the institutionalised discrimination and assimilationist policies they suffer[10] and have addressed the state and state-backed sectarian violence against them, including lynchings, pogroms, massacres and genocidal violence.[11] Others have shown that Alevis are not considered 'appropriate citizens' and that their legal citizenship status does not necessarily lead to rights in Turkey.[12] This literature has also revealed how Alevis, along with Kurds, are among the main targets of Turkey's anti-terror laws[13] and that Alevi neighbourhoods in major cities, which have been under militarised spatial surveillance since the early 1990s, are labelled as spaces of danger and 'terror', contributing to the portrayals of Alevis as violence-prone and unruly people.[14] In this article, I take these discussions on the othering of and discrimination against Alevis further by arguing that Alevis in Turkey are not just a stigmatised but also a racialised group. The framework of racialisation helps us better understand the conditions of possibilities of Alevi death as a result of state and state-sanctioned civil violence, as well as the everyday, mundane forms of violence and discrimination Alevis face in Turkey. The insights for this article come from my many years of ethnographic engagement with Alevi communities in Turkey and the numerous interviews that I have conducted with Alevis of different ethnic and class backgrounds over the last decade.[15]

Racism, religion and the politics of death

There is a consensus among scholars studying race and racism that race does not exist, and that race as biology is a fiction.[16] Race is indeed a social construct – a construct of racist ideologies – but 'racism as a social problem is real'.[17] According to Steve Garner and Sahar Selod, racism involves a process of racialisation that paves the way for 'ascribing sets of characteristics viewed as inherent to members of a group because of their physical or cultural traits. These are not limited to skin tone or pigmentation but include a myriad of attributes including cultural traits such as language, clothing, and religious practices'.[18] The body-centred or colour-coded racial theory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, most clearly manifested in the persistence of anti-Black racism, defined race by reference to physical

differences.[19] However, discussions of 'cultural racism' underline that racism not only defines and attempts to legitimise an ideology of race/ism regarding biological characteristics but also essentialises religious-cultural differences and involves a notion of cultural superiority or inferiority.[20]

In claiming that religion can be raced, recent scholarship on racism underscores the historical relationship between racism, culture and religion.[21] This literature demonstrates that the 'new racism' is not necessarily a new phenomenon and that racing religion dates back to the historical emergence of modern European racism, which is closely linked to colonialism.[22] For example, anthropologist Walter Mignolo contends that the historical foundation of the 'racial modern/colonial matrix' goes back to sixteenth-century Spain and the conquest of Al-Andalusia and the Americas.[23] It was then that the Spanish conquistadors began to define race based on religion.[24] The Indigenous populations of the Americas were considered racially inferior because they were not 'people of the book', and the Jews and Muslims of Europe because they believed in the 'wrong religion' or the 'wrong God'.[25]

Similarly, sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel points to the boomerang effect of the colonisation of the Americas in constructing an ideology of race, arguing that 'religious racism' was the first marker of racism to emerge in the sixteenth century. Religious racism, which was directed against Indigenous people and questioned the humanity of 'Indians' because they had no religion per se, portraying them as 'soul-less subjects', paved the way for challenging the humanity of those who believed in the 'wrong God'. For Grosfoguel, this line of reasoning contributed to the transformation of mediaeval European representations of Islam and Judaism from 'inferior religions' to the depiction of Jews and Muslims as inferior beings, sub-humans.[26] This religious racism, deeply intertwined with colonialism, later extended to certain sects within Christianity. Using the example of the colonisation of Ireland, Grosfoguel asserts that 'what appeared at first glance to be a religious conflict between Protestants and Catholics was, in fact, a racial/colonial conflict'.[27] Likewise, underlining the problems of drawing impermeable lines between racism and sectarianism, scholars have argued that sectarianism in Northern Ireland, which is informed by the history of colonialism, works as a form of racism.[28]

The racialisation of Jewish and Muslim Europeans, as well as colonised and enslaved populations, reduced these communities to one aspect of their identity, enabled the collective punishment of communities and rendered them killable subjects. The portrayal of racialised populations as outside human (that is Christian-European) civilisation has effectively conditioned the possibilities of pogroms, massacres and genocides.[29] As critical race theorists point out, the production of race/ism is directly linked to the production of killable subjects – subjects who 'deserve' to be killed. Achille Mbembe, for instance, referring to Hannah Arendt, contends that the 'politics of race is ultimately linked to the politics of death'.[30] Similarly, Ruth Gilmore defines racism as 'the state-sanctioned or

extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death'.[31] Patrick Wolfe posits that 'race denotes certain people as being out of place, rendering the subordinate populations concerned inherently dirty'; hence, the 'remedy for a people out of place, after all, is ethnic cleansing'.[32] As Eike Marten notes,[33] citing Foucault, in the context of racism, 'the meaning of killing exceeds the notion of murder as such' and includes 'also every form of *indirect murder*: the fact of exposing someone to death, increasing the risk of death for some people, or, quite simply, political death, expulsion, rejection, and so on' [emphasis mine].[34]

Although an extensive body of literature addresses the historical origins of racism in Europe and its contemporary consequences, there remains a need for further research and scholarly work on non-western manifestations of racism and their connections to non-western imperial structures. For example, a simple Google Scholar search using the keywords 'racism in the Ottoman Empire' reveals only four published academic papers. All four of these important works refer to the era of modernisation/westernisation while discussing racism in the empire.[35] However, given the consensus among critical race scholars on the elasticity and flexibility of racism and its deep entanglements with historical and structural inequalities that span time and space, it is crucial to explore unexplored territories of racism and attend to non-western imperial and colonial formations and their contemporary effects.[36]

As I elaborate below, racialised stigmas against Alevi communities in Turkey can be traced back to the stigmatisation and collective punishment of Alevis in the Ottoman era. As Ayse Baltacıoğlu-Brammer indicates, the distinction between 'the people of the book' and 'the people without a book' was not unique to European empires but also existed in the Ottoman era. While the Sunni-Muslim, Christian and Jewish populations in the Ottoman Empire were considered 'people of the book' (*ahl al-kitab*), 'Muslim minorities were, more often than not, considered to be unbelievers (*kafir*) or heretics (*mulhid*)'. [37] Alevi communities (then called *Kızılbaş*), for example, were described in official documents, court chronicles and religious polemics in the Ottoman Empire as unbelievers and heretics who displayed 'immoral sexual behaviors' and 'engaged in a promiscuous and indiscriminate orgy' after the second half of the sixteenth century.[38]

At this point, it is important to note that the *Kızılbaş* emerged as a distinct identity within Anatolia and Mesopotamia in the sixteenth century when the first tensions arose between the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the Shiite Safavid state in Iran. The Ottoman Empire's victory over the Safavids marked the beginning of a continuous period of repression against the *Kızılbaş,* who sympathised with the Safavid Shah.[39] *Fetvas* (formal religious decrees) by influential theologians of the time condemned the *Kızılbaş* communities and sanctioned their persecution. In the sixteenth century, the *Kızılbaş* communities were subjected to widespread massacres under the orders of Yavuz Sultan Selim, who labelled them enemies of the religion and the state.[40] As Hamit Bozarslan argues, it is impossible to talk

about a *longue durée* in the Ottoman Empire: 'the internal ethnic and religious borders within the Muslim communities in the Ottoman Empire were not ossified'.[41] Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that sixteenth-century portrayals of *Kızılbaş* as heretics and enemies of the state and religion resurrected in modern Turkey and legitimised and encouraged violence against these communities, making them vulnerable to state and state-sanctioned civilian violence, hence to premature death. But before further discussing this subject, I will briefly introduce the emerging literature on non-western racism and racism in Turkey to provide a contextual background for my arguments.

Non-western racisms and racism in Turkey

Scholars concerned with racism in non-western contexts – from Iran and Tunisia to Turkey and from India and Pakistan to Malaysia – consistently emphasise the denialism of racism.[42] As Zaheer Baber maintains, using contemporary India as an example, 'more often than not, any systematic discrimination of racialised groups is either denied or a number of euphemisms such as "communalism" and "sectarianism" are routinely invoked to label conflicts that are identical to racism'.[43] This is also the case for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. While the studies on the links between sectarianism and racism in Northern Ireland offer a great example to relativise the boundaries between these two forms of systematic and structural discrimination,[44] sectarianism in the MENA region has yet to be explored in relation to racism.[45] Furthermore, there is also a tendency to interpret instances of racism as a matter of ethnic conflict. For example, in her introduction to a special issue titled *The Politics of Race and Racialisation in the Middle East*, Burcu Özcelik suggests that the discrimination against Kurds, whose homeland was divided between four states (Turkey, Iraq, Syria and Iran), 'may often not be reported or treated as racially motivated in the Middle East', even though 'the personal harm inflicted, and their social and political consequences operate in similar ways to the long-standing experience of what is commonly understood as racial discrimination'.[46] Racism in these contexts is understood as 'something the white people do to us'.[47] But as Kamei Samson maintains, 'racism has no religion'.[48] Studies of racism in Muslim-majority countries show that while Muslims are among the main targets of racist discourses and practices in Europe, North America, China and India, racism can also thrive in Muslim-majority countries.[49] It is, therefore, essential to re-examine the histories of genocides, massacres and other forms of collective punishment in non-western contexts through the lens of race and racism to gain a deeper understanding of the relationship between racism and the politics of death.

Turkey provides fertile ground for examining both western and non-western forms of racism and the intersections between the two. The growing literature on racism in Turkey focuses on how the Turkish nationalist elite adapted European colonial racist discourses to create a notion of Turkish racial superiority and

Whiteness during the formation years of the Turkish Republic.[50] More recently, an increasing number of scholars have pointed to the importance of the internal colonisation of Northern Kurdistan (Southeast Turkey) in understanding the operations of anti-Kurdish racism,[51] emphasising that 'Turkish nationalism embarked on a "modernising" project beholden to colonialism and racism'.[52] Embracing racist European discourses that portrayed white Europeans as the most advanced group in the supposed evolutionary chain, Turkey's founders imagined Turks as part of and even precursors to European civilisation, presenting Turkishness 'as the original source of all white Western superiority'.[53] In line with the body-centred race theory of the nineteenth century, Turkish ruling elites invested resources in pseudoscientific anthropological research and used certain measurement techniques to 'prove' the superiority of the 'Turkish race'.[54] In the early anthropological studies and the accompanying state discourses, the facial characteristics, blood, skin colour and height of Turks were cited as evidence of their alleged superiority over non-Turkish populations in Turkey.

Pseudoscientific racism based on physical characteristics has always been interwoven with cultural racism in Turkey. Turkey's non-Turkish populations, such as Armenians, Greeks, Assyrians, Arabs, Jews and Kurds, were depicted as culturally inferior and untrustworthy in early republican anthropology texts. Armenians, for example, were portrayed as a race dominated by various other cultures for centuries and were therefore unable to govern themselves and form a homogeneous identity with linguistic, religious and cultural unity.[55] Following European colonial discourses, the Kurds have been racialised as 'barbarians' and 'animal-like savages' with 'dim intellect'.[56] Recent research conducted as part of the 'Monitoring Equality in Education Project' shows that such racist representations of non-Turkish communities still exist in Turkey.[57] The research report for this project shows that all non-Turkish Indigenous communities of Turkey are presented with negative attributes in the textbooks. For example, Armenians and Greeks are portrayed as enemies, and Kurds are presented under the title of 'harmful organisations'. Such portrayals have effectively made the country's non-Turkish and non-Muslim populations targets of state and civilian violence. Thus, the history of modern Turkey has witnessed large-scale anti-Kurdish massacres, anti-Jewish and anti-Christian pogroms, and the massive deportation of Christian populations. As I discuss in the following section, racism in Turkey is not only defined by ethnic or ethnoreligious factors but also includes a sectarian dimension involving Alevis of different ethnic backgrounds, including Turkish Alevis.

Racism against Alevis

According to Garner and Selod, 'forms of racism are, by their nature, dynamic and specific to historical, cultural, geographic and political contexts'.[58] As a 'scavenger ideology', racism 'gains its power from its ability to pick out and utilise

ideas and values from other sets of ideas and beliefs in specific socio-historical contexts'.[59] Moreover, racism 'never moves in straight lines or fixes itself in a clearly defined way'.[60] In the context of Turkey, Turkish supremacism, based on the idea of the alleged superiority of 'Turkish blood' and culture, went hand in hand with the belief in the cultural and moral superiority of Sunni Islam. Although the founders of modern Turkey declared that they aimed to build a secular nation-state, in practice, they promoted 'a new nationalist, modernised version of Sunni Islam'.[61] The new state elites, following their Ottoman predecessors, 'conceived Sunnism as the par default religion of the nation', ignored 'the sectarian plurality among Muslims',[62] and in certain instances considered Alevis as 'enemies of the state'.[63] That is to say, 'Sunni Islam played a political role by stipulating the socio-cultural identity of Turkish citizenship', which paved the way for 'the production of a unique model of "secular" citizenship that was culturally exclusionary'.[64]

Since the establishment of modern Turkey, Alevis have been 'excluded from participation in state planning and policy formulation'.[65] There is 'a glass ceiling preventing Alevis from getting high-ranking state jobs'.[66] During the early years of the Turkish Republic, Alevis were 'perceived as a suspect potential fifth column (of Iran) and a security threat requiring continued surveillance'.[67] They continued to be seen as a threat to national security in the following decades as well: from the 1930s through the Cold War period and more recently during the Gezi uprisings of 2013, effectively suffering persecution. Their places of worship (*cemevi*) have not been granted official status, resulting in the exclusion of the Alevi community from access to state financial support, which is given to all other religious communities in Turkey, albeit unequally. More significantly, this exclusion clearly indicates that, much like in the Ottoman era, Alevis are not officially seen as the *people of the book* in contemporary Turkey. As I have argued above, the fact that they are not considered people of the book contributed to the labelling of Alevis as heretics in the Ottoman era. This labelling, as I will discuss below, had a significant impact on portraying Alevis as a community outside of human civilisation, which in turn has justified violence against them in Turkey. Alevis still suffer from racialising stigmas that portray them as a heretical community who engage in incestuous orgies. A recent research report published by the Norwegian Helsinki Committee and the Freedom of Belief Foundation on hate crimes in Turkey in the year 2022 shows that Alevi students face derogatory comments on alleged incestuous relations in Alevi communities from their teachers at school.[68] The same report also shows that Alevis suffer attacks and insults in their workplace, the representatives and buildings of Alevi organisations are targets of violent attacks and the houses of Alevis in various parts of the country are daubed with red crosses and threats.[69] The neighbourhoods that they established as sanctuaries in large cities to shield themselves from potential Islamist and nationalist attacks have been subjected to militarised spatial control for several decades. Constant military vehicle street patrols, a heavy undercover police presence, semi-routine anti-terror operations that take place with the participation of thousands of police officers and

accompanied by helicopters are indicators of racialised policing of these urban spaces and their residents.[70] Hence, as I demonstrated elsewhere, for many Alevis, the state represents a punitive and potentially life-threatening entity rather than a source of security.[71] The profound and prolonged lack of government assistance in the aftermath of the recent devastating earthquake in Antakya, a town predominantly inhabited by Alevis, serves as a clear indication of the interplay between anti-Alevi racism in Turkey and the 'vulnerability to premature death'[72] or 'indirect murder'.[73] Accordingly, in what follows, I elaborate on how Alevis face racism in Turkey and show its connections to the country's imperial past.

'Mum Söndü': locating Alevis outside human civilisation

From the sixteenth century onwards, Alevis were accused of participating in incestuous orgies. Known locally as *mum söndü* (literally, the candle has gone out), this stigma suggests that Alevis blow out candles during their religious ceremonies and engage in incestuous orgies in the dark. As Aykan Erdemir puts it, 'in the Sunni cosmology, the sexual promiscuity and deviance of the heretics are signs of the animal self (*hayvani nefs*)', and it is 'possible for a person to be ranked even lower than Satan if human inhibitions cannot hold the animal self (*hayvani nefi*) under control'.[74] The stigma of '*mum söndü*' survived the Ottoman era and has been instrumental in racialising Alevis in modern Turkey, portraying them as unable to control their 'animal self' and thus deserving of punishment. For example, in his study on Alevis in twentieth-century Turkish literature, Zeki Uyanik shows that renowned authors, including also secular leftists, portrayed Alevis as sexually deviant, immoral and unintelligent people who act like animals according to herd instinct. These 'highly respected' authors (such as Haldun Taner, Reşat Nuri Gültekin, Kemal Tahir, Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpinar and Ömer Seyfettin), whose novels circulate widely and are still required reading by the Ministry of Education in schools, played an important role in spreading racist depictions of Alevis as a community that engages in incestuous orgies. [75] Reşat Nuri Gültekin, who served as a chief inspector in the Ministry of National Education shortly after the founding of modern Turkey, writes in his novel *Gizli El* (Secret Hand, 1920): 'The Hodja was watching a *Kızılbaş mum söndü* behind the tree and saw couples who were hugging one another with terrible shivers'.[76] Or Ömer Seyfettin, a major figure in Turkish national/ist literature, writes in his short story *Harem* (1918) 'in the past, when humans were closer to animals, there was no monogamy. Humans then used to live like a herd. Within a tribe, all men were husbands to all women . . . This still continues in certain communities. Like in *Kızılbaş* communities'.[77]

The association of Alevis with incestuous orgies continued in Turkey's cultural and entertainment scene in the following decades. It was recently discovered that in the Turkish translation of *Lolita* published by a major publishing house (Can Yayinlari) in 1982, the English word 'incest' was translated into Turkish as *Kızılbaş*.

Similarly, the Turkish translator of Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* used *Kızılbaş* for the word incest in the book published by another prestigious publishing house (Varlik Yayinlari) in 1966. In 1995, the host of a popular TV show, *Turnike,* watched by millions, asked one of his pregnant guests, 'Is this baby your father's? Are you Kızılbaş?' In 2010, another popular TV show host asked someone who called in from an Alevi-populated town if their family members were playing *mum söndü*.

Such representations of Alevis are familiar to scholars of race and racism from western colonial contexts where Indigenous, Black and other racialised populations are portrayed as morally and sexually deviant, lacking intelligence, and instinctively behaving like animals.[78] Hyper-sexualisation has been an important tool of racialisation and has contributed to the dehumanisation and animalisation of Indigenous and Black populations, effectively rendering them sinful subjects who deserve punishment. Because Alevism is associated with the great sin of *mum söndü* that deserves an equally great punishment, these stigmas are among the reasons Alevis in Turkey do not feel safe revealing their identity.

Everyday collective punishment: 'painful feelings'

The labelling of Alevis as sinful subjects conditions the possibility of their collective punishment, ranging from everyday punitive practices that include offensive and discriminatory attitudes, bullying and beatings to lethal forms of collective punishment.

Kurdish-Alevi ethnomusicologist Ozan Aksoy tells that, 'When my late grandmother was bidding me farewell as I left home for the first time to attend college in Istanbul, she cautioned me to never tell anyone that I was Alevi and/or Kurd. I was not sure what to expect when she repeatedly warned me about keeping our family's background a secret, but sure enough, once in Istanbul, I heard that 'Alevis do *mum söndü* . . . and phrases like . . . "the best Kurds in the world are those who are dead".'[79] *Mum söndü* stigmas facilitate what Özlem Göner calls 'painful feelings' in Alevis' everyday encounters. For example, one of Göner's interviewees recalls a 'hurt' when her best friend said, 'Alevis are those who practise *mum söndü*'.[80] To explain her feelings about this, she says, 'This made me feel as if somebody hit me in the stomach'. This painful feeling of being punched in the stomach is an example of collective punishment, where a punishment for a crime or sin, that has not been committed, is attributed to the entire community. Many Alevis choose not to reveal their identities to their Sunni friends, neighbours and colleagues to avoid such painful feelings. When I was conducting research between 2010 and 2016 on the policing of and state violence against Alevi communities in Turkey, countless of my Alevi interlocutors and friends from various class backgrounds emphasised how their parents told them they needed to hide their Alevi identity outside their immediate environment.[81] These warnings, aimed at avoiding possible racist attitudes and painful feelings, trigger another difficult feeling: 'There's something wrong with me/us'. For example,

Aysel,[82] a 36-year-old Turkish Alevi teacher, whom I interviewed in 2015 and asked her about her experiences of being an Alevi in Turkey, shares how she felt when her mother told her that she needed to hide her Alevi identity:

> When I started primary school in Istanbul in the 1990s, my mom told me that I should never tell anyone that we were Alevis. I did not even know that we were Alevis. This is how I learned about my Alevi identity. It is a very weird way of learning one's identity. But in retrospect, I now understand that my mom did so to protect me. At the time, I reasoned that if I needed to hide it, then there must be something wrong with being an Alevi and, thus, with us, with our family. This feeling that there was something wrong with me/us accompanied me for years. And my encounters with Sunnis exacerbated this feeling. I remember one day at school when I was a 4th-grade student, and our teacher asked if there were Alevis among us. I remained silent. Nobody said anything. Then the teacher said, 'That is good. I don't need to explain to you the sins of practising *mum söndü*'. Some students started laughing. I did not understand what our teacher meant. But this strengthened my feeling that we were not normal, that we were guilty of a crime or a sin (*bir sucumuz, bir günahimiz varmis)*, which I didn't know about. I have learned to keep my Alevi identity a secret in mixed environments ever since.

Aysel's feelings are by no means unique. I interviewed Dersim, a working-class Alevi woman in her late 20s, in her predominantly Alevi-populated neighbourhood in 2016. In response to my question about the discrimination she has faced as an Alevi in Turkey, Dersim recounts:

> In high school, I was very close friends with three girls. We were a very close group. We used to go to each other's houses after school and hang out together during the weekends. This continued until one of the girls' moms learned that I was an Alevi. After that, she never allowed her daughter to hang out with me. And our friendship as a group ended. My friend told me that her mom told her that Alevis were dirty, that the food they cooked should not be eaten, and that they practised *mum söndü*. I searched for what *mum söndü* meant, and I cannot tell you how I felt after learning what it was. I cried for hours, for days. I knew that what her mom said was not true. But that did not prevent me from feeling that there was something wrong with my family. I felt that I was being punished for a crime I didn't commit.

This is how racism operates. Racism is a punitive mechanism that punishes racialised communities not for *doing* something wrong but rather for *being wrong* according to the norms and beliefs of the dominant groups in a particular society. For Kurdish Alevis, who are considered doubly wrong in a Turkish- and Sunni-dominated society, the level of everyday punishment is even higher. In an article co-authored with sociologist Celia Jenkins, Umit Cetin, a Kurdish-Alevi sociologist, reflects:

> I am an Alevi-Kurd who grew up in a remote Alevi village in Central Anatolia . . . In Turkey, I experienced the forbidden nature of this identity once I started secondary school in the nearby town. At home, my parents constantly reminded me not to speak Kurdish, to the extent that I was dissuaded from playing with my peers. I was instructed not to disclose my Alevi-Kurd identity if I wanted to do well at school, but everyone knew who I was, and *Kizilbaş* was a term of abuse I often heard during the beatings I received from teachers and my Sunni peers. From my first day at school, I was endlessly beaten and bullied, as were other Alevi and Kurdish pupils who were assumed to be heretics and from leftist backgrounds. We were punished and excluded, despite the fact that it was the majority Sunni nationalist Turks who started the fights, often encouraged by the teachers.[83]

All the testimonies I have cited above are clear indications of the collective punishment that Alevis in Turkey endure on a daily basis: the feeling of being hit in the stomach, the sense that there is something wrong with me or with us, bullying, beatings, exclusion, threats and derogatory and discriminatory attitudes. The collective punishment suffered by Alevis is not limited to emotional injuries or relatively small-scale everyday physical violence but, as I illustrate below, extends to broader types of punishment that include lethal forms.

Lethal forms of collective punishment

Shortly after the founding of modern Turkey, the Kurdish Alevis of the Dersim region were subjected to genocidal violence that included the use of poison gas, heavy aerial bombardment, the burning of forests, fields and villages, the forcible removal of children from their families, and assimilationist policies that led to the murder of between 46,000 and 63,000 Kurdish Alevis and the deportation of thousands of others to the western provinces.[84] Aiming to Turkify and Islamise the region, the ruling elites and state reports of the time depicted the people of Dersim as 'wild savages who are deprived of humanity and merit'.[85] The engineers of the Dersim genocide accepted neither the Kurdish nor the Alevi identity of people in Dersim. The words of Commander of the General Staff Fevzi Çakmak shed light on how the ruling elites of the time saw Kurdishness in Dersim: 'Dersim should primarily be accepted as a colony, Kurdishness should be melted into Turkishness, and then should be subjected to particular Turkish jurisdiction'.[86] The Dersim Report prepared by the General Command of the Gendarmerie in the 1930s identifies the Alevi/Kızılbaş faith as an obstacle to Turkishness and argues that 'the worst aspect of Alevis that requires a special attention is the deep gap between them and Turkishness. [They] do not like Sunni Muslims, bear a grudge against them, feud with them since the beginning of the time.'[87] The report also repeatedly praises the sixteenth-century Ottoman Sultan Yavuz Sultan Selim, who ordered the persecution of tens of thousands of Alevis, 'thanking him for his

"wrath" in mass killings of Alevis and for securing the Sunni presence in Turkey'.[88]At the same time, mainstream papers were publishing news on how Alevi/Kızılbaş people were caught and punished by state and civilian actors while engaging in orgies in Anatolian villages.[89]

While in the decades following the genocidal violence in Dersim there haven't been any large-scale massacres against Alevis, Alevis once again began to be targets of state-backed violence during the Cold War era. The official Cold War slogan 3K (*Kürt, Kızılbaş, Komunist*) identified Alevis, along with Kurds and Communists, as one of the three main threats to national security and as allies of the country's external enemy, i.e., Soviet Russia. The years 1978 and 1980 witnessed a series of anti-Alevi pogroms in small towns in Turkey, such as Malatya (1978), Corum (1980), Sivas (1978) and Maras (1978). Studies show that Alevi alignment with leftist politics,[90] Kurdish Alevis' support for the emerging Kurdish anti-colonial movement[91] as well as the upward mobility of Alevis in these towns[92] were among the reasons that rendered Alevis killable in the eyes of nationalist and Islamist populations. It is also important to acknowledge the state's role here as an enabler, if not an initiator. That is to say that official discourses that condemned Alevis as a threat to national security, intertwined with the stigmas inherited from the Ottoman Empire that portray Alevis as sinful subjects deserving of punishment, worked to foment and legitimise violence against Alevi communities. As a result of these pogroms, hundreds of Alevis were killed, thousands of shops and houses owned by Alevis were destroyed, and thousands had to leave their homes in search of sanctuary in big cities or as refugees in Europe. At the same time, the newly emerging Alevi working-class neighbourhoods in big cities also suffered from Islamist and nationalist attacks and police and military violence. The nationalist and Islamist attacks on these neighbourhoods were so common in those years that the residents had to establish escort groups for self-protection when outside their neighbourhoods. [93]

It is important to note here that these pogroms occurred shortly after Alevis started departing from their centuries-old sanctuaries situated in mountainous regions and began moving into neighbouring, predominantly Sunni towns. After the severe persecutions and massacres of Kızılbaş during the sixteenth century, they had retreated to mountainous areas, hard to reach for soldiers and other potential persecutors and lived in seclusion until the 1960s.[94] The violence they faced in the twentieth century shortly after leaving their places of refuge was reminiscent of the past violence endured by Kızılbaş communities centuries ago. The language used by Islamist groups involved in the pogroms also effectively connected past Ottoman violence to the present. For instance, the pamphlets distributed before the Alevi pogrom of 1978 in Sivas under the signature of 'the Muslim youth' addressed Alevis as follows: 'Once upon a time you used to utter, "Shah, Shah" [an allusion to Alevi/Kızılbaş support for Shah Ismail, the Safavid leader in the early sixteenth century]. Now it is not towards the Shah, but towards communism that you are heading. We will absolutely prevent this move.'[95] Sevim

Polat, who survived the 1978 Maras pogrom, reports that the persecutors chanted that Alevis were infidels and that they would earn merit (*sevaba girmek*) by killing Alevis.[96]

The Alevi community interpreted these pogroms and government officials' responses to them as evidence of the continuing 'state's hostility' against the Alevis.[97] As Martin van Bruinessen argues 'the local police, already infiltrated by the extreme right did little to protect the Alevis' during these pogroms.[98] The presence of state security forces who assisted the perpetrators in these pogroms and their raids on Alevi homes, not those of the perpetrators, further intensified the scope of the violence.[99] The punishments meted out to the organisers of and participants in the pogroms did not reflect in any way the gravity of the offences.[100]

State-sanctioned violence against Alevi bodies and in Alevi spaces continued in the following decades. For example, one of the first festivals to celebrate Alevi culture ended in a massacre in 1993. In July 1993, Alevi communities in Sivas organised a festival commemorating Pir Sultan Abdal, the sixteenth-century Alevi poet-rebel. An angry Sunni mob chanting Islamist slogans attacked the hotel where festival participants and organisers were staying and burned the guests alive. As Erdemir observes, Alevis' 'portrayal as heretics, as being beast-like . . . enabled the Sunni mob in Sivas, comprised of thousands of people from all walks of life, to cheer in joy as people were burned alive'.[101] As a result, thirty-seven festival participants, the vast majority of whom were Alevi artists and intellectuals, lost their lives. In the years that followed, many of the lawyers who defended the perpetrators became members of the governing Justice and Development Party and served as elected members of the parliament. To make matters worse, one of the lawyers of the perpetrators, Sevket Kazan, even served as Minister of Justice in 1996 and 1997. In March 2012, the statute of limitations on the Sivas massacre case expired, and the court dropped the case against five people charged as perpetrators. According to Eray Cayli's analysis, this would not have happened if the judiciary, following the call of human rights activists and Alevi organisations, had treated the atrocity as a crime against humanity rather than an ordinary homicide.[102] The near-impunity granted to the perpetrators of the Sivas massacre and the rising careers of their defenders in the government have once again shown that Alevi lives do not matter in Turkey, and the state sanctions violence against them.

The Sivas massacre was followed by the Gazi massacre of 1995, in which twenty-one people were killed and many more injured in the Gazi neighbourhood of Istanbul, predominantly inhabited by Alevis. As police fired into the crowd, they chanted, 'Death to Alevis!' The simultaneity of attack and chanting represents a 'violent interpellation' that worked in two ways: 'The chant informed the protesters that, despite their multiple and layered identities . . . in the eyes of the police, the embodiment of state sovereignty, they were all Alevis. The accompanying shots and their chanting "Death to Alevis" reminded Alevis that they were all *killable subjects*.'[103] Like the Sivas massacre trial, the Gazi case expired due to the

statute of limitations. Only two people were found guilty and sentenced to one year and eight months in prison. Again, the near impunity granted to the perpetrators is evidence of the state-sanctioned killability of Alevis in Turkey. It is therefore no coincidence that many of my interlocutors repeatedly referred to the words of the poet Tezer Özlü quoted at the beginning of this article when I asked them how they felt as Alevis in Turkey. The 19-year-old Turkish Alevi university student Eylem remarked when I interviewed him shortly after his friend was wounded by a police officer during the Gezi Uprisings in the summer of 2013:

> I have never felt safe in this country. How can I feel safe here as an Alevi? Alevis were burned alive in this country; they have been massacred. There were several Alevi massacres in this country when Islamists weren't even in power. Imagine what can happen now that they are in power! I wouldn't be surprised if there was another Alevi massacre. Tezer Özlü's words, 'This country is not ours; it belongs to those who want to kill us', perfectly explain how Alevis feel in this country.

Given the violence against Alevis in the past and the way the state deals with them, many Alevis, like Eylem, do not feel safe in Turkey and believe another massacre is still possible. In their study of Alevi-Sunni neighbourhood relations, which included a total of thirty-two focus groups with 315 participants in three different cities in Turkey, Banu Gökariksel and Anna Secor conclude that 'for Alevis in Turkey today, neighboring takes place in an atmosphere of fear and precarity: an atmosphere within which the possibility of violence . . . and the unbearable . . . are ever present, even in situations of long-standing familiarity.'[104] This feeling of fear, precarity and waiting for impending punishment is another form of collective punishment that prevents Alevis from feeling safe in Turkey. This feeling is not only informed by everyday forms of racism or haunting memories of past violence. It is also kept alive by the anti-Alevi stance of the state's representatives and the constant and threatening reminder of the possibility of violence.

While Alevis in Turkey have not experienced a massacre since the 1990s, this does not mean that state authorities no longer remind them that they are killable subjects. For instance, 2013 saw the large-scale Gezi uprising in which millions of people across the country participated, and yet the government accused the Alevis of its organisation claiming that they were being used by external forces (*dış mihraklar*) who wanted to sow chaos in the country. Only 24 hours after the Gezi uprising began, then-Prime Minister Erdoğan declared that the upcoming bridge over the Bosporus would be named after Yavuz Sultan Selim. The decision to name the bridge after the notorious historical figure, responsible for the execution of tens of thousands of Alevis, sparked public and media debates about the sectarian divide between Alevis and Sunnis in Turkey. In response to criticism from Alevi representatives, Erdoğan justified his choice by praising Sultan Yavuz

as an 'excellent warrior' and a 'brilliant commander', highlighting the sultan's history of violent actions. At the same time, police violence was concentrated in Alevi neighbourhoods, both in Istanbul and elsewhere. It is therefore no coincidence that all seven young men killed by the police during the Gezi uprisings were Alevis.

Ali, a young Alevi man, whom I interviewed after Erdoğan's announcement, explains how this targeted violence and 'the politics of naming' work to convey to Alevis that they are killable subjects:

> The fact that Erdoğan chose to name the third bridge after an Ottoman sultan responsible for the Alevi massacres is not by chance. I am not surprised by this decision. They also named the second airport in Istanbul (Sabiha Gökcen) after another figure involved in the murder of Alevis: the woman who carried out aerial bombings on the people of Dersim. This is a clear message to Alevis, indicating that Alevis are not meant to feel safe in this country and that they are not wanted here. I would not be surprised if there's another Alevi massacre; after all, this is the country of those who want to kill us.

Over the last decade, the targeting of Alevi spaces and bodies by state security forces has kept these sentiments alive. In the last ten years, a sense of insecurity and impending punishment has been fuelled by cases in which state security forces specifically targeted Alevi spaces and individuals. Examples of such incidents include the tragic murder of Uğur Kurt by a policeman while he was attending a funeral at the Okmeydanı *cemevi* in 2014. In addition, there have been multiple *cemevi* raids carried out by anti-terrorism units in Alevi neighbourhoods. Violent attacks on *cemevis*, the buildings of Alevi foundations, and their representatives continue to this day. Many Alevis across the country make the shocking discovery that their homes are being marked with a red cross and the word 'Alevi'. Reminiscent of the red crosses marked on Alevis' houses right before the pogroms of Sivas, Maras, Malatya and Corum, these symbols warn Alevis that their premature death is still a possibility in Turkey.

Conclusion

In this article, I have drawn on the case of racism against Alevis in Turkey to show that sectarian identities can also be raced. By considering racism as a punitive mechanism that imposes collective punishment on racialised communities and individuals within those communities, I have argued that this punishment operates at various levels, from emotional and mundane forms of punitive practices to more corporal and lethal forms of punishment involving state and civilian actors. At one level, racism works as a form of everyday collective punishment for a crime or sin that has not been committed and gives rise to painful and difficult feelings and the sense that 'something is wrong with me/us'. At another level, by portraying racialised populations as outside of human civilisation and

as sinful subjects, racism also promotes and legitimises lethal forms of collective punishment. As the case of racism against the Alevis in Turkey suggests, the impunity or near-impunity granted to perpetrators of violence, the sympathies of ruling elites for past violence and the threatening attempts to evoke it serve as constant reminders of the possibility of death, which in and of itself can be seen as another form of collective punishment.

The emergent literature reveals that racism in Turkey, deeply entangled with Turkish nationalism and Turkish supremacist ideas, is informed by European racism. By engaging with the literature that shows that the 'new racism' is actually not new at all and that 'religious racism' has played a key role in the formation and development of racism, I have shown that racism in Turkey also has a religious/sectarian dimension and that it is not only shaped by European racisms but also by the country's own Sunni-dominated imperial past. The Ottoman era representations of Alevis as heretics, which portrayed them as unable to control their basic instincts and effectively engaging in incestuous orgies that went hand in hand with their depictions as enemies of the state and religion, have been resurrected in modern Turkey and played a key role in the state-sanctioned death of Alevis. Thus, Turkey provides an auspicious terrain for exploring both western and non-western forms of racism and the complex connections and interplay between them.

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