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"HISTORICAL ARCHIVES AND THE HISTORIANS' COMMISSION TO INVESTIGATE THE ARMENIAN EVENTS OF 1915"

(*"1915 ERMENİ OLAYLARININ ARAŞTIRILMASIYLA İLGİLİ
OLARAK TARİHİ ARŞİVLER VE TARİHÇİLER KOMİSYONU"*)

Author: Yücel Güçlü, *Historical Archives and the Historians'
Commission to Investigate The Armenian Events of 1915*
(London: University Press of America, 2015), 360 pp.

Yücel Güçlü's book, titled *Historical Archives and the Historians' Commission to Investigate the Armenian Events Of 1915*, has been composed with the use of archives and databases in Turkey, United Kingdom, Russia, and Armenia. When we look at the general context of the book, Güçlü provides to the reader detailed information about the progress in the indexing and the current situation of the historical documents in the archives of the abovementioned countries. This information allows the reader to make a comparison about the level of openness of the archives and see the comments of the scholars who benefited or tried to benefit from them. In general, Güçlü points out to the importance of carrying joint historical research in order to uncover the facts that will be instrumental in moving forward Turkish-Armenian relations, which is a process that started within the framework of Zurich Protocols in 2009.

In the first nine chapters of the book, Güçlü expresses how meticulous the research on the archives have been conducted, starting from the times of the Ottoman Empire up until today. This research has been conducted by using various documents located in a wide array of sources such as tax registers, Yıldız Palace Archive, Military Archives, Prime Ministry's Ottoman Archive (BOA), Muslim Court Records etc., as well by using the

works of many Turkish and non-Turkish scholars who focus on Ottoman studies. In this respect, Güçlü gives very detailed information about the history of archive management in Turkey.

What is striking in these chapters are the budget dedicated to documenting all these works, the number of people who accessed and benefited from the archives, and the systematic registration of everything in the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey. This is an important initiative welcomed by many people, as it is a step towards taking historical discussions to a more sophisticated different level. For instance, in his speech he made on 20 February 1990,¹ US Senator Robert Byrd stated that “*in the last year, the Government of the Republic of Turkey has opened the Ottoman Archives spanning the World War 1 era*” and added; “*So there is a new information freely available which could help historians make a determination about this (Armenian) matter.*”

In addition, while expressing his views on the subject on the next day, US Senator Timothy Wirth stated;

“The relevant documents in the Ottoman archives are being made accessible to researchers. That commitment has been made by the Turkish Government. The Turkish Government has responded to calls for these documents and has invested significant resources into cataloging four centuries of archives relating to Armenians. All documents through 1895 have so far been catalogued. This process is ongoing. I think the Turkish Government has certainly been forthcoming on this front.”²

While providing a guideline on which documents to look for and how to use the relevant search engines, Güçlü also underlines an important concern; some scholars wonder whether there are full sets of documents without any missing parts/information included in the catalogues. On this issue, Güçlü states;

“As noted above, most of the relevant documents are contained in bound, consecutively paginated registers. For example, each decision taken by the Council of Ministers was recorded daily in such registers. Were even a single document to be missing, a simple perusal of the page numbers would reveal that fact. In short, allegation was nothing but a “smoke screen” advanced by the resolution’s proponents.”³

1 Yücel Güçlü, *Historical Archives and the Historians' Commission to Investigate The Armenian Events of 1915* (London: University Press of America, 2015), p. 33.

2 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 33.

3 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 39.

Considering how carefully the documentation and registration has been done, as it has been explained in this book, Güçlü's answer is persuasive. Additionally, according to Güçlü, between the years 1984-1989, the Turkish Government allocated over 20 million dollars to a massive program to declassify and catalog all documents covering the period from 1691 to 1894, and these documents are all available to interested scholars.⁴ Comments of the academics who accessed these archives⁵ support Güçlü's statements and gives the reader an idea about the open position of Turkey on historical facts.

In the following chapters (until Chapter 10), Güçlü touches upon present-day documents and cases that inform on the discussions concerning Turkish-Armenian relations, such as the verdict of the European Court of Human Rights on the *Perinçek v. Switzerland* case.⁶ What we understand from these chapters is that, during the Ottoman times, information about both Muslim and Non-Muslim people had been registered very precisely and meticulously, and the Republic of Turkey dedicated an important amount of time and money to open them for academic use. Güçlü presents this fact in a easily understandable manner.

Chapter 10, titled "Armenian Depositories", gives information about the resources and databases related to Turkish-Armenian relations, which located mainly in Armenia, but also in the Armenian libraries in different countries such as the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem. The situation in these places is rather different than Turkey. Armenia's various archives and libraries are not as welcoming as the ones in Turkey. For example, Taner Akçam stated;

*"The archive [archives of the Armenian Patriarchate in Jerusalem] is unfortunately not open to all researchers. For this reason, it is difficult to state with any authority the extent of its holdings. There is no need to emphasize the wrongness of such an indefensible policy as the denial of access to such a potentially valuable sources."*⁷

As even Akçam reveals, who is an ardent supporter of the genocide narrative regarding the the events of 1915, most of the Armenian documents are either not available or are difficult to access. Güçlü gives a very striking example of this in his book titled *The Türkyılmaz Case, A Turkish Scholar Harassed in Yerevan*. This Turkish scholar obtained permission to access archives in

4 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 32.

5 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, pp. 47-50.

6 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, pp. 42-50.

7 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 121.

Armenia in 2005, but after his work was done in the archives, he was nevertheless detained at the Zvartnots Airport by Armenia's National Security Service. The National Security Service claimed that he was not allowed to take the copies of the documents he collected during his research outside of Armenia. This event created reactions in academic circles.⁸ Such a reaction is to be expected, as organizations such as the International Crisis Group encourage scholars to do more academic works on Turkish-Armenian relations.⁹ Güçlü states that even though some documents in the archives in Armenia are available for access, further guidelines are needed to use them efficiently. The International Crisis Group also touches upon the archives in US, Russia, and the UK within the framework of the recommendations they gave on Turkish-Armenian relations,¹⁰ which leads the reader to the following two chapters.

Chapter 11 and 12 are dedicated to the archives, documents, and depositories in the UK and Russia. For the UK, Güçlü gives detailed information about which documents to find in what location. Additionally, he expresses the importance of the closed-EMSIB¹¹ archives. He concludes Chapter 11 with the Malta Deportations as a historical case and the decisions on the “absence of evidence” with some statements made by the British officials serving in İstanbul in 1920s.¹² In Chapter 12, Güçlü gives information on the opening of the Soviet Union's archives. In 1989, for the first time, foreign scholars were admitted to the normal reading rooms of the state archives and, again in 1989, some scholars (very limited in number) were able to access the central party archives.¹³ However, they gave mixed reports about the documents present in the archives and the situation of the archives. Some important examples of the works produced with the help of the Russian documents include the ones of Mehmet Perinçek,¹⁴ who was able to conduct research in the Russian archives on Turkish-Armenian history. The work of the European Azerbaijan Society (TEAS) is also substantial in this regard. TEAS published a three-volume

8 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 123.

9 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 127.

10 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 127.

11 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, pp. 133-135. Also see; “KV 1. Imperial Overseas Intelligence 1915-1919: Eastern Mediterranean Special Intelligence Bureau”, NationalArchives.gov.uk, 1921, <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/details/r/C3973360>

12 High-ranking Ottoman officials, accused of mistreating Armenians, were taken to Malta and were to be tried by the British. However, despite intense efforts by the British to find incriminating evidence, the Ottoman officials were let go once it was realized that there was no evidence that could substantiate the accusations of mistreatment leveled against them. Please see; Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 137.

13 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 142.

14 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 155.

archive study titled *The Armenian Question in the Caucasus: Russian Archive Documents and Publications*. Güçlü concludes his remarks and the information given in this chapter by underlining the importance of the Russian archives, considering the influence and interest of Russia in the region. Chapter 12, like the other chapters, provides guidelines for doing further research on the Russian archives.

Until Chapter 19 (starting from Chapter 12), Güçlü mostly talks about the developments in the last decade and next steps to be taken on Turkish-Armenian relations. Chapter 19 is dedicated to the “collapse” of the Zurich Protocols signed between Turkey and Armenia. Güçlü indicates that it was a “stillborn” initiative with nevertheless good intentions. Armenian officials of the time were rather skeptical about the whole idea of rapprochement, as even contemplating about posing the question of whether what happened in 1915 was a “genocide” or not was not –and is still not- acceptable for Armenians. In the last three chapters, Güçlü gives suggestions about the future of the Turkish-Armenian relations based on the idea of creating a “sub-commission” working on the historical documents. He also summarizes the general idea prevalent in the international community on this topic, including many officials’ statements and declarations. One of the important ones, which gives a concrete idea about the position, which should be adopted by the international community as well, is US Whitehouse Spokesperson Mike Hamer’s statement that he made on 27 February 2010;

*“Our interest remains the achievement of a full, frank, and just acknowledgement of the facts. We continue to believe that the best way to advance that goal is for the Armenian and Turkish people to address the facts of the past as a part of their ongoing efforts to normalize the relations.”*¹⁵

As Güçlü explains, even though Turkey is a rather young country in the international context, its history is still subject to questioning, and particularly when the Armenian question comes up to the agenda, Ottoman heritage is brought up as a binding link to the history of the Republic of Turkey. According to this approach, Turkey’s Ottoman heritage should not be taken into account separately from modern Turkey’s history. Nevertheless, even if one was to assume that this approach is valid, one should not try to manipulate historical facts with political motivations. In this respect, the following sentence by Güçlü grabs attention; *“Writing scholarly history should not be about one’s own experiences and eyewitness accounts, [scholarly history is about] the systematic*

15 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 247.

examination of surviving written sources of the past.”¹⁶ This can be taken as the exact summary of Güçlü’s book and the reason why he wrote it.

Güçlü does not only delve into the issue of the progress in indexing historical documents, he also compiles the recent developments, statements of the academics and the high level officials on the Turkish-Armenian issue, related declarations, events, and other relevant documents in one book, which in total provide a wide perspective to the reader on this issue. By doing this, Güçlü also gives a rich list of resources that will enrich the academic literature and discussions on this issue. Therefore, this book should be one of the main sources for people who are curious about the 1915 events and its reflections on the current and future relations between Armenians and Turks. Güçlü not only includes Turkish and Armenian archives to his study, he also includes Russian and British, and also many others.

In order to understand history, it is more appropriate to make a wider research and examine the databases of the actors, besides the Ottoman Empire and Republic of Turkey, which were somehow involved in the regional developments at that time. Both the UK and Russia, were actors with a special interest for the region in which the Ottoman Empire was located. Hence, both of these countries have a rich database concerning the issue at hand. Unfortunately, not all archives are open, but still, there is considerable amount of resources to be found regarding the historical facts related with the Armenian issue. Güçlü directs and guides the reader on how to find the relevant sources, as well as helps the reader to understand within which context to evaluate them. Moreover, he helps the reader to understand the past and the present of the Turkish-Armenian relations with the help of the related documents and the progress that has been made -or that is attempted to be made- by Turkey, Armenia, and the international community. By doing so, coming back to his core motivation, Güçlü explains the reason why working on historical documents is important for building a better future amongst people who have diverging interpretations on history.

16 Güçlü, *Historical Archives*, p. 262.