

The Ottoman Archives Debate and the Armenian Genocide



Ara Sarafian

This paper is an account of an ongoing controversy regarding the place of Ottoman archives in discussions of the Armenian Genocide. The paper argues that an “Ottoman archives debate” has been created by the Turkish state and its agents as part of an ongoing campaign in the denial of the Genocide. Drawing on the author’s personal experiences in Ottoman archives, the paper argues that Ottoman archives are not open to intellectually honest scrutiny, and that they nonetheless tend to corroborate Western records on the Armenian Genocide.

The “Ottoman archives debate” was initiated in the United States on 19 May 1985 in a newspaper advertisement over the signatures of sixty-nine academics who had no specialized knowledge of late Ottoman Armenian affairs. The advertisement announced the imminent opening of Ottoman archives in Turkey and the resolution thereby of the “Armenian Genocide issue.” The Turkish prime minister, Turgut Özal, had already promised, a year earlier, to open up such archives, and the Turkish foreign minister, Mesut Yılmaz, undertook to make collections available to Western repositories on microfilm. In a letter dated 29 September 1989, the Turkish ambassador to the United States, Nüzhet Kandemir, again claimed that

the Turkish government has recently announced its decision to open Ottoman archives related to Armenians for academic research. . . . We expect the opening of the Ottoman archives will enable historians to reach their own conclusions concerning the controversy over the events

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which happened in eastern Anatolia during the closing decades of the Ottoman Empire.¹

It has always been the case that historians working on the Armenian Genocide could have benefited greatly from unfettered access to Ottoman state records, if such records had been accessible. Having refused access to such records for decades, now the Turkish state was arguing that no legitimate historical conclusions could be reached without consulting such materials, and thus the public must withhold judgment on the veracity of the Armenian Genocide. This argument was echoed by Turkish state organizations, Turkish newspapers, and individuals predisposed to support the Turkish state. The Turkish government added weight to these assertions by committing itself to declassifying Ottoman records on Armenians and introducing new regulations to facilitate access to such materials.²

In one of many statements on this subject, the Turkish prime minister, Turgut Özal, stated:

I am sure you will agree that the study of such events of the past [i.e., the treatment of Armenians in 1915] should be left to historians. When I came to power the Ottoman Archives were closed to the public. The Armenian propaganda used to exploit this against us. As you know it was my government which opened the Archives for academic research. This should also facilitate an objective and factual assessment of the events in question. There has never been an intention on our part to distort the truth. Now it is up to the scholars to bring the facts to light. The Turkish Government can only welcome it.³

To anyone taking these statements at face value, it might have seemed that the Turkish state was committing itself to addressing the legacy of the Armenian Genocide within the academic arena.

State, Academia, and Genocide

Throughout this period, however, the same authorities remained intimately involved in buttressing the Turkish nationalist position in the denial of the Armenian Genocide.⁴ A clear link existed between the denial of the Armenian Genocide,

¹ *Turkish Review Quarterly Digest* (Ankara, Directorate General of Press and Information), Winter 1989, p. 119.

² *Official Gazette*, 18 Sept. 1989, issue 20286, decision number 89/14269, "Regulations Governing Individuals and Institutions of Turkish and Foreign Citizenship Wishing to Conduct research in the State Archives of the Turkish Republic." Regarding these new regulations, see Alan W. Fisher, "Research Access in Turkey," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (September 1990), pp. 139–60.

³ Özal to U.S. President Bush, letter dated 9 Nov. 1989, in *Turkish Review Quarterly Digest*, Winter 1989, p. 143.

⁴ They did so through such organizations as the Turkish Historical Society; the General Directorate of the Prime Ministry Archives; the Prime Ministry Directorate General of Press and Information (Ankara); the General Staff Press of the Turkish Army; the Foreign Policy Institute (Ankara); Ankara Chamber of Commerce; the *TBMM Journal*; numerous university press, newspapers, nonprofit and private organizations, etc.

anti-Armenian publications from Turkey, and the “Ottoman archives debate.” The common denominator in each case was the agency of the Turkish state.⁵ For example, Şinasi Orel, the individual charged with putting together Ottoman archives on Armenians, was not an impartial scholar but, rather, a retired Turkish diplomat and a confirmed Turkish nationalist author whose position on Armenians and the Armenian Genocide was a matter of record. According to Orel, the charge of genocide had no substance, as it was “based from its outset on nothing more than a series of forged documents.”⁶ He informed his readers that had the Armenian Genocide taken place, many foreigners in the Ottoman Empire would have borne witness to it and publicized it throughout the world.⁷ His inference was that such was not the case. The history of the Armenian Genocide, according to Orel, was simply a product of Armenian propaganda and the gullibility of Western academics in being influenced by Armenians.⁸ He maintained that no records exist on the Armenian Genocide because it was an event that never occurred and therefore could hardly be supported by documents.⁹ Clearly, the Turkish government compromised itself when it raised the Ottoman archives debate in the 1980s and appointed Orel as the chief architect to organize Ottoman archival materials on Armenians.¹⁰

Just as the appointment of Orel compromised the Turkish government’s position, so did the appointment of İsmail Binark as the general director of the Turkish State Archives. Binark, like Orel, claims that the Armenian Genocide

⁵ For one case study of the activities of the Turkish government in subverting the academic process in Turkey and abroad, see Speros Vryonis, Jr., *The Turkish State and History: Clio Meets the Grey Wolf*, (Thessalonike: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1991). The chief agent of this subversion in the United States was Heath Lowry of the Institute of Turkish Studies, now Atatürk Professor of Ottoman and Turkish History at Princeton University. Lowry was exposed in this role following a clerical error at the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C. when his correspondence file with the Turkish ambassador was inadvertently sent to an American scholar. See Roger W. Smith, Erik Markusen, and Robert Jay Lifton, “Professional Ethics and the Denial of the Armenian Genocide,” *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 1 (1995), pp. 1–22.

⁶ Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca, *The Talat Paşa Telegrams: Historical Fact or Armenian Fiction?* (Nicosia: K. Rustem & Brother, 1986).

⁷ Orel insisted that “German, American, Austrian, and Swiss missionaries and charitable organizations were present in almost every corner of Anatolia throughout this period [1915–16]. Further, these groups were even granted permission to assist and provide services to the relocated Armenians. Given the widespread nature of these missionary organizations in Anatolia, this factor alone would have been sufficient to ensure that any ill-treatment to which the Armenians were subjected would have been broadcast worldwide immediately.” Orel and Yuca, *The Talat Paşa Telegrams*, p. 121.

⁸ “The patterns under which the Armenian propagandists operate are well established: anything, including the production of forged documents, is permissible, as long as it serves the purpose of the ‘Armenian cause’. Unfortunately, this is just as true in the 1980s as it was in 1920. At present, Armenian circles are busily engaged in rewriting Armenian history so as to make it conform to their own dreams, aspirations, and desires. Within this effort, they see nothing wrong in trying to appropriate the culture, art, traditions, and life-styles of other nations, most especially of the Turks.” Orel and Yuca, *The Talat Paşa Telegrams*, p. 146.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ For Orel’s involvement in sifting and declassifying Ottoman records on Armenians, see Şinasi Orel, “Ermeni İddialarının Belgesel Dayanakları,” *XI Türk Tarih Kongresi, Ankara, 5–9 Eylül 1990: Kongreye Sunulan Bildiriler*, vol. 5 (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basimevi, 1994), pp. 1951–69.

thesis was based on falsified Western records and contends that historians should use only Ottoman Turkish sources for a correct evaluation of Turkish-Armenian relations.¹¹ According to Binark, the Armenian issue was the product of Armenian terrorism, hatred, propaganda, and the nobility of Turks in not defending themselves.¹² According to Binark, Ottoman archives showed the guilt of Armenians as an insidious minority—and presumably justified the mass extermination that followed from that guilt.¹³ Instead of keeping a professional distance from a discussion of Ottoman Armenians, Binark demonstrated his partisan credentials, betrayed the political dimension of his appointment as the General Director of State Archives, and compromised the Turkish government's position in the Ottoman archives debate.

The crossover between the Turkish state and Turkish academic institutions was obviously a matter of state policy. In 1986, Mesut Yılmaz, the Turkish politician, announced that a special fund had been formed primarily to make Turkish State Archives “more effective to win international public opinion for Turkey.”¹⁴ He disclosed that in 1986 alone, over 5,213,762,025 Turkish lira (over ten million U.S. dollars at that time) was budgeted for these archives, whose purpose he defined as the reflection of “the [Turkish] national point of view.”¹⁵ By 1989 Yılmaz, now prime minister of Turkey, claimed that by making Ottoman archives available to scholars, Turkey had contributed to the proof that there was not a single page that brought shame to Turks and their history.¹⁶

Clearly, the management of Ottoman archives have a political purpose outside the pursuit of scholarly knowledge, and the “Ottoman archives debate” is certainly not an exception. The promise of Ottoman records on the events of 1915 was a ruse to displace discussions of European and American sources on the Armenian Genocide, and to recast the debate in terms of Ottoman archives, which would remain under the direction of Turkish state authorities. Perhaps for this reason, the Turkish government never kept its promise to send microfilm copies of Ottoman records on the treatment of Armenians in 1915 to major

¹¹ İsmet Binark (project director), *1906–1918, Armenian Violence and Massacre in the Caucasus and Anatolia Based on Archives* (Ankara: T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, Yayın Nu: 23, 1995), p. L.

¹² Binark insists that “the silence of the Turkish people arising from the dignity of just people has been interpreted as the silence of guilty people.” Ibid.

¹³ İsmet Binark, *1906–1918, Armenian Violence and Massacre in the Caucasus and Anatolia Based on Archives*, pp. LII–LIII. Binark and his advisers have somewhat stretched the title of this publication. The work is composed of 26 reports on atrocities allegedly committed by Armenians. One report is from 1906 (Armeno-Tartar clashes of that year in the Russian empire), one is dated 6 March 1915 (referring to Kars and Ardahan), and the rest are from May 1916 and thereafter. The absence of materials in the intervening key period of the Genocide and in the chief provinces inhabited by Ottoman Armenians is quite remarkable.

¹⁴ A. Mesut Yılmaz, “Information Fund and Its Activities,” *TBMM Journal*, Ankara, October 1986, pp. 30–31.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ “Ottoman Archives Open to Public,” *Newspot: Turkish Digest*, Ankara, 18 May 1989.

Western repositories. Presumably the state decided to insulate the declassified materials from serious academic scrutiny.¹⁷

Against this background, in the 1980s several authors attempted to reintroduce the Turkish nationalist thesis on the Armenian Genocide with the following fundamental reassertions: Armenians constituted an insignificant minority in the Ottoman Empire; Ottoman Armenians, under the instigation of foreign states, became a rebellious minority in the nineteenth century; during World War I there was a civil war between Armenians and Muslims

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in the Ottoman Empire; Armenians were relocated during this period because of the threat they posed to the Ottoman war effort; the relocation of Armenians in 1915–16 was essentially successful, though there were some miscarriages of justice; a number of Armenians died during these deportations due to general war-time conditions such as malnutrition, disease, etc.

The attempts to push the discussion of the Armenian Genocide within denialist parameters and to reintroduce the Turkish nationalist thesis actually failed. This failure was not simply a result of the paucity of available records in Turkish archives upon which denialists could draw, but also because the material, for all its limitations, actually contradicted the Turkish nationalist thesis—as will be seen below. Perhaps that is why Turkish authorities have remained reluctant to allow critical scholars access to Ottoman archival materials on the Armenian Genocide, not only through Western repositories, but also inside Turkey.

Ottoman Archives: A Personal Odyssey

Having worked in the Prime Ministry Ottoman State Archives in Istanbul between December 1991 and June 1992, in January 1995, and in July 1995—until I was forced to leave in 1995—I was able to make the following observations regarding access to these records.¹⁸ There is a significant paucity of materials on

¹⁷ There are several archival collections that one would have expected the Turkish authorities to make freely available had they wanted to initiate serious discussion of Ottoman records. For example, the Ministry of Interior cipher telegram series or internal general security records (with their original registers), i.e. Dahiliye Nezareti Evraki: Şifre Kalemi, Dahiliye Emniyyet-i Umumiyye.

¹⁸ For a discussion of my first two trips to Turkish archives, see “The Issue of Access to Ottoman Archives,” *Zeitschrift für Türkeistudien* 1993, no. 1, pp. 93–99; “The Issue of Access to Ottoman Archives Revisited,” *Zeitschrift für Türkeistudien* 1995, no. 2, pp. 290–93.

Ottoman Armenians in Turkish archives today. Moreover, those materials that are available are not fully accessible. Turkish archival authorities retain the ability to withhold records from researchers and to give preferential access to others.¹⁹ All documents are preread for content before being granted to researchers and materials can be withheld by the archival authorities with impunity. Requests can simply be refused on grounds that (1) the documents requested are outside a researcher's declared subject matter; (2) the documents cannot be found; (3) the materials requested are too brittle; or (4) the items are under special treatment (whatever that may mean). On my first trip to the Prime Ministry Archives many of my requests were not honored, and the above explanations were offered. However, the systematic nature of these denials became apparent when certain types of records were consistently withheld. For example, Justin McCarthy cites eight files from the Yıldız Esas Evrakı as evidence in his book *Muslims and Minorities* yet I could not get any of these files.²⁰ When I asked for similar materials from the same collection, they were also refused. When I continued to ask for further records of the same class, the entire collection was closed, only to be opened after my departure from Turkey. Of the ninety-one files I requested from the Yıldız Esas Evrakı, fifty-eight were refused. Other materials cited by partisan scholars were also refused. For example, on my 1992 trip I asked to see the Yıldız Perakende materials cited by Kemal Karpat and was told that the collection was unavailable.²¹ Indeed, I was told that the collection was closed and had never been opened.

I submitted a report of my experiences to the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C.²² The Turkish Embassy dismissed it by citing an official communiqué from the Prime Ministry Archives—the very people who stood accused of wrongdoing.²³ When I requested on several occasions a new research visa to work at other archives in Turkey, my requests were initially ignored and later refused altogether. I was told that the materials with which I wanted to work—at five

¹⁹ For example, there are still closed collections. Often citations used by partisan authors are simply not open for examination by other researchers. The cipher telegram collection pertaining to Ottoman Armenians, discussed later in this paper, were cited by partisan scholars in the early 1980s, though the materials were not formally available in the archives until 1993. Kemal Karpat's work on Ottoman demography was significantly based on such a collection (i.e. Yıldız Perakende collection). It is my understanding that no scholar who has received such favorable treatment has acknowledged such a state of affairs in print. One could make an interesting comparison between the official catalogue of archival collections at the Prime Ministry archives and the citations of Turkish nationalist authors over the years.

²⁰ The citations were from Justin McCarthy, *Muslims and Minorities: The Population of Anatolia and the End of Empire* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1983).

²¹ Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

²² This report was subsequently published in a small German-Turkish journal, *Zeitschrift für Türkeistudien*.

²³ The formal communiqué did not address the substance of my report, and the embassy did not feel a need to make a further investigation.

different archives—were being “computerized.”²⁴ In the end, I returned to the Prime Ministry Archives with my old research pass, after certain individuals had intervened on my behalf. This time, I was actually given materials that were previously refused, though no explanation was offered for the earlier refusals. The archival authorities retained their power to withhold records with impunity, though I did not encounter the same difficulties as before. Since I now had a better access to materials, I began working on a collection of cipher telegrams from the World War I period pertaining to the treatment of Armenians.²⁵

Cipher Telegrams

The *Şifre Kalemi* or cipher telegram collection has been cited by Turkish nationalist authors to support the contention that the Ottoman government deported Armenians in 1915 with the intention of resettling rather than exterminating them, and that interior minister Talaat Pasha took a personal interest in the well-being of deportees. Talaat Pasha was actually the author of a large number of the telegrams in this collection, including orders for the deportation of individual communities, inquiries about the state of convoys, instructions regarding the direction of caravans, etc.²⁶ Indeed, authors like Kamuran Gürün who deny the Armenian Genocide have used such Ottoman records to argue that the 1915 deportations were an orderly affair, though they have not discussed the absence of information on the fate of deportees.²⁷ Amazingly, several denialists, including Gürün, have even attempted to elide such a discussion by asserting that 702,900 Armenians were successfully resettled by the end of 1916.²⁸ This assertion has been based on a single citation from the Ankara military archives—without further supporting materials.²⁹ Incredibly, an examination of the record

²⁴ I applied to the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C. for a new research visa on 11 Dec. 1992; 21 Feb. 1993; 5 March 1993; 5 April 1993; 13 Sept. 1993. My request asked to work at the Prime Ministry Archives (Istanbul); Istanbul University Archives; Istanbul Archaeological Museum Archives; Bayazit Library (Istanbul); and the Turkish General Staff Archives (Ankara).

²⁵ This collection was opened briefly in 1992, when I was at the Başbakanlık archives, but closed soon afterwards—until my departure from these archives.

²⁶ When working on these cipher telegrams, the question of original registers noting telegraphic communications with the provinces came up. Since Şinasi Orel has produced facsimile pages of these registers in his work, my colleague Hilmar Kaiser and I asked to examine the same materials. A comparison of such records would have allowed us to ascertain any difference between the original set of telegrams from 1915–16 and those declassified in Turkish archives today. We were told that the registers in question are unavailable.

²⁷ Gürün, *The Armenian File: The Myth of Innocence Exposed* (London, Nicosia, Istanbul: K. Rustem & Bro. and Weidenfeld & Nicolson Ltd.), 1985, pp. 204–14.

²⁸ Gürün, *The Armenian File*, p. 214; Turkish General Staff, *Military History Documents*, no. 81, special edition on World War I, December 1982; Bilal Şimşir, ed., *Documents* (Ankara: Prime Ministry Directorate General of Press and Information, [no date]), doc. 41, pp. 114–24; Azmi Süslü, *Ermeniler ve 1915 Tehcir Olayı* (Van: Van: Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Rektörlüğü, 1990), pp. 123–32.

²⁹ “In a report submitted by the Ministry of Interior to the Grand Vizier on 7 December 1916, it was stated that about 702,900 individuals had been relocated; in 1915 25 million kurush had been spent for this purpose; until the end of October 1916 86 million kurush had been spent, and until the end of the year 150 million kurush more would be spent.” Gürün, *The Armenian File*, p. 214.

in question reveals that the report pertains to the resettlement not of Armenians but Muslim refugees who fled from the Russian front in 1915–16. These refugees were moved, fed, vaccinated, and resettled in central and western Asia Minor, including regions cleared of their native Armenian population. If anything, this document indicates that the Ottoman government had the ability to move hundreds of thousands of people at this time. The obvious question remains why no such records are available on the hundreds of thousands of Armenians who were “deported” between 1915 and 1916.³⁰

nor, including regions cleared of their native Armenian population. If anything, this document indicates that the Ottoman government had the ability to move hundreds of thousands of people at this time. The obvious question remains why no such records are available on the hundreds of thousands of Armenians who were “deported” between 1915 and 1916.³⁰

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Turkification, Modern Turkey, and 1915

The available Ottoman records in the cipher telegrams series show that the “deportation” of Armenians in 1915 was part of a more general program for the turkification of Asia Minor.³¹ The Ottoman records confirm that as Armenians were moved out, their properties were taken over by state authorities and given mainly to Turkish, Bosnian, and Caucasian Muslim refugees. The destruction of Armenians during this period was also accompanied by measures to “redistribute” the Kurdish population for assimilation in the empire—a policy that has been implemented more successfully in the Turkish republic. The Ottoman authorities also took steps against the general Greek population of the empire. Yet no Turkish nationalist author today who has worked on these materials has even mentioned this crucial background to the period. Such glaring omissions are indicators of the negative intellectual ethos prevailing in modern Turkey and in Turkish historiography on Ottoman Armenians.

The cipher telegram records show that the Ottoman government had complete control over its subject peoples; Armenians were systematically deported and destroyed throughout 1915–16; and Talaat Pasha was in charge of deportations through a telegraphic network and an obedient state bureaucracy. Ottoman archives in Turkey corroborate the freely accessible Western sources, which provide us with a more complete picture of the systematic destruction of Ottoman Armenians in 1915.

³⁰ In fact, there are a number of reports that account for a trickle of deportees arriving at Zor in 1915, but their ultimate fate is not discussed. For a discussion of the fate of these Armenians, see Raymond H. Kévorkian, ed., *L'Extermination des déportés arméniens ottomans dans les camps de concentration de Syrie-Mésopotamie (1915–1916)*, a special issue of *Revue d'histoire arménienne contemporaine*: no. 2, 1996-1997-1998.

³¹ Hilmar Kaiser and I have both worked on this sweeping context of the Genocide. We hope to publish our results in the near future.

Modus Operandi

Perhaps I have been fortunate to have worked at the Prime Ministry Archives on Ottoman Armenians in the first place. But from the outset the archival authorities worked to impress upon me their power to curtail my research by keeping tabs on my progress and honoring my requests selectively.³² I believe that their aim was to compromise my intellectual integrity and influence me to change my research strategy. Colleagues assured me that this was the *modus operandi* of the authorities. Once it was clear that I was not going to succumb, that is, when I left Turkey and began to discuss my experiences without regard to possible consequences, I was slighted by the Turkish Embassy in Washington D.C. and refused access to other archival collections in Turkey. However, they narrowed down the amount of material refused when I returned to Istanbul—presumably to weaken my case against them in future discussions. I then continued my work mainly on the Armenian Genocide until my colleague Hilmar Kaiser and I began inquiring about certain citations by Turkish nationalist authors from closed archival collections. We were refused access to such records, and we were refused any written acknowledgement (or explanation) regarding such closed collections. I was then assaulted in the courtyard of the archives by a guard, and Necati Gültepe, the head of the Istanbul Prime Ministry Archives, accused me of instigating that incident and threatened me with expulsion from the Prime Ministry Archives if I caused another breach of discipline. I understood this as a choice between curbing my research or facing another incident, which would lead to my expulsion from the archives.³³ Hilmar Kaiser and I left Turkey very soon afterwards. When Kaiser later returned to these same archives, he was summarily expelled on “disciplinary grounds.” I am informed by colleagues that I have also been expelled in absentia.

Concluding Remarks

The Ottoman archives debate was hatched in a continuing effort, orchestrated by the Turkish government, to deny the Armenian Genocide of 1915. The promise of Ottoman records in the mid-1980s was simply a way to shift the focus of debate from existing Western archives on the Genocide. The Ottoman materials that were promised were not made available for the scrutiny of Western scholars, and Turkish state intellectuals have failed to utilize Ottoman materials to exculpate the Ottoman state in the genocide of Armenians. Furthermore, despite the limitations of the Ottoman archival materials under discussion, i.e. despite

³² I should say that the reading room staff were highly professional and gave no cause for concern. The problems arose behind the scenes.

³³ I refrain from discussing the details of this period as the matter is liable to go to a tribunal.

the intellectual absences within these records and the restrictions on their use, these Ottoman materials corroborate Western accounts of the Armenian Genocide. They show that the Ottoman authorities were very much in control in 1915; that there was no effective resistance by Armenians to liquidation; and that the destruction of Ottoman Armenians (like the liquidation of other groups) was part of a grand design to recast the empire in a Turkish nationalist mold. Turkish authorities are now committed to a semblance of an open-archives policy while restricting access to critical scholars and encouraging partisans to prop up the Turkish nationalist agenda.