**OKTAY ÖZEL**

**02:21**

My name is Oktay Özel, I am a historian. I studies Ottoman history at Hacettepe University and I continued until PhD and I did my PhD again in C17 Ottoman rural history in Manchester at Manchester University and I came back to Turkey, continued at Hacettepe University and left the university some 20 years ago. I was planning to just quit the job.But anyway I continued at another university, Bilkent university for some 20 years until I retired last year. (03:07)

*[Then a long explanation of how he studied population movements and violence in C17 Ottoman Empire and then how his family came from Batumi in Georgia and how he got involved in researching the influx of Georgian migrants into Turkey how they clashed with the high-raking Muslim Turks (there was even a Turko-Georgian war) and then they were settled in Ordu and Black Sea regions and brought with them their traditional activity of banditry and the second generation was involved in the attacks and deportation of Armenians (with the Tehcir Law in 1915).*

*He only got to learn about Western Anatolia through the work of his younger colleagues.]*

**19:17–**

When I was a student at the university there was no such issue on the agenda of the historians, as far as I know. In the 1990s, I didn’t hear or read anything about that, perhaps that was the time that a kind of interest in western scholarship developed. And then probably in the 2000s in Turkey my colleagues, my generation and the younger generation historians in Turkey started to take up the issues of Greek deportations. That was the time that we started to here first and develop interest and turned that interest into projects. **(20:12)**

**20:20**

There may be many reasons for that changing atmosphere in Turkey and in Europe and the whole globe after 1990s, after the Cold War era there was a kind of liberalization everywhere. Old systems collapsed and a kind of national discourses on history and nationalist narratives of history started to be challenged everywhere, particularly in this part of the world including the Balkans and Turkey and the Caucasus.

21: 32

Yes there was a critical attitude, despite the fact that there was still a kind of military influence in politics and it was just years after the coup in 1980. But the whole Turkey just opened up suddenly. There was pressure of all kinds upon the public but it didn’t stop. The public started to speak from different angles, not only from scholarship, but different segments of the society produced their own speakers about their histories, Alevites, Kurds, Greeks, Armenians came later **(22:21)** So there was the liberalization of this general atmosphere, post-Cold War era atmosphere which eased things in Turkey too. **(22:31)**

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***[How easy is it to access the Ottoman Archives?]***

**25:45–**

In the 1990s I think there was a gov’tal policy to open up the Ottoman archives more with a kind of structural re-adjustments, it was Türgüt Ozal’s years. **(25:59)**

**26:30–**

And they employed some 500 new specialists, trained them in reading the Ottoman documentation, cataloguing, also repair of some damaged documents and the Ottoman Archived started to work properly for the first time, with modern techniques as well. That was in the 1990s. **(27:03)**

**27:34–**

But there were some critical issues on the agenda, the Kurdish issue, the Alevites, internal historical, sociological or political issues that had repercussions in historical research as well but the document archives didn’t have much documentation on those so it didn’t involve an archival problem. **(28:02)**

But there was the issue of Armenian genocide which was dominating not only political life but scholarly life as well. When I returned to Turkey in the early 1990s, throughout the 1990s, I mean that decade was hell for historians in terms of studying such issues like Armenian genocide and some other issues.. that there was a kind of state discourse which just forbids free scholarly research and there was a heavy psychological pressure on historians as well coming from the state. But despite that pressure there were questions and new generation historians started to think also formulate questions and try to find ways of doing research into those subjects by using the Ottoman Archive material as well. **(29:26)**

**29:33**

In the 2000s, the first decade of the 2000s, I think was the crucial turning point. The Ottoman archives opened up new material for research, which includes critical sections of the Ottoman govts of *Ittihat ve Terakki*  in the 1910s, the documentation records of the Ministry of Interior, for example, was crucial, proved to be crucial actually, the Military Archive also started to publish some documentation that they had. They though that this was harmless documentation. But as they opened more and more of that kind of closed sections of the Ottoman Archive , those sections proved to be vital for researchers and ever since early 2000s onwards my generation + younger generation historians started to almost jump on those documentations and ever since they’ve been working on all kinds of issues, whether it is sensitive to the government or the state, it doesn’t matter anymore. **(30:57)**

**LARGER HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

**31:39–**
Okay. I mean when I read first about what happened in Foça, the articles and the books my colleagues wrote, I thought that the intercommunal violence and conflict was much wider than I expected or happened to know. It resembled somehow to what happened in other parts of the Black Sea. Provinces of Empire. But then as I read more on intercommunal violence and the violent nature of the late C19 early C20 in terms of the collapsing empires, esp. the multinational, multi-ethnic empires such as the Ottoman empire, the religious ethnic tensions became a political issues of the governments of the time, there was an Armenian revolutionary movement in Turkey, all kinds of nationalist movements in the Balkans, which includes the Greeks, the Bulgarians, other Ottoman subject. So there was a climate of violence in general. So that was the larger context. **(33:27)**

So I started to see that what happened in the west was part of that. **(33:34)**

And I researched more into 1913,14, 15 in the context of the Armenian Genocide –I worked more on the Armenian Genocide by the way and I also studied *Teşkilat i Mahsusa*, the Special Organization, a kind of paramilitary counter-insurgency organisation and their role in the Armenian genocide, I realised that part of *TiM*’s history involved what happened in this part of Turkey, including Fokaia. I know now that what they did in Fokaia was one of the early experiments with a kind of more radical policy of ethnic cleansing. **(34:39)**

Of course they couldn’t do it officially so they did it through these kinds of paramilitary organisations and *TiM*’s first domestic operation was I think the operation in this part of Turkey. So they continued with the Armenians in 1915 in the same way. But much more radical. **(35:09)**

**TELL US MORE ABOUT THE SPECIAL ORGANISATION**

**35:39–**

*Teşkilat i Mahsusa*, which is Special Organisation, was a kind of paramilitary organisation, a kind of counter-insurgency organisation, an underground organisation, which was originally founded in 1913, of course there were some prior experiences of that kind during the Balkan War in 1912, but we see *Teşkilat i Mahsusa* in 1913 more actively **(36:18)**

… and the Ottoman government of the time, *Ittihat ve Terakki* govt, actually established such an institution based on their own party and committee experience. **(36:37)**

Because the *ItveTer* party, what we call party now, was itself a kind of revolutionary organisation established on the format of Armenian revolutionary organisation and also Bulgarian revolutionary organisations in the Balkans and IMRO and that sort of thing in Macedonia. **(37:02)**

So they were themselves part of that experience of being kind of revolutionary, armed, underground, secret committee. So when they became government, when they formed the Ottoman govt with a coup – not the first part until 1913- but in 1913 a coup, they just seized power and they established a kind of military dictatorship. So under such conditions that they had to deal with some big issues, one was the Macedonian problem the other one was the Armenian problem, both internationalised, and they lost in the Balkans in the case of the Macedonian question when they were in power, it was painful for them **(38:08)**

When they were trying to sort out the population aspects of the issue of Macedonian problem and also the problem with the Greeks, they employed *TiM* to just ethnically cleanse the Western Provinces of Turkey, actually during the war it had already been cleansed greatly, but the aim of the *ItveTer* govt was then to block the coming back of the Greeks who had already left. **(39:01)** And also they were trying to terrorise the remaining Greeks of the region as a kind of reaction to what happened to the Muslims of the Balkans during the Balkan war. **(39:20)**

**39:28** So *TiM* actually for the first time practiced an operation of ethnic cleansing and Foça 1914 was part of that. **(39:52)**

**40:35** So in 1914, February I think, they had to sign, again the Ottoman govt, *ItveTer*, the same people who inititate the *TiM* had so sign this reform project from the Great Powers for the Armenian Provinces in the East, and that was a shock and I think that was a critical turning point and ever since they started to think seriously of much more radical policies towards the Armenians. **(41:21)**

So *TiM* was re-established and re-introduced with the start of WWI, with the Ottomans’ decision to take side on the part of the Germans during the war and that night it was re-introduced. This time not for the Armenians but specifically for eastern provinces. They ere was a war between professional soldiers, armies, of Russia and the Ottoman Empire, they were in fight but on the Black Sea Coast, on the Caucasus front, on the Eastern Anatolian fornt there were also the paramilitary activities of the same TiM as a kind of counter-insurgency organisation **(42:24)** to carry out a kind of guerrilla warfare, along with the regular army. **(42:37)**

**43:47**

Then came [the battle of] Sarikamış. The Ottomans lost, it was a big failure and a kind of traumatic defeat of the Ottoman armies by the Russians in the East **(44:08)** and then after that in March **(44:15)** ///// **(44:39**) the central committee of the party and committee took a serious decision, a much more radical decision, to solve radically what was called the Armenian problem or the Eastern question. **(44:56) (44:58)** Then they re-introduced *TiM* with structural, legal changes and that *TiM* for the third time, reintroduce, but this time the aim was the destruction of the Armenians in the eastern provinces plus Trabzon *villayet*. **(45:21)** So that *TiM* played a crucial role in what we call today Armenian Genocide. **(45:30)**