

Book review of the »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform«
Inanç Atilgan, Garabet Moumdjian (Ed.s), Vienna: Wieser-Verlag, 2009, 2010

From the very beginning, the book »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform«¹ gives the impression that Turkish and Armenian scholars met and discussed the events which took place during World War I. However, a closer examination puts a question mark not only on the book, but the academic level of Atilgan's activities.

Genocide unresolved?

Like many Turkish »liberal« representatives (politicians, scholars ...), the book's editor Atilgan tries to give the impression that the Armenian Genocide is a still unresolved question, and that scholars are divided in two more or less equal groups of opposing opinions: One group says that there was genocide, while the other says that there was a civil war and the Armenian population of the Ottoman Empire had to be 'relocated', but the Ottoman leadership did never intend to destroy the deportees.

Wherever denialists appear they claim to present at least half of the academia. **In reality this fraction of denying "scholars" is a minority and is either of nationalist ideologist affiliation or funded by Turkey.**

The long line of dialogs

To understand the full scale of Atilgan's and Moumdjian's book - »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform« - the reader needs to know **what the book does not provide: a historical framework as a foundation.**

Especially during the last 20 years, various meetings, workshops and discussion groups on various levels have taken place with Turks and Armenians as participants. One of the important meetings was the »Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Committee" (TARC). TARC brought together ex-diplomats, high ranking ex-military officers and (ex-)leaders of major nongovernmental organisations. Each of the TARC members had served the group they represented for several years and was therefore highly acknowledged and influential in their own group.

David Phillips, the main organizer and mediator of the TARC, was convinced that this kind of meeting demands several initial meetings to clarify (by the group) the topics which both sides were willing to discuss. One of these meetings was the '*Discussion between Armenian and Turkish Scholars and Civil Society Representatives*'. *The 'Discussion between Armenian and Turkish Scholars and Civil Society Representatives' was finally convened at the Diplomatic Academy of Vienna on June 10, 2000. Even was joined by Halil Berktaş [Sabanci University Istanbul], an accomplished historian with the uncanny ability to speak with authority and at great length on seemingly every subject.*² The US based scholar Rouben Adalian, director of the private »Armenian National Institute" (ANI) and author of several books including the »Encyclopaedia of Genocide«, »Armenian Genocide Resource Guide« and the » Guide to the Armenian Genocide in the U.S. Archives (1915-1918)«, was one of the two Armenian

¹ Since Mai/June 2010 two versions of the book »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform« (edited by Inanç Atilgan and Garabet Moumdjian) exist. The origin edition (1st version) was published in December 2009. The second edition appeared in 2010 with a foreword from the former chancellor of Austria, Alfred Gusenbauer. **The book review refers to both editions** as the second edition is not revised (in the criticized points) version of the original one, with one exception: Because of the new foreword the pagination of the 2nd edition changed for twenty pages.

² Phillips, David L.: Unsilencing the Past, Track Two Diplomacy and Turkish-Armenian Reconciliation. New York; Oxford: Berghahn, 2005; p. 23

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participants.³ Alongside numerous other topics this group of Armenians and Turks “[...] discussed the Turkish and Armenian official records, encyclopaedias and textbooks.”⁴ TARC was established on September 15, 2001 and worked until April, 14. 2004.⁵

Atilgan’s perception of TARC

In the »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform« Atilgan’s perception of the »Turkish Armenian Reconciliation Committee – TARC« reads as follows⁶: “*The TARC Process (...) had to be stopped as the nationalists on both sides were not involved in the reconciliation process. [...]*”⁷.

Perhaps there is a more appropriate explanation why TARC did not continue to work: At the TARC meeting of September 24, 2001, the “*Armenians tried to express the grief of being driven from their homes, [the Turkish Diplomat Omer] Lutem reported, “Turkish books do not show any Armenian presence before the Turks. Anatolia was never an Armenian homeland. You were just visitors.” When Alex [Alexander Arzumanyan former foreign minister of Armenia] pointed out that they were in Anatolia long enough to build four thousand churches”, [Mumtaz] Soysal added, “We tried to destroy them all, but there were just too many.” Then Lutem threatened, “If Armenians insist on genocide, Turkey will inflict hurt on Armenia. Is that what you want?”*”⁸

In my opinion a main reason why TARC fell apart was that in September 2002 TARC commissioned the »International Center for Transitional Justice“ (ICTJ) the mandate to study the treatment of the Ottoman Armenians in WWI to determine whether the ‘events of 1915’ are applicable to the UN Genocide Convention. In 2003 the experts of ICTJ presented their results to the TARC. **ICTJ concluded that the mass murder of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during WWI fulfilled the conditions of the UN Genocide Convention (Dec. 8, 1948).** This decision was probably a disaster for the Turks and therefore Gündüz Aktan, Sadi Ergüvenç and Özdem Sanberk left TARC.

Background of the “VAT Book” the »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform«

In the year 2003, when TARC was about to collapse, the “Viennese Armenian Turkish Platform” (VAT) popped up. VAT presented itself as a platform of historians (Wolf Dieter Bihl, Artem Ohandjanian, Kerstin Tomenendal and Inanç Atilgan [until 2002/2003 his name was Inanç Feigl]) who claimed to mediate between Armenian and Turkish historians in order to discuss the “*Turkish-Armenian question in the year 1915 in the course of the First World War*”⁹ on the basis of strict scientific methods and rules.”¹⁰

The VAT procedure

As a start, VAT asked Armenians and the Turks to deliver until July 15, 2004 “*100 documents as a maximum*”¹¹ from each side which confirm “*their understanding of this delicate matter*”.¹²

³ Phillips, op. cit., p. 24

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Phillips, op. cit., p. 134

⁶ At the year of its foundation

⁷ Atilgan, Inanç; Moundjian, Garabet (Ed.s): Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform. Vienna: Wieser Verlag, 2009; Atilgan/Moundjian, op. cit., p. 21 (p. 41 in the second ed.)

⁸ Phillips, op. cit., p. 43

⁹ Atilgan/Moundjian, op. cit., p. 29 (p. 49)

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Atilgan/Moundjian, op. cit., p. 57

¹² Atilgan/Moundjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., cover

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After the mutual inspection of the 100 documents each side would have the possibility to respond to these documents with another 80 documents.¹³

The book »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform« which represents the outcome of the VAT's activities does not give any clue about the system or pattern used to select the many documents. **There is also a complete lack of the historical, biographical and political context of these documents and the authors of the published letters, telegrams and analyses.**

Missing skills

From the start on, the activities of the VAT - for different reasons – never got off the ground. **VAT neither had the skills nor the financial means or the network of second level workers which is needed for such a demanding project.** For example: It was clear from the beginning that the “*Turkish side*” would base their argumentation on documents written in Osmanli – from the Ottoman Archives. VAT's »President« Wolfdieter Bihl was appointed as “*only authority*” during the Armenian-Turkish talks. But Bihl neither speaks Modern Turkish, nor has he a command of Osmanli (Ottoman Turkish).¹⁴ Already for this reason alone Bihl could not perform his task. Instead, the Turkish Historical Society (TTK) provided the Ottoman documents in facsimile and also in English translation¹⁵ (on the quality of these TTK translations see below).

Why only Austrian documents?

The Armenian Academy of Sciences provided 100 (?) documents, which exclusively came from Austrian Archives. These documents were part of Ohandjanian's facsimile collection, which served as one of the main sources for Atilgan's doctoral thesis which he wrote under the guidance of Bihl (see below). **Not a single document brought from the “Armenian side” derived from another archive than that in Vienna.** Would not Armenian scholars – who live and work worldwide – have wished to present sources from various archives and nations? Are there no documents in the USA, Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia or elsewhere concerning the deportation and killing of a part of the Ottoman population? There is indeed a comprehensive wealth of documents in many nations' archives which prove the genocide. According to Prof. Taner Akçam (author of various monographs on the Armenian genocide), even the Ottoman Archives contain enough documents to prove the genocide.

However, a scholar is expected to cross-check his thesis with documents of heterogeneous sources in order to verify or falsify them.

Lacking legitimacy

Even before the first exchange of documents took place, the Turkish newspapers declared the ‘*Turkish side*’ to be the winner in this seeming dispute between Armenian and Turkish scholars. Then Ashot Melkonian as the head of the historians of the Armenian Academy of Sciences resigned in protest from VAT. In summer 2004, Ohandjanian as another member of the Armenian Academy of Sciences took Melkonian's place on the “*Armenian side*”. When Lavrenti Barseghian, then director of the Museum and Institute of the Armenian Genocide (who has no command of German or English) declined the invitation for a conference on 27 October 2004, VAT (Atilgan, Tomenendal and Bihl) was actually left without participants from the Armenian Academy of Sciences.

Revival of the “Armenian side”

¹³ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 57

¹⁴ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 64

¹⁵ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 68

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Today we know that Atilgan found a new use for the documents. He simply continued the activities of the VAT without Armenians, concealing the full circumstances of the resignation of the VAT's Armenian participants. Years after losing the "Armenian side" Atilgan met Garabet Moumdjian, an Armenian-American scholar. Together with Moumdjian, who has no knowledge of German, he translated the Austrian documents – written in German – and published them together with Turkish documents in a book titled »Archival Documents of the Viennese Armenian-Turkish Platform«.

With the support of Garabet Moumdjian, who gave his name for this project, Atilgan maintained the impression of an Armenian participation and the book as the alleged result of a genuine Turkish–Armenian dialogue and cooperation.

Not consistent

The book contains 102 documents from the »Turkish side«, 73 from the »Armenian side« and two documents which were presented by both sides. **Instead of 179, as announced in the opening credits¹⁶, the book contains 177 documents.**

Let us go into details:

The VAT book is not consistent in the naming of persons, titles and nations. For example, although the "Foreign Ministry of Austria-Hungary"¹⁷ is correctly named in many places on several occasions one reads about an "Austrian Foreign Ministry"¹⁸. The title of the Foreign Secretary also changes from "Foreign Minister of the Habsburg Empire"¹⁹ to "Austrian Foreign Minister"²⁰. But a nation of Austria had not been founded yet at that time.

Documents at the wrong place/time

Document No. 2 on page 66/67 (page 86/87 in the version from Mai/June 2010) has been presented by the »Armenian side« and was dated by Atilgan as being from 28 June 1914. In fact the original document dates from 28 June 1915.

The original document starts with: "*The Kurdish revolts have increased their scope. The districts Van, Bitlis, Mus and Dersim are affected. Now the Ottoman Government is giving this its full attention. Two Ottoman Bey's, one from Erzingan and the other from Komach, west of Erzingan, have been sent to negotiate with the insurgents. Armenians and Kurds together have started to establish their own political system with self-administration under Russian guidance and assistance. [...]*"

Atilgan translates the same document as follows "*Rebellions took place in Van, Bitlis and Mush. Kurds and Armenians are working together to establish their own states under Russian leadership.*"²¹

Document No. 163 (presented by the »Turkish side«) contains two basic mistakes. Firstly the document is dated Oct 23 – Nov. 21 1918, which is not correct.

Secondly, this document is presented as one single document but in fact it includes 5 different telegrams dated of the period Oct. 23 - Nov. 21 1918. Beside this example of adding telegrams and counting them as one single document the Turks presented 102 documents instead of "100 documents as a maximum".²²

¹⁶ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 43

¹⁷ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 242

¹⁸ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 204

¹⁹ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 214

²⁰ Atilgan Incanc, Moumdjian Garabet; Archival Documents ... 2010; p. 802

²¹ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 86

²² Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., p. 57

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It appears that the impreciseness with the date the goal of exchanging the causal chronology of action and reaction. According to Turkish doctrine the revolts had to take place before the deportations, in order to depict the deportation as an action of retribution and punishment. But if the Armenians ‘revolted’ against *deportations* this would appear as self-defense - a picture that most Turks want to avoid, because it reveals that Ottoman Turkey deported the Armenians for reasons other than rebellious activities, as official Turkey constantly claims.

Distorting translation

Atilgan and Moumdjian translated 73 documents from the “*Armenian side*” – with the exception of document Nr. 70 – in distorting ways.

For example, in document 23 the Austrian Ambassador Pallavicini mentions “[...] *armenische Unruhen (Armenian unrests) [...]*”, which Atilgan translates as “*Armenian revolts*”.²³

One of the key documents from the Austrian archives, dated Sep. 30, 1915 by Karl von Trautmannsdorff to Count Stephan Burian, the Austro-Hungarian Imperial Foreign Minister, reads: “[...] *It is undeniable today that the Turks took the undoubtedly frequent cases of treason and sedition as an excuse to carry out the extermination of the Armenian race, which seems to have succeeded to a great extent. Talaat Bay recently told me with some satisfaction that in Erzurum, for instance, there is barely an Armenian left. [...] But if in further developments there is a war between Turkey and Greece I fear that Turkey, which now lives under the delusion that the extermination of the Armenian race can be conducted with impunity, will use this opportunity to take action against the Greeks using force and massive deportations. Given the impracticable nature of such measures, the Greeks would face the same destiny as the Armenians in the months before. [...]*”²⁴

Atilgan “*contents*” the same document to the following: “*According to news received from intelligence sources and Bank branches today, this extermination policy against the Armenians might also apply against Greeks because of Greece’s declaration of war [against the Ottoman Empire]! The arguments used against the Armenians (economic, etc.) can be applies to the Greeks too.*”²⁵

Atilgan’s “translation” distorts the meaning of the document. Why did the editor(s) condense each document in such deliberate ways? Scholars want and need to read the original or at least a highly reliable, unabridged translation of the text.

The ‘Inspection Committee’

To lend the book greater credibility, Atilgan and Moumdjian introduced an ‘Inspection Committee’, as mentioned on page 5 of the VAT book. This body consisted of Wolfdieter Bihl, Markus Köhbach, Kemal Cicek, Garabet Moumdjian and Lojze Wieser. Lojze Wieser is the owner of the »Wieser Verlag« publishing house and responsible for the printing of the book. Köbach and Bihl are both university professors in Vienna. Kerstin Tomenendal and Inanç Atilgan – who are a married couple – were their students.

At this point I have to quote Prof. Bihl’s address to the Viennese Armenian community in April 2005 on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of the genocide of Armenians. He already then spoke about a ‘rebellion’ of the Ottoman Armenians, which allegedly provoked the deportation of the entire Armenian population from their homeland. He also quoted the deniers Yusuf Halacoglu and Erich Feigl [the adopted father of the later editor Inanç Atilgan], without any mentioning of concentration camps and mass murder of the Armenians. In all, Bihl refused to evaluate these events as genocide. The Armenian audience was left by Bihl with the feeling that it was their people’s own fault that had led to deportation and murder.

²³ Atilgan/Moumdjian, op. cit., 2nd ed., 2010, p. 186f

²⁴ Ohandjanian, Artem : Armenien : Der verschwiegene Völkermord. Wien: Böhlau, p. 105 f. and also Atilgan/Moumdjian, op. cit., p. 601

²⁵ Atilgan/Moumdjian, 2nd ed., op. cit., 600

Bihl also bears the responsibility for Atilgan's doctorate in which the latter explains that the deportation was a "legitimized attempt to solve a problem in an extreme manner."²⁶ Atilgan's evaluation of the intentional and systematic killing of one and a half million people is based on Halacoglu, who "can not see any Ottoman intention behind the mass killing of Armenians." Bihl, according to Atilgan "confirms this position but adds that the Ottoman leadership should have known that deportations of families during wartime over a distance of 1000km to the south will cost many lives because of attacking gangs, no infrastructure and different reasons like hunger and sicknesses."²⁷ Therefore Atilgan does not qualify the Armenian mass killing a genocide.²⁸ Bihl awarded Atilgan's doctoral thesis with the best mark »very good«.

Scholarly or political

Atilgan does not tire of pointing out that his work in general and this book in particular is a piece of science. By checking the sources of the 177 documents you find out that all the documents were known and published already in the 1980s. Practical all these Turkish and Austrian documents can be found as facsimiles, either in English translations or in the German original, in monographs which are available in the university library of Vienna.

But if the true purpose of this book is not added knowledge and scholarly innovation - what else is the intention of its editors for simply reprinting published documents? Why did the "Turkish side" travel to Vienna to present documents which many had known for at least 30 years? The only difference between the »British Documents on the Ottoman Armenians«²⁹, the »Armenian Activities in the Ottoman Documents (1914-1918)«³⁰, the facsimile collection of Artem Ohandjanian and the VAT book is that some selected Turkish and Austrian documents have been brought together in one book.

Conclusion

Atilgan did once write "audiatur et altera pars"³¹: let us hear the other side. The other side – the Turkish scholars – had the chance to present a new interpretation, something interesting, thrilling or even breathtaking. The chance to prove that Turkish humanities have caught up with international standards by working strictly according to scientific methods and regulations was missed. For the prize of nearly 50 Euros you get the impressive proof by Atilgan that until today Turkish humanities work by turning down the basic facts, by the distorting and 'condensed' translation of archival documents, denial tactics and the half-truths of the Turkish Historical Society, which we have been familiar with since the 1980s. It is certainly disconcerting that Austrian scholars and the previous chancellor of Austria, Alfred Gusenbauer have lent their names for such a book. For scholars who work according a political doctrine it must be said: **If the hypothesis is the declared target of the research then this is not science.**

²⁶ Atilgan, Inanç: Das Kriegsjahr 1915, Reaktion Österreich-Ungarns auf die Umsiedlung der Armenier innerhalb des osmanischen Reiches anhand von Primärquellen (Dissertation), University of Vienna, 2003, page 197

²⁷ Atilgan, Kriegsjahr 1915, op. cit., page 199

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ To be found at the library of the University of Vienna under:

»British Documents on the Ottoman Armenian Vol I«signature AC01691525

»British Documents on the Ottoman Armenian Vol II«signature AC01691538

»British Documents on the Ottoman Armenian Vol III«signature AC00252687

»British Documents on the Ottoman Armenian Vol IV«signature AC03172571

³⁰ To be found in the library of the University of Vienna, signature AC06611553

³¹ Atilgan Inanç in a letter to the human rights NGO "Society for Threatened People" 2006