

Said Nursi

By [Abdürrahim Özer](#)

Okur, *Sait*

(Molla Said-i Kürdi, Bediüzzaman Said-i Kürdi, Said Nursi)

Kurdish Islamic scholar, theologian

Died 23 March 1960 in Şanlıurfa, Turkey

Summary

Said Nursi was a prominent Kurdish intellectual. He fervently supported constitutionalism and sought to improve the Kurds' condition during the late Ottoman Empire. After World War I and the consequent fall of the Ottoman Empire, Nursi founded the "Nurcu" ("Followers of the Divine Light") movement and sought to revive Islamic thought in a secular state.

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Early Life

Said Nursi, officially Sait Okur (1878-1960), was born in the village of Nurs/Nors (Kepirli after 1928) in the Hizan district of Bitlis. He was one of seven siblings in a family of modest background. Having failed at his attempts to obtain an *icâzetname* (traditional diploma), Nursi continued his education through brief visits to a number of madrasahs and short-lived contacts and discussions with notable local sheikhs. His pugnacious character, intensity, and quick wit enabled him to make a name for himself. Nursi's intellectual development continued further under the protection and patronage of the governor of Van, [Tahir Pasha \(1847-1913\)](#). During his visit to Mardin in the early 1890s, Nursi became acquainted with political issues related to the state of the [Ottoman Empire](#) and the Islamic world in general. He was affiliated with the *Kadiri* Sufi order in his youth and later influenced by the ideas of [Namık Kemal \(1840-1888\)](#) and [Jamal al-Din al-Afgani \(1839-1897\)](#).

Constitutional Period

Nursi remained in Van from 1897 to 1907. In late 1907, he arrived in Istanbul. During his stay in the capital, he quickly became acquainted with Kurdish intellectuals and the Kurdish community and joined the *Kürd Teavün ve Terakki Cemiyeti* (Kurdish Society for Mutual Aid and Progress). However, Nursi's conspicuous appearance and activities aroused suspicion and resulted in his detainment by the [Ottoman government](#). The Hamidian regime perceived Nursi as a potential troublemaker and ordered him to return to Van, but he refused to comply.

From the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 onwards, Nursi became an enthusiastic supporter of the constitutional regime. He published articles in various newspapers emphasizing the importance of *meşveret* (consultation) in Islamic tradition. Most of his articles during this period dealt with the importance of the Shariah, the necessity of education, and the needs of the Kurds. He applied for permission to publish a newspaper called *Marifet ve İttihad-ı Ekrad* (Kurdish Fulfillment and Unity) in early 1909 but later joined *İttihad-ı Muhammedi* (Muhammedan Union) and published his articles in *Volkan* (Volcano), the Union's mouthpiece. He was put on trial after the counterrevolution of 1909 (31 March incident), but was acquitted of all charges.

In 1910, Nursi returned to Van with an agenda to propagate constitutionalism and legitimate the new regime's alliance with the Armenians among the Kurdish population. In 1911, he travelled to Damascus to give a sermon in the Umayyad Mosque to quell the then rising Arab [nationalism](#). That same year he accompanied [Mehmed V, Sultan of the Turks \(1844-1918\)](#) on his imperial visit to Kosovo.

Caucasus Front in World War I

Nursi established his own madrasah in Van on the eve of World War I. When the Ottoman Empire entered the war, Nursi volunteered and served in the 3rd Army as a [battalion imam](#). He returned from Erzurum to Van before the Armenians took control of the city in May 1915. He evacuated the city together with Governor [Cevdet Pasha \(-1955\)](#), retreated towards Gevaş/Vostan, and clashed with the Armenian volunteers in his hometown Ispart/Spargerd. When the Russian advance commenced in early 1916, the governor of Bitlis, Memduh Pasha, commissioned Nursi to retrieve [artillery](#) pieces from Muş to be used in the defense of Bitlis. When Russian forces invaded Bitlis after a surprise attack on the night of 3 March 1916, Nursi was wounded and had to surrender with his remaining four disciples.

Consequently, he was brought to Tbilisi through Van as a [prisoner of war](#). Thanks to the efforts of Memduh Pasha, he received aid from the [Hilal-i Ahmer](#) (Red Crescent) during his

captivity. Nursi was taken to Kostroma, 350 kilometers northeast of Moscow, and remained there a little more than a year. Initially he was accommodated with the other Ottoman officers in the camp but later retreated to the mosque of a nearby Tatar village. Like many other Ottoman prisoners of war, he managed to escape after the [February Revolution](#) and returned to Istanbul in June 1918.

Nursi's affiliation, if there was any, to the [Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa](#) (Special Organization) and his attitude towards Armenian civilians during the war are still matters of debate. It is not possible to make a definitive conclusion on either issue without further evidence. Although he had very close relations to the people who were involved in the Special Organization, whether he was assigned to any specific operational duty is unknown. Nursi was present in four critical cities, namely Erzurum, Van, Muş, and Bitlis, during the spring and summer of 1915, when the infamous [atrocities against the Armenians were committed](#). According to his own testimony, he tried to save Armenian women and children in Bitlis from being massacred. To what extent he was successful in this endeavor remains unclear, similar to his attitude towards other Armenian civilians.

Post-War Life in the Ottoman Empire

Nursi was commissioned to work in the newly founded *Dârü'l-Hikmeti'l-İslamiye* (The Islamic Academy) immediately after his return to Istanbul and remained a member of this commission until its abolition. He published an epistle against the British invasion of Constantinople and supported the *Milli Mücadele* (National Movement). A few days after the abolition of the Sultanate in 1922, Nursi travelled to Ankara and was welcomed in the parliament. However, his vision of an Islamic Republic contradicted [Mustafa Kemal's \(-1938\)](#) plans, so he parted ways with the new regime.

Republican Era

In 1924, Nursi returned to Van after a brief visit to Istanbul. He retreated from public and political life to live in seclusion. He was exiled to Burdur after the Sheikh Said rebellion in 1926 even though he was not involved. This exile opened a new chapter in Nursi's life and also resulted in the emergence of a new religious movement, later called *Nurculuk* (Followers of the Divine Light), in the 1930s. Nursi embraced a new cognomen for himself and in place of *Kürdi* (Kurdish), he adopted his village name to become Said Nursi. He gradually transformed himself from a Kurdish Islamic intellectual to the centennial *mujaddid* (renewer) of the 14th-century *hijra*. Republican reforms alienated him further from public life. He faced trial because of his works, the *Risale-i Nur* (The Epistles of Light) collection, several times up until 1956. In the 1950s, he once again became actively involved in politics, openly

supporting the Democrat Party, opposing Kemalism and the Republican People's Party as well as anti-communist rhetoric. He died in Urfa on 23 March 1960.

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