
Berlin

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The year 2015 marks the 100th anniversary of the Armenian Genocide, as well as a record number of publications on deportations and massacres of Ottoman Christians during the Great War in Turkey. These range from history books responding to “Armenian allegations” to Turkish translations of survivor memoirs, scholarly works, and collections of political essays. Under a longstanding denialist habitus and official censorship, liberal and leftist academics, publishers and intellectuals seemed eager to use the relatively increasing public interest in Turkey to create a wider discussion on Medz Yeghern [Great Crime]. Sadly, scholarly or non-scholarly publications on the Genocide have been sharply decreasing the last two years. Perhaps due to Turkish government pressure on academic freedom and free speech during this time, growing academic interest remained a merely temporary intellectual trend, rather than a permanent academic or political activity.

Taner Akçam is one of the pioneering scholars from Turkey working on the history of the Genocide. His latest book Naim Efendi’nin Hatıratı ve Talat Paşa Telgrafları: Krikor Gergeryan Arşivi is published one year after the 100th anniversary rush, as intentionally. The book revisits the long discredited memoir of an Ottoman officer at the Transportation Department in Aleppo in 1915-16, Naim Efendi – one of the officers formally responsible of transporting Armenian convoys to concentration camps. To this end, it rests on archival work in the Krikor Gergerian Private Archive in New York and official Turkish state archives in Istanbul and Ankara. The original memoir was published by an Ottoman Armenian intellectual and journalist, Aram Andonian (1875-1952) in 1920-21, who became acquainted with Naim Efendi during his captive years in Aleppo. Since its publication, it has been a matter of heated scholarly and political debates regarding the authenticity of the documents. One of these documents include the killing order of Armenians signed by Ottoman Interior Minister Talat Pasha, reading “For Armenians, some rights, such as living and working within the borders of Turkey, are abolished. In this regard, the government takes the whole
responsibility and orders getting rid of them all, including the infants" (p. 19). Akçam presents these debates chronologically while challenging the claims that 52 manuscripts and 22 original documents bought by Andonian from Naim Efendi are fake. Although the book offers several exceptional and engaging sections, specific passages of the first chapter distinguish themselves where the author discusses the claims that the memoir and telegrams are forgeries.

Aside from a foreword that offers a meticulous account of how Krikor Gergerian managed to film Naim Efendi’s memoir and Talat Pasha’s telegrams in Jerusalem and Paris, the book is mainly divided into three parts. The first chapter includes a comprehensive description of the text published by Andonian and the memoir acquired by the author at the Gergerian Archive, along with the reception of the memoir by scholars and controversies surrounding them. The second chapter provides ample amounts of Ottoman wartime records in order to provide further evidence for Naim Efendi’s identity and the accuracy of his testimonies. Finally, the last part of the book presents Turkish translations of certain passages of the memoir published by Andonian in Armenian, along with Naim Efendi’s comments on the official orders from Istanbul. It is interesting to note that those comments were excluded in the Armenian, French, and English translations of the memoir edited by Andonian, thus appearing in Akçam’s book for the first time.

The claim that the memoir and telegrams are forgeries is mainly based on a book titled The Truth behind the telegrams attributed to Talat Pasha by Armenians written by Şinasi Orel and Süreyya Yuca in 1983. Akçam openly asserts that this book was written by a committee under the guidance of the Turkish Foreign Ministry which Orel and Yuca were part of (p. 23). In their comprehensive investigation of the authenticity of documents in the Andonian volume, Orel and Yuca outline a great deal of evidence supported by different official Ottoman Archives in order to demonstrate the discrepancies between the original Ottoman documents and those that appeared in the memoir. Based on his findings from the same archives (to which researchers have now restricted access), Akçam re-examines the widely accepted claim of Orel and Yuca by addressing mainly three of their theses: i) perhaps there was no Ottoman officer by the name “Naim Efendi”, ii) it is not clear if there is an original memoir written by him, iii) documents published in the memoir are fake because dates, signatures and encryption codes are not accurate or do not match the ones on the official reports.

Akçam firmly draws up a list of authentic Ottoman reports mentioning an Ottoman officer with the name of Naim Efendi serving in Aleppo, including one with his signature released by the Turkish Armed Forces Archive (p. 47). Although Orel and Yuca’s book casts doubt on the very existence of an Ottoman officer with the name of “Naim Efendi” at the Transportation Department in Aleppo in 1915-16, they seem unlikely to dismiss the possibility that there was an Ottoman officer named “Naim Efendi”. They hold the idea that even if Naim Efendi was an actual person, he would have been a low