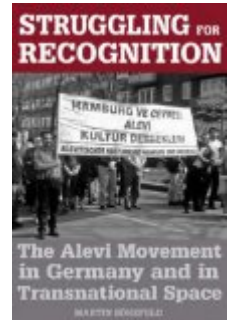


Martin Sökefeld. *Struggling for Recognition: The Alevi Movement in Germany and in Transnational Space.* Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2008. x + 291 pp. \$85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-84545-478-4.



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Central questions in German studies have long revolved around questions of where the nation's borders lie and definitions of German citizenship. One of the problems with studying minority groups in Germany, therefore, is avoiding models that essentialize and hem groups into inescapable, monolithic categories. In the case of Turks in postwar Germany, minority communities within Germany have become one homogeneous group in the press, in the popular vernacular, and even in scholarship. This attitude is reflected in designations like "foreigner" (*Ausländer*) or "Turk," with one word standing in generally to describe more complex configurations. In contrast to the leveling influence of this discourse, Martin Sökefeld's book provides an important and nuanced study of one particular group, the Alevi, and in so doing creates space for broader and more careful considerations of different minority communities within Germany. Sökefeld's book does not offer a definition of what Alevis are and where they fit in, but rather, as he states, "a refusal to do so" (p. 4). The difficulty of both defin-

ing and acknowledging Alevis within the various intersecting Turkish communities of Germany is the driving force behind this book—an exercise that provides an important lesson for minority studies within and beyond German studies.

The text centers on the movement for the "recognition" of "Alevi identity" in both Germany and Turkey that began in the late 1980s. As a part of the larger Turkish immigrant population in Germany, Alevis have struggled in the diaspora to maintain control of the unique Alevi identity in a country that barely allows for one (fictionally) homogeneous Turkish (Sunni) identity. Scholars and politicians have defined the Alevi in multiple ways. A religious and/or cultural minority community within Turkey, they are estimated to number in the tens of millions. Alevis make up an estimated 10 percent of the Turkish population in Germany.[1] As Sökefeld explains, some scholars consider Alevism a sect of Islam that is most notably not Sunni (in contrast to the majority of Turks), while others consider Alevism a way of life, defined by cultural and traditional character-

istics.[2] To be Alevi among Sunni Turks in Turkey is one thing; to be Alevi among Turkish migrants to Germany, another. Yet, the two groups are bound together in the transnational space that is the focus of this monograph.

Conducted over a period of almost seven years, Sökefeld's social anthropological ethnography of Alevis in Hamburg uses interviews and questionnaires as well as participant observation and sources created by the Alevi to discuss a group of people who have been both migrants and minorities throughout their history. The Alevi have consistently provided a backdrop against which majority populations can define who they are by pointing out their differences. Therefore, Sökefeld's discussion of "Alevi politics of identity, within the debate on recognition" (p. 2) offers much more than a study of migration or diaspora in Germany. It rather describes an exercise in the politics and policing of identity formation, including a discussion of what is at stake in each process. Sökefeld's main interests lie in the group's transition from a private, concealed group identity to that of a public community and the leadership role played by Alevi "community associations" in this transition.

Through six chapters, Sökefeld builds his argument that the different constellations of Alevi identity complicate their recognition. He positions the Alevi as participants in a social movement; in a religious movement; in a turf war among competing Alevi associations in Hamburg; in rituals and commemorative events; as a diaspora; as part of the larger context of migrants and minorities in Germany; and, finally, as part of the broader transnational Alevi movement that extends beyond national borders. Sökefeld's overarching thesis is that questions of identity for any group are necessarily intertwined with questions of politics, so that "the concept of identity entails a dialogic relationship because identity calls for recognition" (p. 253). Public recognition is as essential to a group's identity as self-recognition, especially

in countries such as Germany and Turkey, which define homogeneity as part of their national consciousness. The struggle for recognition then becomes a fight against essentialism on the one hand and a bid for political agency as a collective, unified identity on the other. This paradox of identity-related conflicts in both Germany and Turkey provides the central framework of an "Alevi movement."

Sökefeld argues that an Alevi identity arose out of the postwar discourse on Alevis--a discourse that occurred, *inter alia*, in multicultural centers in cities such as Hamburg as well as within identity-related conflicts on the national level in Germany and Turkey. When Alevi associations, especially those in Germany, claim to represent the Alevi community, Sökefeld argues, they evoke and create the very community they seek to represent: "Alevi associations embody the movement also in their often competitive and conflicting relationships, which in part point towards competing conceptions of Alevi identity" (p. 255).

In chapter 5, which is particularly strong, Sökefeld makes the argument that Alevis are unified by a "politics of memory" or "collective memory" based on attacks against them in Turkey (for example, in Maraş [1978], in Çorum [1980], and in Sivas [1933]). Drawing on the literature of collective memory, Sökefeld points out that "activists of the Alevi Movement" conceived of the attack at Sivas as an event that targeted the entire community (p. 121). Sökefeld views the Sivas massacre as emblematic of the struggles faced by Alevis, an event that underlined the necessity of a separate political movement. In this vein, commemorative events in Germany that are organized, publicized, and sponsored by Alevi associations serve the dual purposes of establishing and solidifying a historical continuity of Alevi experience and of representing the Alevi as a unique community to the German public.

Alevis also present themselves to the German public as different from Sunni Turks by pointing

out that they share a "liberal lifestyle" with members of German culture--as seen in the example of Alevi women, who do not wear headscarves. Sökefeld points out that Alevis are in many ways more "compatible" with Germans than typical Sunnis: "Alevis position themselves firmly on the side of modernity, that is on the German side of the divide" (p. 185). Even when Alevis hold German citizenship, Sökefeld points out, public discourse continues to categorize them as foreign. Thus, the German public and the context of migration in Germany also provide an important backdrop for the construction of Alevi identity in transnational space. Turkey and Germany both make a nationalistic demand for homogeneity and integration among their populations that minority groups challenge. Difficulty in categorizing Alevis makes their membership in both of these states even more precarious. Sökefeld's choice of the gerund for the title underlines that identity is an ongoing, complicated process rather than a fixed status. For this reason, this study is useful not only for what it illuminates about minorities within contemporary Germany, but also for what it tells us about Germany today.

Notes

[1]. Kerstin E. Fineklstein, *Eingewandert: Deutschlands "Parallelgesellschaften"* (Bonn: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2009), 96.

[2]. See the essays in Tod Olsson, Elisabeth Özdalga, and Catharina Raudvere, eds., *Alevi Identity: Cultural, Religious and Social Perspectives* (Istanbul: Numune Matbaası, 1998).

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