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# The Archive as a "Collective Project"

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The history of the archive is the history of the state.[1] Or so say conventional approaches to the archives. Until recently, the archive has been seen solely as a site, or rather a repository, of modern state power and governmentality, and a crucial medium for the making and preservation of national memory in the late 19th century.[2] There is a truth to this state-centric perspective: the archive was conceived as a place where *governments* keep their records; they usually contain a term such as "state," "government," or "national" in their names; and they are often funded by and connected to a governmental body.

As history was deconstructed and reconstructed beginning in the 1960s from multiple directions (e.g., postcolonial, feminist, labor), the view of the archive as a repository of state power or national identity has been challenged. Seeing the archive as a key source of the nation, Mike Featherstone raises the question of "who makes the history," as well as who should have access to it.[3] Appadurai approaches the Foucauldian notion of the archive along similar lines, considering the panoptical function that Foucault ascribes to it as "too dark" a vision and posing it be replaced with a view of the archive as a "collective project." In Appadurai's view, "the creation of the documents and their aggregation into archives is also a part of everyday life outside the purview of the state."[4] As such, we need to see archiving as a collective project and the making of the archive as a conflicted, contested, but ultimately shared enterprise involving both state and societal actors and factors. Seen in this light, archives can open multiple possibilities to scholars, whether historians or historical anthropologists, to seek counter-histories, alternative narratives, and multiplicity of experiences. As Patrice Ladwig and Ricardo Roque state, an ethnography of the archive, or archival ethnographies, would "disinter the processes by which disparate, even divisive, discourses were fused into a consistent ideology"[5] to reveal "failures, anxieties, silences, absences, and struggles that are reflected in the archives' institutional histories and documents themselves."[6]

Uncovering the voices of suppressed groups is a relatively novel enterprise for historians of the Ottoman Empire and modern Turkey. In a context of protracted conflict between Kurds and the Turkish state and discussions of the Armenian Genocide, Ottoman-Turkish historiography on the eastern provinces has largely remained state-centric and nationalist. The history of the Kurds and Armenians as well as other non-Muslim populations of the Ottoman Empire have largely been pushed into the margins of mainstream historical accounts both in Turkey and in Euro-American academia. Until the early 2000s, the Turkish state maintained a draconian ban on any reference to Kurds in textbooks and the doors of Turkish academia were closed shut to any topic related to Kurds and to Kurdish scholars who openly expressed their identity. Ismail Beşikçi, a Turkish scholar who was the first in Turkish academia to approach Kurdish society as a legitimate area of scholarly research, was sentenced to thirteen years in prison by the state following the military intervention of 12 March 1971.[7] As for the Armenians, the Turkish nationalist narrative of the Armenian Genocide has less erased them than

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portrayed them as traitors or participants in violent militias that killed Muslim civilians. In a climate where academic and intellectual freedom has been nonexistent, mainstream Turkish academics have largely refrained from incorporating anything related to Kurds and Armenians into their scholarly analyses. Consequently, the histories of these two groups have been produced mostly outside of academia by nonprofessionals such as political activists, journalists, and lawyers.

The marginalization of the Kurds and Armenians in Ottoman-Turkish historiography shaped the tone of the mostly nonacademic historical accounts in two ways. First, for both groups, refuting the official historical narrative turned out to be the major motivation for history writing. For the Kurds, this manifested in ethno-nationalist perspectives and paradigms, whereas for the Armenians the genocidal moment defined the contours of their historical narratives. This motivation (i.e., refuting the official narrative) is best summarized in the common saying that Kurds have long tried to prove that they *live* (i.e., exist) while Armenians have tried to prove that they were *killed.* Second, both groups revealed a morbid attitude towards the archives and archival documents, albeit in strikingly different ways. For Kurdish historians, the archive represented nothing but a spring of official history perspectives and it was meticulously filtered by the authorities to censor any document that could challenge official narratives. Therefore, one can attain only a biased and distorted historical account there. For Armenian historians, the archive tended to symbolize their constant search for the smoking gun, namely the central order for the annihilation of Ottoman Armenians in 1915. Like the views of Kurdish historians, theirs were certainly filtered. Ultimately, in their search for their Ottoman and early Republican past, these two minorities of modern Turkey maintained a wary distance from the archive, not to mention the concrete barriers they might have been facing in accessing it.

Since the early 2000s, Turkey has witnessed what can be called an awakening of civil society and an increasing scholarly interest in the histories of the minorities whose voices have long been pushed to the margins by official histories. This went hand in hand with or rather culminated in the rise of oral history projects commissioned mostly by nongovernmental organizations. According to Leyla Neyzi, the proliferation of oral history and memory studies "provides a contrast with history, a well-established, hegemonic discipline historically allied with the state."[8] That oral history methodology (as opposed to conventional methodologies such as archival research) is more conducive to retrieving suppressed voices in Ottoman-Turkish history became a widespread belief that further reproduced the view of the archive as a site of state power and dominant national identity. While the value of oral history for complicating and challenging official history narratives is undeniable, I maintain serious doubts about its viability as an alternative to the archive, a site which contains a multiplicity of voices waiting only to be retrieved through careful extraction and reading.

The arrival of the historian in the archive, Dirks states, is like the arrival of the anthropologist in the field: both represent "a rite of passage," or "the magical moment." In contrast to the arrival story of the anthropologist, however, "the historian's arrival story is largely untold, shielded by the fact that while the archive has often seemed mystical, it has never appeared exotic."[9] My own arrival in the archive was a moment of anxious and hopeful expectation. Having been trained as a social historian, I had read all the fascinating accounts of historians working on different parts of the world "hearing"

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the voices of social actors, at least those historians who chose to hear these voices. The history of the Kurds, as I learned from the scarcely available historical accounts, however, was nothing more than an unrelenting story of assimilation and destruction, as well as resistance to these processes. In a way, systematic violence of the state had turned into a precondition for the acceptance of the Kurds as historical actors. This narrative was what I wanted to challenge when I first conceived of my dissertation project back in 2004. I sought to see how Kurds *existed*, just like any other group in the empire, not just in those moments of outright destruction and political struggle but in their quotidian lives as laborers, tribesmen, plaintiffs, criminals, petitioners, husbands, daughters, artists, neighbors, and so on. I sought to show that being killed was not the only form of existence that the Kurds had in history. They lived, loved, fought, co-opted, caved-in, negotiated, and struggled in ways not so different from any other group in the empire.

In 2007, when I arrived in the Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, I had no precedent for research on archival sources for Kurdish social history with which to work. I had no idea what to look for or where. All I wanted to do was to show that Kurds *did* appear in the millions of dusty pages of archival documents beyond contexts of war and revolt, that Kurdish history was about life not death. I also felt like this huge historiographical void provided me with ample opportunity to search for these traces. Rather than doing keyword searches in the archive online database or thumbing through the indexes of printed catalogues, I would spend long hours reading thousands of catalog entries in chronological order, trying to understand the different ways in which Kurdish lives featured in Ottoman records. For a few weeks, I was obsessed with a land dispute between two villages, then the conditions in a prison, then Kurdish laborers in Çukurova, then a locust attack in Kurdistan. I felt an urge to follow a different strategy of focusing on one thing, place, person, or region and start a much deeper excavation as soon as possible, especially because as a doctoral student with limited funding I had only limited time in the archives. But my historian's intuition told me to enjoy this extensive introduction to complex Kurdish lives. Looking back, I see myself as if I was in a distant, exotic site waiting to be explored interminably.

Eventually I stopped my extensive journey into the thousands of documents across time and space, not for practical reasons, but because I encountered a fascinating incident where quotidian actions of the Kurdish population had paved the way for a drastic transformation within the larger structures, relations, and power conflicts in Ottoman Kurdistan. One day in 1848, the inhabitants of Veşin, a Kurdish village nestled in a secluded valley in Palu district, awoke before sunrise. The men met at the village mosque for the presunrise prayer that marked the beginning of the Ramadan holiday. Just before the prayer began, they heard gunfire in the distance. As the noise grew louder, the mosque goers realized the culprit was Abdullah Bey, the most powerful Kurdish noble in the district, accompanied by at least 600 armed men. The gang was coming to collect one and a half tons of clarified butter from the villagers in payment for three years of back taxes. The villagers responded by opening fire. The Ramadan holiday turned bloody. Three villagers died, four were wounded, and sixty-five houses were burnt to the ground with all their belongings, including stores of grain, animals and their fodder, poplar trees, and vineyards. The villagers then fled to the surrounding hills in despair.[10]

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Initially I thought that this was just one among many violent encounters that took place in Kurdistan at the time (which it was). But what caught my attention was not the extent of the destruction it caused, nor the violence per se, but rather the ways in which villagers approached this moment. As I read multiple accounts and testimonies by the villagers, I realized that from their perspective this violence was not ordinary, accepted, or legitimate but rather extraordinary, unlawful, and illegitimate. Hence, they brought the case to the highest Ottoman council in the imperial capital at the time and demanded the punishment of the local chief, Abdullah Bey, as well as reparations for their physical and material losses. Through this act, they involved the Ottoman state in the case. This, in turn, triggered a set of events that resulted in the imperial state's pronouncing a policy of confiscating the lands of Kurdish nobles in the area, in contravention to the three-centuries-old agreements made between Sultan Süleyman the Lawgiver and the ancestors of the Kurdish nobility back in the 16th century.

This was it. I was fascinated by the extraordinary in the quotidian. The history of this period had long been narrated as one of total destruction of the Kurdish nobility and unconditional submission of the ordinary people to historical forces outside their control. What I saw, though, was a much more complex story with multiple historical actors, diverse interests, and divergent strategies. I stopped in order to tell the story of that moment. And it took me hundreds of documents, thousands of pages, days and nights of transliteration, and lots of tears to come up with a narrative of this incident that I summarized in one paragraph above.[11]

Archival research, as any historical methodology, comes with its opportunities and shortcomings. Epistemological problems associated with using state documents notwithstanding, my search for lived Kurdish experiences in the state archives has been a subversive act. Rather than the exclusive privilege of a putatively all-powerful state, I see "all documentation as intervention, and all archiving as part of the same collective project."[12] Thus, the archive is more than a repository of state power and national identity. It is also a site where the complexity of human experience can be unearthed.

Fast forward to 2012 when the first popular Kurdish history journal, *Kürt Tarihi* (Kurdish History), appeared in Turkey. The view of the archive as a collective project and my obsession with Kurdish history as the history of life rather than death propelled me to prepare a section in the journal titled "Archive Dust" (Arşiv Tozu). For each issue, I focused on one or two documents from the archives that exemplified the ways in which Kurds featured in the archival record beyond the dynamic of state violence and resistance to it. Searching for Kurdish lives, as opposed to destruction and death, in the archives—this I find liberating.

NOTES

[1] "Archive" is usually used in the plural. In the theoretical discussions on the "idea of records in an extended (metaphorical) sense following Foucault and Derrida," it appears mostly as *the archive.* Following this line of thinking, I use it in the singular. David Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives: Possible Futures and Contingent Pasts: Archives as Anthropological Surrogates," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41 (2012): 462.

[2] Mike Featherstone, "Archive," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23 (2006): 592.

[3] Ibid., 592.

[4] Arjun Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," in *Information Is Alive: Art and Theory on Archiving and Retrieving Data,* ed. Joke Brouwer, Arjen Mulder, and Susan Charlton (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2003), 16.

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[5]Zeitlyn, "Anthropology in and of the Archives," 464.

[6]Patrice Ladwig and Ricardo Roque, abstract for the mini workshop titled "Fieldwork between Folders: Theories of the Archive and the Historical Anthropology of Colonialism," organized by the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, accessed 1 April 2017, https://www.eth.mpg.de/3328094/miniworkshop_colonial_archives.pdf

[7]Martin van Bruinessen, "Ismail Beşikçi: Turkish Sociologist, Critic of Kemalism, and Kurdologist," *Journal of Kurdish Studies* 5 (2005 [2003–4]): 19–34.

[8]Leyla Neyzi, "Oral History and Memory Studies in Turkey," in *Turkey's Engagement with Modernity: Conflict and Change in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Celia Kerslake, Kerem Öktem, and Philip Robins (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 443–59.

[9]Nicholas B. Dirks, "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History," in *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and Its Futures,* ed. Brian Keith Axel (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), 48.

[10]Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, "Ruling the Periphery, Governing the Land the Making of the Modern Ottoman State in Kurdistan, 1840–70," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 34 (2014): 160–75.

[11]Ibid. See also Nilay Özok-Gündoğan, "A 'Peripheral' Approach to the 1908 Revolution in the Ottoman Empire: Land Disputes in Peasant Petitions in Post-Revolutionary Diyarbekir," in *Social Relations in Ottoman Diyarbekir, 1870–1915,* ed. Joost Jongerden and Jelle Verheij (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 179–216.

[12]Appadurai, "Archive and Aspiration," 16.

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