

# ***On the Exhibition “Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary” and the Attack on the Exhibition***

*Balca Ergener*

Narratives can make us understand.  
Photographs do something else: they haunt us.  
Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*

On September 6-7 1955, a large-scale attack targeted Greek, Armenian and Jewish citizens of Turkey living in Istanbul.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 100,000 people organized in coordinated gangs of twenty-thirty committed acts of violence in neighbourhoods and districts where Istanbul’s non-Muslim population was mostly concentrated.<sup>2</sup> Using various previously acquired tools (i.e. stones, levers, logs, shovels, saws, welding machines) residences and shops were ruined and pillaged; their contents wrecked, thrown into the streets, trailed behind vehicles; and churches, community schools and cemeteries vandalized. The attacks comprised a key reason for the subsequent large-scale migration of non-Muslims from Turkey, especially that of the Greek Orthodox community. On the same dates in İzmir, attacks targeted not only shops, homes and churches belonging to the Greek community, but also the Greek Consulate, and in Ankara mass student rallies supporting the attacks in İstanbul were organized.

On September 6, 2005, an exhibition titled “*Tümamiral Fahri Çoker’in Arşivinden: Ellinci Yılında 6-7 Eylül Olayları*” [From the Archives of Rear Admiral Fahri Çoker: the Events of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary] was organized at Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları in İstanbul.<sup>3</sup> The exhibition showcased previously unreleased photographs taken during the events along with documents evidencing high-level state involvement in their planning. It also displayed information and testimonies quoted from a study by Dilek Güven that had been recently published, providing the most comprehensive analysis of the incidents to date within a framework of homogenized nation-state building and socio-economic policy: *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6-7 Eylül Olayları* [The Events of September 6-7 in the Context of Turkey’s Minority Policies and Strategies]. The opening of the exhibition was attacked by a group of 20-30 militant nationalists. Upon entering the gallery, in protest of the exhibition, the attackers hurled eggs on some photographs, ripped up and threw some photographs out of the windows.

In this paper, I will reflect on the significance of publicly exhibiting these photographs previously seen only by a handful of people along with archival documents and Dilek Güven’s research, and I will discuss the attack on the exhibition in this framework. Like written documents, photographs can serve as evidence – a function that should not be underestimated – but what other significance and function can exhibiting and viewing these photographs have? This will constitute the central question of my inquiry.

## **The Incidents of September 6-7, 1955**

Rumours and warnings of an action against non-Muslims in Istanbul had begun to circulate weeks in advance. On September 6, state radio announced a bomb-attack on Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s birthplace in Thessalonica, and the popular evening paper *İstanbul Ekspres* announced the incident in two separate editions. (Previously, on the night of September 5, a bomb was set off in the garden of the Turkish Consulate in Thessalonica, adjacent to the house where Mustafa Kemal was born. The damage was limited to broken windows. Greek authorities arrested and prosecuted as suspects Oktay Engin, a Turkish secret service operative studying law in Greece on a Turkish state-funded scholarship, and Hasan Uçar, the security guard of the consulate. Additionally, the Consul General and the Vice Consul were accused of instigating and instructing

<sup>1</sup> I have gathered the details of the incidents from Dilek Güven’s study: Dilek Güven, *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Azınlık Politikaları ve Stratejileri Bağlamında 6-7 Eylül Olayları* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> These were Beyoğlu, Kurtuluş, Şişli, Nişantaşı, Eminönü, Fatih, Eyüp, Bakırköy, Yeşilköy, Ortaköy, Arnavutköy, Bebek, Kadıköy, Kuzguncuk, Çengelköy and the Princes’ Islands.

<sup>3</sup> Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları is an art venue which primarily hosts exhibitions of visual art, documentary and activist photography as well as documentary and film screenings and discussions.

the attackers.)<sup>4</sup> In the afternoon of September 6, The Association of Turkish Cyprus (KTC), having as its agenda "defending the Turkish minority in Cyprus against the United Nations and other organizations, and organizing country-wide protests," along with some student organizations linked to this association, organized a protest rally in Taksim, İstanbul.<sup>5</sup> Following the rally, attacks began on previously identified and in some cases already marked locations in various neighbourhoods in İstanbul. The attackers included İstanbulites as well as people brought from other cities, and they provoked other members of the public to join in by appealing to the question of Cyprus and the general "aversion to non-Muslims." The security forces merely watched, failed to intervene even in situations which could be easily prevented, and in some cases, aided and abetted the attacks. According to court records, "in İstanbul 4214 residences, 1004 shops, 73 churches, 1 synagogue, 2 monasteries, 26 schools and 5317 other venues including factories, hotels, bars, etc. were attacked."<sup>6</sup> The fact that cases of burglary, injury and murder were relatively few considering the magnitude of the attacks is interpreted as an indication that the attackers were instructed to refrain from such actions. There were 300-600 people –including attackers – wounded, 15 deaths according to the Helsinki Watch report and 11 deaths according to the Turkish media, and 60 (reported) cases of rape. Martial law was proclaimed at night in an attempt to quell the uprising, though in some areas the attacks continued for several days. Some of the perpetrators were arrested and prosecuted in closed military trials (three in İstanbul and one in each of the other two cities). Most suspects were released by the end of 1956.

In his initial statements, the then-prime minister Adnan Menderes claimed that the acts of violence that took place on September 6-7 in İstanbul and İzmir were patriotic and "spontaneous" reactions to the news items in the national media. The first of these was the news concerning the bombing of Mustafa Kemal's house in Thessalonica. And the second was an article in the daily newspaper *Hürriyet* stating that a Greek attack on Turks was imminent in Cyprus and that there were "plenty of Greeks in İstanbul whom we could attack."<sup>7</sup> Menderes also stated that even though the government was informed of the plans to hold demonstrations, they did not expect a reaction of such proportions. Shortly thereafter, the government assigned guilt to "communist provocateurs" and on September 7, an arbitrarily drawn list of 48 people who had nothing to do with the events, but who had been under surveillance due to their leftwing activities, were arrested and not released until the end of the year.

In her book, Dilek Güven draws on documentary evidence and testimonies to demonstrate that people involved in the organization and execution of the incidents of September 6-7 included the then-president Celal Bayar, prime minister Adnan Menderes and other members of the ruling Democratic Party (DP), secret service operatives, and members of KTC, student organizations and labour unions instructed by governmental and state actors. In the trials held in İstanbul, no members of the government or the secret service were prosecuted in relation to the attacks, and KTC members suspected of involvement were acquitted. However, the Yassıada Tribunals, held after the 1960 military coup, convicted Bayar, Menderes and Foreign Affairs Minister Zorlu of instigating the events, in addition to other crimes. Güven points to the Cyprus talks held in the United Kingdom at the time as one of the reasons for state and DP involvement in organizing the attacks: a Turkish "reaction was necessary" in order to secure support for the Turkish side in the

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<sup>4</sup> Dilek Güven gives an account of what followed the prosecution of these four people by the Greek authorities: "On 17 July 1956, the Turkish ambassador in Athens threatened to shut down the Turkish Consulate in Thessalonica and the Greek Consulate in İstanbul. As a result, charges against the Consul General and Vice Consul were dropped, and Uçar and Engin were released pending trial. Engin had been promised financial support and a good post in return for his service. The Turkish Consul in Komotini / Gümülcine intervened to enable the repatriation of Engin on 22 September 1956. Engin was appointed to a municipal post upon personal instruction by Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and İstanbul Governor Fahrettin Kerim Gökay. After undertaking various duties for the secret service, he became district governor and later governor in the city of Nevşehir." (Güven, pp. 71-2) Consul General Mehmet Ali Balin, Vice Consul Mehmet Ali Tekinal, Oktay Engin and the security guard Hasan Uçar were tried on charges of "acquiring bombs and causing explosion in the garden of the Consulate General in Thessaloniki" in the special military tribunal (Yassıada Tribunals) formed after the 1960 coup d'état. All four were acquitted.

<sup>5</sup> Güven, p. 57.

<sup>6</sup> *6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2005), p. ix.

<sup>7</sup> Güven, p. 3.

talks. Güven also explains that DP had a vested interest in distracting the public with foreign affairs at a time of turbulent internal politics and economic difficulties, while bolstering its control by means of martial law and censorship. However, Güven argues that an explanation based solely on the socio-economic and political conditions of the day is not sufficient, and provides an analysis of the events of September 6-7 as a perpetuation of the official policy towards non-Muslim citizens since the foundation of the Republic, and as part and parcel of attempts to create a homogenized nation-state and a national bourgeoisie. Her approach makes it possible to reflect on the events of September 6-7 in relation to other instances of policies of discrimination and assimilation which non-Muslims and other minorities have historically been subjected to, rather than as an isolated instance for which the (duly overthrown and convicted) DP government alone was responsible.

### **The Exhibition**

The exhibition at Karşı Sanat displayed a selection of photographs from the personal archives of the late retired Rear Admiral Fahri Çoker who had served as the presiding judge in Beyoğlu District Martial-Law Court, one of the three such courts established in İstanbul immediately after the events of September 6-7. Çoker had donated these previously unreleased photographs to the History Foundation of Turkey (Tarih Vakfı) and willed that they be made public only after his death. The originals were small black and white prints. Karşı Sanat reproduced them in large format for the exhibition. In addition to Dilek Güven's study, another book published by the History Foundation to coincide with the exhibition was *6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi* (The Incidents of 6-7 September Photographs-Documents, the Fahri Çoker Archive), which includes a biography of Fahri Çoker, all of the photographs and documents that he donated to the foundation, and a foreword by Dilek Güven. The exhibition was co-organized by Dilek Güven, Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları and the History Foundation, with support from Dr. Ayhan Aktar, Helsinki Citizens Assembly and the Human Settlement Association.

During her research, Güven studied the photographs in the History Foundation archive, and identified the locations in many of them. This information was also included in the above-mentioned book. In my interview with Güven, she said that her main motive in organizing this exhibition was to reveal the existence of these photographs by exhibiting them publicly so as to stop them from "disappearing" in any way. I would argue that the desire to expose the photographs and invite others to become witnesses so as to prevent their cover-up is quite significant when thinking through the possible meanings of the attack on the exhibition.

### **The attack on the exhibition**

The attack on the 2005 exhibition had obvious similarities to the original events of September 6-7.<sup>8</sup> The venue had secured a permit for the exhibition from the Governorship of İstanbul in advance. On the day of the opening, approximately two hundred police officers were positioned across the street from the exhibition space. Officers in plain clothes were placed inside the gallery. Two hours before the opening, Kemal Keriñsiz<sup>9</sup> walked into the gallery with two young

<sup>8</sup> This description of the attack is based on Karşı Sanat Çalışmaları Director Feyyaz Yaman's account.

<sup>9</sup> Currently Kemal Keriñsiz is a defendant in the Ergenekon trial, charged with "membership of a terrorist organization" and "inciting the public to an armed uprising against the government." Previously he had served in the same trial as the legal counsel of retired colonel Muzaffer Tekin, who is accused of planning the 2006 gun-attack on a high court which left one judge dead, and three bomb attacks on the daily newspaper *Cumhuriyet*. Some of the former "activities" of Keriñsiz are as follows: "In October 2005, Keriñsiz appealed the sentence that Hrant Dink received for 'insulting Turkishness,' his objection being that it was a low-end sentence. He filed a complaint against Orhan Pamuk for 'denigrating the army.' He participated in the campaign to expel the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of İstanbul to Greece. In December 2005, freedom of expression charges were brought against journalists İsmet Berkan, Erol Katirciođlu, Murat Belge, Haluk Şahin and Hasan Cemal, as well as *Agos* journalists Hrant Dink, Aydın Engin, Serkis Seropyan and Arat Dink – all upon complaints filed by Kemal Keriñsiz. During Pamuk's trial, Keriñsiz's group held a banner that proclaimed Pamuk and his supporters 'sons of missionaries.' In January 2006, Keriñsiz was part of a group protesting the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate and its cross-finding ritual held annually on the Golden Horn. Their slogans included 'Fuck off patriarch' and 'İstanbul is Turkish, will remain Turkish.' In June 2006, upon a complaint filed by Keriñsiz, charges were brought against novelist Elif Şafak for 'insulting Turkishness.' Keriñsiz and his group protested Armenian Supreme Patriarch Karekin II's visit to Heybeliada (one of the Princes' Islands), during which a protestor from Keriñsiz's gang reportedly assaulted an elderly woman. In July

men carrying a parcel containing Turkish flags on thick wooden sticks. They "inspected" the gallery and walked out. Later, the opening was disrupted by two people shouting and loudly reciting poetry, announcing to the visitors and journalists present that the exhibition misrepresented the events and omitted what the Turks had suffered in Cyprus, Western Thrace and Crete. Afterwards, a group of 20-30 people including Ramazan Kırkık<sup>10</sup> and Levent Temiz<sup>11</sup>, former youth leader of the nationalist party, walked into the main hall. They distributed pamphlets, threw eggs on the photographs, and shouted slogans such as "Turkey is Turkish, will remain Turkish," "death to traitors," "love it or leave it," "why not the pictures from Cyprus but these," and "don't defend those who set fire to Atatürk's house."<sup>12</sup> The organizers first alerted the plainclothes police officers when the two people started shouting, but no measures were taken. Visitors who were standing on the balcony immediately signalled to the police teams in front of the building when the attackers began to tear the photographs and throw them out of the windows, but it took the police about fifteen minutes to go upstairs and intervene. Following the attack, Karşı Sanat director Feyyaz Yaman gave testimony four times in various police stations and court houses, and identified three suspects who had been detained. However, the ensuing trial, framed solely in terms of "attack against property," is inconclusively underway with only a single defendant who had not even been involved in the attack. It is legally impossible to file a claim for another trial until the existing one is concluded.

In the interviews I conducted, Dilek Güven, Feyyaz Yaman and attack witness Mihail Vasiliadis (the editor of Greek-language newspaper *Apoyevmatini* published in Turkey) all stated that they did not take the attack on the exhibition seriously at the time due to the small number of attackers, and the strong public support the exhibition received. In the end, the exhibition was visited by a large number of people, the visitors' book was filled with pages of praise, there was good media coverage of the exhibition, and the attack was widely condemned. Dilek Güven stated that the most interesting outcome for her was that for the first time, the press, including mainstream papers, wrote that the events of September 6-7 were organized with support from the state, the secret service and the government. Furthermore, it was obvious that the target of

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2006, TESEV's (the Turkish Economic and Social Research Foundation) press conference announcing the publication of their report on forced migration was violently disrupted by a group of people who had attended the conference in Keriñsiz's company. Keriñsiz sat back and watched, and later declared to the media that 'the statements made by TESEV in this conference are identical to PKK's declarations. Hence, naturally, the public's reaction is a legitimate one.'" (Erhan Üstündağ, "Keriñsiz İlk Kez 'Etnik Ayrımcılığın' Hesabını Verecek," *Bianet*, 28 July 2008, <http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/108635-kerincsiz-ilk-kez-etnik-ayrimciligin-hesabini-verecek>, retrieved on 13 August 2009.) Also, Keriñsiz was "known as the lawyer who secured a court order banning the conference 'Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire' which was initially scheduled for May 2005 but later postponed to 23 September upon the intervention by Minister of Justice Cemil Çiçek." (Nilüfer Zengin, "Bir Hukukçunun Milliyetçi Olarak Portresi: Kemal Keriñsiz," *Bianet*, 23 January 2008, <http://bianet.org/bianet/siyaset/104360-bir-hukukcunun-milliyetci-olarak-portresi-kemal-kerincsiz>, retrieved on 13 August 2009.)

<sup>10</sup> "According to a news article published in the daily *Tercüman* prior to the attack, Kırkık stated that the exhibition and the panel discussion were organized with the aim to provoke: 'This Soros-sponsored foundation is trying to create controversy in the country by distorting the events of 1955. Their aim is to claim Greeks' rights, to prove that Turks are barbarians, and to secure reparations. In short, it is to create a new controversy in the country. We oppose both the exhibition and the panel'. The article also noted that the Turkish Union of Non-Governmental Organizations, which Kırkık is affiliated with, had petitioned the president, the prime minister, the minister of justice, the minister of interior, the president of the Higher Education Council, and the head of the General Directorate of Foundations, calling on them to ban the exhibition and the panel.'" (Kemal Özmen, "6-7 Eylül Sergisine Saldırdılar," *Bianet*, 6 September 2005, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/66620-6-7-eylul-sergisine-saldirilar>, retrieved on 13 August 2009.) Kırkık had also disrupted the "Incidents of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary" panel organized at Istanbul Bilgi University. Kırkık's other activities include the attack on TESEV's press conference announcing the publication of their report, *Coming to Terms with Forced Migration: Post-displacement Restitution of Citizenship Rights in Turkey*. Also, like Keriñsiz, Kırkık was one of the people who tried to obstruct the conference on "Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire: Questions of Scientific Responsibility and Democracy."

<sup>11</sup> "During the demonstration held in front of the offices of *Agos* on February 26, 2004, Levent Temiz had announced 'From now on Hrant Dink is the target of all our rage and hatred.'" ("Dink Uzun Yıllar Veli Küçük'ün Hedefindeymiş...", *Bianet*, March 27, 2009, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/ifade-ozgurlugu/113444-dink-uzun-yillar-veli-kucukun-hedefindeymis>, retrieved on August 13, 2009.) Currently Levent Temiz is a defendant in the Ergenekon trial, charged with "membership to an armed terrorist organization, possession of a firearm and bullets." ("Ergenekon'da Kim Neyle Suçlanıyor?," *Bianet*, March 26, 2009, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/113395-ergenekonda-kim-neyle-suclaniyor>, retrieved on August 13, 2009.)

<sup>12</sup> Kemal Özmen, "6-7 Eylül Sergisine Saldırdılar," *Bianet*, September 6, 2005, <http://www.bianet.org/bianet/insan-haklari/66620-6-7-eylul-sergisine-saldirilar>, retrieved on August 13, 2009.

the attack was not the specific contents of the exhibition, but rather the fact that it concerned non-Muslim citizens of Turkey. Coming from people who seem to have developed a habit of targeting events of a similar kind, the attack was hardly shocking.

This attack on the photographic reproductions could be seen as a small-scale symbolic re-enactment of the 1955 events. This sense was certainly corroborated by the fact that the exhibition venue was located on İstiklal Avenue, where many of the exhibited pictures were taken and which was one of the most heavily damaged areas. A group of photographers, and members of the Fine Arts Association highlighted this symbolic significance of the attack in a press conference they held in front of the new reproductions that were put back up within a few days.<sup>13</sup>

### The Photographs

As I have mentioned above, what makes these photographs unique is that unlike previously published images, what they show is not limited to the landscape of wreckage caused by the attacks, but they also map the emergence of the events from the very beginning. Photographs constitute "irrefutable" proofs to the presence of their contents at the very moment they were taken. Every photograph is made up of "natural" traces – traces of the light reflected from their contents – inscribed on film or digital memory. This is the result of a process in which the photographer, after having pushed the shutter release button, can no longer interfere.<sup>14</sup> The photographs showcased in the exhibition render the attacks of September 6-7 undeniable and constitute key evidence for identifying the perpetrators.

Some of these photographs were taken by members of the secret service, and others by national and international journalists. Following the declaration of martial law on the evening of September 6, 1955, their publication was prohibited, and hence their national and international circulation prevented. Later they were used by security forces and courts to identify and arrest some of the attackers, as indicated by the pen-marks on some prints and the notes accompanying some images such as "X = Son of driver Aziz in Cihangir."<sup>15</sup> But more crucially, the photographs contain details evidencing the role of the state and state-sponsored institutions in the organisation of the events.

The selection exhibited at Karşı Sanat was carefully chosen from among a total of 246 photographs in the archive in order to give a chronological account of the events and to illustrate that the attacks were premeditated and organized. The series of images included in the exhibition (and in the book) begin with student groups assembling around Taksim, carrying Turkish flags and banners that read "Cyprus is Turkish."<sup>16</sup> We see that about forty people address the crowds, and it is documented that some of the same people deliver speeches at various locations. Later, we view the actions of people whom Dilek Güven calls "provocateurs" in her study – carrying flags, banners and portraits of Atatürk and Celal Bayar, they call on members of the public to participate in the attacks. Also, in order to avoid damage to their stores and property (i.e. car) people put up flags, "Cyprus is Turkish" banners or signs indicating that the

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<sup>13</sup> The largest group condemning the attack consisted of 424 photographers who signed a common statement. Photographer Özcan Yurdalan, the initiator of this action and the spokesperson at the press conference, told me in an interview that they chose to call on the photographers to express their opposition individually rather than via the organizations they belonged to, and that this was important for protecting a medium where photographers express themselves and articulate their opposition. The statement speaks of the "conscience awakening" function of these photographs, as well as how they enable the remembrance of the "organised atrocity and aggression" they depict. The statement condemns violence, oppression and policies of creating a society of "uniform identity." See [http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber\\_id=139](http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber_id=139). More recently, Fotoğraf Vakfı (Photography Foundation) and Galata Fotoğrafhanesi (Galata Photography House) Özcan Yurdalan is affiliated with undertook a similar action to protest the gendarmerie intervention in, and later a university-imposed ban on the photography exhibition on 8 March Women's Day and the local elections, organised as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> UFAT Photography Festival. See: [http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber\\_id=226](http://www.fotografvakfi.org/turkce/haberlist.asp?haber_id=226)

<sup>14</sup> See John Berger, Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling* (New York: Vintage, 1995).

<sup>15</sup> 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi, p. x.

<sup>16</sup> As described in 6-7 Eylül Olayları Fotoğraflar-Belgeler Fahri Çoker Arşivi.

owner was Muslim. According to Dilek Güven, these photographs reveal three key points: first, the workplaces were raided and damaged with exactly the same instruments and methods; second, the police remained passive; and third, the attire of the attackers indicated that many people were brought in from other cities. When I asked about the elegantly dressed women among the attackers, Güven said we could infer from their clothes that they probably had just walked out of a theatre or cinema, and decided to join in the ongoing pillage.<sup>17</sup> This was one of the many types of reaction given by members of the public who had neither been instructed nor prepared for the attack: some took up axes and joined in the raid, some tried to help their neighbours.

Another terrifying detail documented in these photographs is the delight and contentment seen on the faces of the attackers. Some even posed for the cameras upon noticing the photographers. In my opinion, inferring from this that the photographs make us witnesses to a state of frenzy, is not a sufficient conclusion. Writing about the images of American soldiers torturing Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison, Susan Sontag stated, "the horror of what is shown in the photographs cannot be separated from the horror that the photographs were taken – with the perpetrators posing, gloating, over their helpless captives."<sup>18</sup> Sontag notes that this is rare in the history of photography. For example, photographs taken by German soldiers of the atrocities they were committing in Poland and Russia during the Second World War rarely ever included the perpetrators themselves. According to Sontag, pictures of torture in Abu Ghraib can be compared to pictures of white Americans posing in front of black victims of lynching, taken between the 1880's and 1930's: "The lynching photographs were souvenirs of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done. So are the pictures from Abu Ghraib."<sup>19</sup> I believe that a similar interpretation befits the photographs exhibited in Karşı Sanat, even though they do not show the victims and the atrocity they depict is of a different magnitude. As Mihail Vasiliadis told me in an interview, the photographs show that the attackers had no doubt that they were executing their "patriotic duty" and thus doing the right thing.

For all these reasons, the photography archive that Fahri Çoker donated to the History Foundation consists of important historical documents. Nevertheless, the view that making public, exhibiting or publishing these documents and photographs is not a *political* action in itself – because they are historical documents – fails to acknowledge the attempt to relate to truth and to the past by means of the exhibition and books. According to this view, it is as if these photographs and documents lay the past in front of our eyes in all its *transparency* and the organizers and visitors of the exhibition become *passive* viewers, as if these documents and photographs endowed with *objectivity* can claim *their own* place in history which in turn is understood as a totality of *objective* knowledge, and therefore allow September 6-7, 1955 to claim its place in history. And yet we should not forget that the pictures and documents in the archive cannot articulate a narrative on their own. Dilek Güven's reconstruction of the incidents and her analysis of their background within a framework of various institutional policies constitute an important step in the attempt to dispel the ambiguity around the events and to begin making sense of them. In this way, the events of September 6-7, shunned by official history, denied and unspoken though its living witnesses abound, are remembered and spoken of, owing to the power of these photographs and testimonies. Furthermore, by making these pictures and documents public, the exhibition prevents their "disappearance" behind locked doors, as is the case with many archives in Turkey. In this sense, the attack on the exhibition could be seen as a reaction against exposing evidence for and breaking the silence around a crime which should have been kept hidden in collaboration with the state.

<sup>17</sup> In his article about the exhibition Fatih Özgüven refers to the nostalgia for Beyoğlu as once upon a time a neighbourhood where people would go out only in their finest clothes, and writes that the photographs "turn this nostalgia topsy-turvy." ("Beyoğlu Nostaljisinin Çöküşü...", *Radikal*, 15 September 2005. Available [online]: <http://www.radikal.com.tr/Default.aspx?aType=RadikalYazarYazisi&ArticleID=757386&Yazar=FAT%DDH%20%D6ZG%DCV&Date=16.02.2009>, retrieved 13 August 2009.)

<sup>18</sup> Susan Sontag, "Regarding the Torture of Others," *The New York Times*, 23 May 2004. Available [online]: <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/05/23/magazine/23PRISONS.html>, retrieved 14 August 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

Meltem Ahıska's problematization of how power relates to memory and history in Turkey, and her discussion on the possibilities opened up by archives, can contribute to comprehending the aim of the exhibition as well as the attack that targeted it.<sup>20</sup> Ahıska argues that the formation of modern nation-states occasions the emergence of archives as sites that preserve and publicize registers of memory. Archives establish the past as an "objective and authentic space" which in turn can be cited for the construction of history. The presumption maintained by positivist historians and official narratives that archival records consist of transparent and impartial documents, effectively "reduces the distance between power and truth." Nation-states instrumentalize archives (by organizing, classifying and making them public in certain ways) for constructing official history, for governing the past and the present, and for legitimizing the present.

Yet, even though archives provide an "objective space" for the construction of history by preserving the traces of the past, historical generalizations can never fully account for the singularity of each archival record. Archives can be used to formulate different meanings in different contexts, and questions concerning what is preserved and what is not, how and in what kind of a narrative a record is made public, render archives "the sites of a political struggle for the present and the future." According to Ahıska, history can position singularities on a "common plane," relativize them, and open up a space for the past which will not "oppress" the present, while memory allows us to call on singular experiences in an effort to make sense of the present. It is this mediation that archives can effect: "History provides a common plane on which singular experiences can be interconnected; but only when it is claimed by present memory does history become a living force."<sup>21</sup> Singular and subjective memories, "the voices of others," and "different demands for justice" contained in archives can be wrought into a narrative that challenges official history.

According to Ahıska, in Turkey, where archives are damaged, left to rot and not made public, the present and the past are governed by the construction and maintenance of two discrete orders of truth: one which is "in appearance" and "for keeping up appearances," presented to "foreigners," and another consisting of "concealed" truths, conducts and possibilities that become shared secrets between the state and its citizens. In other words, on the one hand there is an "ossified" truth which does not allow for singularities, and on the other hand, there are practices that circumvent this without disturbing it. The singular remains unacknowledged unless it is in line with the general; what is "visible and experienced" does not constitute an evidence if it is at odds with official records and rules. And yet, there is always room for covert practices, which remain shared secrets. In fact, by means of the "deep state," the Turkish state itself exercises its power within an additional order whose existence depends on the knowledge that official truth is in fact a keeping up of appearances. The destruction of archives serves this exercise of power and impairs memory:

When archives are damaged to such an extent that they can no longer answer today's questions, our memory is crippled; it can no longer become relativized by coming into contact with "others" and their suffering, it can no longer access the vast universe of the sense of history. In other words, memory is not afforded a place in or a right to history. When the act of remembering fails to appropriate history, memory fails to gain public meaning and recognition, instead becomes suspect and disposable like archives.<sup>22</sup>

Going back to the question of photography as an archival register, since the technological leap of photography at the beginning of the 20th century, almost every (known) social "event" and tragedy has been photographed by journalists, documentary photographers, surveillance mechanisms or amateurs. These photographic records are then transmitted by various media

<sup>20</sup> Meltem Ahıska, "Arşiv Korkusu ve Karakaplı Nizami Bey: Türkiye'de Tarih, Hafıza ve İktidar," in *Türkiye'de İktidarı Yeniden Düşünmek*, ed. K. Murat Güney (İstanbul: Varlık, 2009), pp. 59-93.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 80.

and archived by various institutions. Photographs, and especially those that are striking and shocking (and it is usually photographs that meet this criteria which are circulated widely) leave lasting impressions on memory, so that most historical events are remembered through photographs which were published.<sup>23</sup> It would be pertinent at this point to take into account both Susan Sontag's and John Berger's writings on photography as a means of communication, and think them in conjunction with Ahiska's claim that archives can be organized so as to enable different constructions of the past.<sup>24</sup> Photographs do not assist us much in understanding their contents, because they only provide a (momentary) glimpse of something that happened in the past. They rip their content out of temporal continuity and the context within which it occurred. This is why their meaning is ambiguous and multiple, inviting us to imagine and speculate beyond that which is visible. Captions and the context in which they are exhibited can narrow down the set of possible meanings and guide the viewer as to how the photographs should be read.

Clearly, when the photographs in question are of suffering, atrocity, war and poverty, "reality" is always much more complicated than what the photographs are able to show. Understanding what it is that we see and what it is that the photographs evidence, requires a comprehension of who caused what the picture shows, and in most cases, understanding the role of the means and methods of state-organized violence. Without this kind of inquiry, photographs become just another reminder of the evil and painful aspects of human nature and life. (According to Sontag this is indeed the fate of many photographs. The actual events and their causes are forgotten, all that remain are images fixed in memory.)<sup>25</sup>

For all these reasons, I believe that it is very significant that the pictures, documents and oral testimonies were exhibited at Karşı Sanat along with Dilek Güven's study (and that the book of the archive was published with Güven's foreword). Photographs may seem to invite us to share the experience they depict; however, they only allow us to see a limited appearance of it from within another context and a certain distance. But at the same time, they bring events from what seems like a distant past and a remote place somewhat closer, render them familiar and thus can facilitate their association with the present. Mihail Vasiliadis told me that since he had witnessed the actual events of September 6-7 in İstanbul, the pictures on display did not have much of an effect on him. Still, he believed that they may assist viewers in imagining the fear of the victims who, not knowing that their attackers were instructed not to kill, were afraid that along with their homes, shops and other belongings, they would lose their lives. While the photographs and oral testimonies enable us to listen to and imagine to a certain extent the experience of the victims and witnesses, the book draws on the evidence in the photographs and the documents to provide a framework in which we can make sense of all of this.

This is when the exhibition venue becomes political. As I have tried to explain with reference to Sontag, when pictures of poverty, pain and atrocity are exhibited without such a framework, as they often are, the reaction of the viewer (if not already acquainted with the framework) will be limited to sympathy and perhaps sorrow. Sontag asks what to do when it is not possible for us to immediately intervene to stop the suffering and injustice we view in photographs, either because it is in the distant past or occurring in distant lands. Her answer is to contemplate, to be aware that we live in a world where these things have been experienced and continue to be experienced, to think about who caused the exhibited atrocities and how they can be brought to an end. Writing about the release of new photographs of a past event, as was the case in the exhibition discussed here, Sontag states: "... photographs help construct – and revise – our sense

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<sup>23</sup> Sontag writes that everybody who is fairly familiar with the Spanish Civil War can summon to mind Robert Capa's photograph of a Loyalist soldier at the moment of death. In a similar way, prior to the release of the photographs discussed in this article, I believe the events of September 6-7 were remembered with the image of heaps of fabric and wreckage covering İstiklal Avenue. According to Sontag, one reason for this is, "In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form of remembering it." (Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (London: Penguin, 2004), pp. 19-20.)

<sup>24</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977); John Berger, Jean Mohr, *Another Way of Telling*.

<sup>25</sup> "Eventually the specificity of the photographs' accusations will fade; the denunciation of a particular conflict and attribution of specific crimes will become a denunciation of human cruelty, human savagery as such." (*Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 109.)



of a more distant past, with the posthumous shocks engineered by the hitherto unknown photographs. Photographs that everyone recognises are now a constituent part of what a society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about."<sup>26</sup>

We could argue that this was the very aim of the exhibition "Events of September 6-7 on their Fiftieth Anniversary." Also, it is obvious that this is what the attacks targeting the exhibition and other similar events (such as the conference on "Ottoman Armenians during the Decline of the Empire" or TESEV's press conference related to the publication on forced migration) were intended to prevent. It seems to me that the method of the attack on this exhibition, namely the damaging of the photographs, make it clear that the attack was meant to preserve the dual order of truth about which Ahıska writes. We can think that the photographs were attacked because as material evidence they make it impossible to deny what took place. And yet once made public, their destruction does not invalidate their evidentiary status. In this case, it does not even guarantee that they are seen by fewer people, because the original prints remain undamaged and can be infinitely reproduced. Moreover, some of them are already published online and have therefore entered a network of circulation the limits of which cannot be mapped. On that account, the damage inflicted on the reproductions is in fact a threat made to those who betrayed a national secret. It draws its power from the determination to preserve "truth" and official history as set out by the powers that be, unchallenged by both archives and memory, as illustrated by the attackers shouting "don't defend those who set fire to Atatürk's house," in reference to a scheme drawn to provoke and legitimise the events of September 6-7, 1955.

Translated from Turkish by Başak Ertür