

SCARS OF A PUTSCH

Director Nathalie Borgers

Austria, Belgium | 2025

102 min. | German, French, Turkish with English subtitles

Screenplay Nathalie Borgers. **Cinematography** Klemens Koscher, Johannes Hammel. **Editing** Rudi Maerten. **Sound** Ibrahim Kahraman Tong Zhang. **Producer** Ralph Wieser. **Executive Producers** Ralph Wieser, Olivier Dubois. **Co-Producer** Olivier Dubois. **Production company** Mischief Films (Wien, Austria). **With** Abidin Ertuğrul, Nathalie Borgers, Cahit Akçam, Perihan Akçam, Yeter Güneş.

World sales Wallonie Image Production / Belgian Docs

Synopsis

History has left scars on the body of Abidin Ertuğrul, the partner of director Nathalie Borgers. Her film follows these scars back to the Turkey of the 1970s, when Ertuğrul was forced out of the bus taking him to university by a fascist militia and hit by seven bullets. On 12 September 1980, the Turkish military carries out another putsch. The images of rallies and demonstrations give way to footage of mass arrests. In the meantime, the world outside applauds the former chief of general staff and new president Kenan Evren for the neo-liberal reforms that he pushes through. Borgers reconstructs the atmosphere of tension before the putsch and the ever more tangible repression afterwards, drawing lines of connection to the rise of Erdoğan and the authoritarian present. With impressive historical footage from international archives and in conversations full of warmth and openness, SCARS OF A PUTSCH traces out the tradition of democratic movements in Turkey, which have endured with great persistence despite all the violence of the state. (Fabian Tietke)

Nathalie Borgers, born 1964 in Brussels. Initially, she worked as a journalist for Belgian television (RTBF). Moved to San Francisco in 1987, where she studied radio, film & television, receiving the student award for „Documentary Writing“. She completed her M.A. in 1990. Made several short documentaries with Atrium Productions as director & producer. Working as an independent film maker in Paris from 1991. Since 2011, she lives permanently in Vienna. Since 2020, teaching at the Paris film school La Fémis, workshop „Concevoir un projet documentaire“ (Drafting A Documentary Project).

Films: 2005: Das Arrangement / The Arrangement. 2008: Winds of Sand, Women of Rock. 2011: Liebesgrüße aus den Kolonien / Greetings from the Colony. 2015: Fang den Haider / Catching Haider. 2019: The Remains – After the Odyssey. 2025: Scars of a Putsch.

Director's Statement

To Find a Meaning in the Scars

Connect the threads, break the silence and look back at a fundamental event that had been forgotten

In 2008, I met my future husband, Abidin, a Turk who had fled to Austria thirty years earlier, after the coup in 1980. Although he seemed firmly rooted in his host country, Turkey would not let him go. He was concerned about the future of his homeland, hoped that his country would turn towards democratic values and saw how it was moving further away from this every day.

In the 1970s, Abidin was part of the student movement that wanted to shape Turkey into a free and democratic country in which social justice prevailed. His activities as an opposition activist led to him being shot by a far-right militia. As he fell to the ground, one of his attackers stepped close to him to kill him with six more bullets at close range. But Abidin survived. He resumed the fight after his convalescence until the military coup on September 12, 1980 put an end to the dream of an entire generation.

I didn't know much about the political complexity of his country. I had images of Turkey in my mind's eye of the banks of the Bosphorus, the sweetness of life in the shade of olive trees and the scents of the Orient. Turkey appeared to me as a secular nation with a diverse natural beauty and a fascinating cultural richness.

In 2008, when Abidin and I met, Erdogan was prime minister and the Western world wanted to see him as the man who would create the synthesis between Islam and democracy. But Abidin was more aware than anyone else of the authoritarian tendencies of the Turkish state and the inevitable regression that a political project like this could mean: "Political Islam as such is an overall project that regulates society as a whole, and its application in politics naturally leads to a totalitarian state." He raged against the Europeans who supported the prime minister instead of helping an opposition that had been suppressed for years.

Europeans had fallen into the Islamists' trap. Today, they watch in amazement at the authoritarian drift of Turkey into a country with an ultra-liberal economy. An economy that solely serves the interests of a grateful oligarchy whose power is based on the influence of radical Islam. Supported by this, Erdogan sees himself in the role of an international spiritual leader. His religious conservatism has become a strong mobilizing force, and his "neo-Ottoman" foreign policy is opening up spheres of influence in the former territories of the Ottoman Empire, especially in the Middle East.

For Abidin and his fellow fighters at the time, the decline of Turkey began after the coup of September 12, 1980, when the junta laid the foundations for political Islam and prepared the ideological ground for a man like Erdogan. This is not just Abidin's subjective personal feeling. Turkish historians agree on this point, and I am always amazed at the ignorance of Europeans towards the countries of the Middle East, especially

Turkey. I do not exclude myself from this. And that in view of the hundreds of thousands of Turks who have become our citizens or neighbors. I have realized how little I knew about the life of my husband, this former "revolutionary", even though we had been married for ten years.

This film has offered me the rare and special opportunity to experience and present a great European history through the personal story of Abidin's life. It was my desire to understand the process that brought Turkey to where it is today and to find meaning in the scars that cover my husband's body. After 45 years of ignorance, it was time to connect the threads of the great story, break the silence and look back at this fundamental event that had been forgotten.

Nathalie Borgers

Starting Position/Historical Context

by Nathalie Borgers

2025 marks the 45th anniversary of the military putsch in Turkey on 12 September 1980. Only a few newspapers have so far taken an interest in its importance. Yet, this event is an essential key to understanding Turkey's drifting away today. The military putsch marked a break with the country's contemporary history and fundamentally changed the Turkish state apparatus. It introduced a new political, economic, and social era which continues to persist four decades later.

With extraordinary violence, the military junta shut down opposition parties and media companies, outlawed unions, imprisoned hundreds of thousands of people, and systematically tortured leftist activists. This suffocated the infrastructure that could ultimately have led to a social democracy on the European model. General Kenan Evren was freed by this opposition and worked on a new constitution which he labelled democratic, but which in reality founded an authoritarian and autocratic regime. The ostensible fundamental freedoms were dependent upon the condition of not endangering the state – a status that, once again, the state alone could judge.

Today, this constitution remains the foundation of the Turkish government. President Erdogan can thus label any criticism of his policies as an attack on the integrity of the state and throw suspects in jail without trial. In this regard, the country's situation is dramatic: All the leaders and representatives of the only opposition party, the HDP, currently find themselves in jail or in exile despite democratic elections. The same goes for all critical voices, be they academics, journalists, lawyers, spokespeople from chambers of commerce, or unionists.

At that time, the Turkish army, which held power from 1980 to 1983, not only eliminated the opposition, it also ensured the liberalisation of the country's economy as well as the Islamisation of society. After bloody repression threw the country into a state of terror, the junta was able to implement the measures for "neo-liberalisation" the International Monetary Fund had wanted for decades. These measures consisted in massive privatisation, wage cuts, the elimination of workers' rights, cuts in public funding for education and health, etc. To achieve this goal, the junta sought out support amongst the most conservative forces in the country, including religious brotherhoods, which were even legalised as a result. Furthermore, an obligation for a Sunni Islam religious education in primary schools was embedded in the new constitution. This was in harmony with America's Green Belt Policy to combat communism by supporting political Islam in the border regions of the USSR.

It is worth noting the fact that back then there was little discussion about the true reasons behind the putsch and its

consequences. Actually, Western countries were happy with the putsch. Meanwhile, the taking of power by an authoritarian and pro-American regime in Turkey, which guaranteed the protection of Western interests from turbulence, could only calm alliances in the very tense international context. The putsch was even prepared with NATO's help. Publicly, this meant: only the army can liberate the country from the violence between 'radical leftists and extremist, right-wing militias' who also butted heads in street fights. The coup on 12 September 1980 was justified in this way and the army was portrayed as the sole guarantor of the Republic.

The official discourse, including all literature and articles in the press about the putsch, portrayed the different opposing groups on the same level. But nothing is further from the truth. If the situation at the origin of the junta's intervention actually deteriorated into a "street war" between opposing fractions, this is because the extremist, right-wing militias the authorities had begun instrumentalising in 1975 systematically attempted to kill leftist opponents of the regime. Only in the last few decades has research been done into how these events actually occurred. This research now confirms their accuracy. The book *La violence politique en Turquie: L'État en jeu 1975-1980* (Political Violence in Turkey: The State in Action, 1975-1980) by political scientist Benjamin Gourisse provides evidence to prove that both participating groups did not have access to the same resources or measures. The one group was supported and coordinated by the MHP, an ultra-nationalist party in power at the time, while the other saw its access to government and state authorities revoked. This major difference questions both the kind and nature of the violence which led to the putsch as well as the putsch itself – above all, the ideological connectivity between the extremist, right-wing militias and the officers behind the putsch is now beyond doubt.

It is also surprising that Turkey has never undertaken any work of collectively recalling its authoritarian past, as has been and still is the case in Argentina, Chile, and Poland, or even closer, in Germany.

Nevertheless, even if the approach remains very marginal, a few people today are trying to document the 1980s.

For example, Turkish-German sociologist Elifcan Karacan, the daughter of leftist activists who had to flee the country at the time, gathered recollections of victims of the putsch of their years in prison or under torture. She published her study in 2018. (*Erinnerung an den türkischen Militärputsch von 1980: Erinnerung, Gewalt und Trauma* [Recollections of the Turkish Military Putsch of 1980: Recollection, Violence, and Trauma]).

SCARS OF A PUTSCH comes out of a context of working on memory and in a time period when the upswing in repression and the increasingly glaring Islamisation of Turkey forces us to look at the past in order to understand the present situation.

Because the consequences of the putsch – especially the country's 're-Islamisation' and the strengthening of nationalist ideology, which started on the first day of the military junta's taking of power in 1980 – has led to a social dichotomy between ultra-nationalists and supporters of democracy, which is even being played out today in Turkish communities across the European territory.