

BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

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SOME NOTES ON HANS-LUKAS KIESER’S BIOGRAPHY ON TALAAT PASHA AND DR. YÜCEL GÜÇLÜ’S CRITICISMS ON THE BOOK**

(HANS-LUKAS KIESER’İN TALAT PAŞA BİYOGRAFİSİ
ÜZERİNE BAZI NOTLAR VE DR. YÜCEL GÜÇLÜ’NÜN
BU KİTABA YÖNELİK ELEŞTİRİLERİ)

Author: Hans-Lukas Kieser

Title: Talaat Pasha: Father of Modern Turkey, Architect of Genocide

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In the last decade, the books published by Princeton University Press examining the fateful period of the Turkish-Armenian relations in the last decades of the Ottoman Empire have been extraordinarily one-sided and have been written by scholars who are part of the same network. The latest example of this disturbing trend is the extremely lopsided biography of Talat Pasha by Swiss author Hans-Lukas Kieser.

In his book, Hans-Lukas Kieser presents the Grand Vizier of the Ottoman State Talat Pasha as a merciless politician who maintained power through

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a potent blend of Turkish ethno-nationalism, the political Islam employed by former Sultan Abdulhamid II, and a willingness to resort to radical solutions and violence; such as allegedly committing genocide against the non-Muslim citizens of the Ottoman State. According to Mr. Kieser, Talat was the architect of the “Armenian Genocide”, which allegedly resulted in the systematic extermination of more than a million people, and which apparently set the stage for a century that would witness atrocities on a scale never imagined.

In a lengthy review published in the latest issue of *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* (Volume 38, Issue 3, 2018, pp. 441-450), Turkish historian Yücel Güçlü provided a detailed critique of Kieser’s book on Talat Pasha and enumerated several mistakes and shortcomings.

As Yücel Güçlü notes in his book review, Talat Pasha was an important figure in Ottoman history:

“Ninety-seven years after his death, Talaat Pasha continues to evoke passion. In many parts of the world attitudes toward him reveal much about contemporary political stances. Talaat Pasha was an extraordinary man and he was clearly capable of giving strong direction to policy during his tenure of office. Of the other Ottoman leaders of the period, it is no exaggeration to say, he stood out among all. No one could escape the charm of his sympathetic and attractive personality. A standard work on the last Ottoman grand viziers portrays Talaat Pasha as a powerful statesman who had an unusual ability to analyze the complicated situation that obtained in the country during the First World War. In December 1908 he was elected a deputy to the new Ottoman Parliament for his home province of Edirne. His colleagues quickly recognized his talents, and in 1909, he was elected vice president of the Chamber of Deputies, and later he was appointed minister of the interior and afterwards minister of posts and telegraphs. In the cabinet of Said Halim Pasha, he held the portfolio of the interior. On the resignation of Said Halim Pasha in 1917, he assumed the position of grand vizier.” (p. 441)

Hans Lukas Kieser’s biography on Talat Pasha interested me for personal reasons, because his wife Hayriye was the aunt of my mother. My mother Münevver had stayed in Talat Pasha’s house in 1920/1921. So, my mother was in Berlin when Talat Pasha was assassinated in cold blood by Soghomon Tehlirian in 1921. As it is written in the biography, Hayriye and Talat did not have children and Münevver -being an orphan- was considered by them as their daughter.

After returning to Turkey, my mother continued to have close contacts with her aunt. I also often visited her. During those visits, I had the opportunity to ask Hayriye Hanım many questions about Talat Pasha, about the time he was Minister of Interior and Grand Vizier; as well as their “Berlin days”. According to my mother and Hayriye Hanım, Talat Pasha was a very gentle,

honest, and admirable person; they also praised his humanist qualities. On this subject, Dr. Kieser writes the following: “Talaat’s charm was sometimes combined with a melancholy that mollified even angry people in his presence” (P. 329); “his genuineness and plainness increased the deference vis-s-vis him” (p. 330); “Many Germans regarded Talaat as not only a successful statesman but also an honest, kind, and admirable person”; and “No one could escape the charm of his sympathetic and attractive personality...” (p. 331); “The German speaking press (except Swiss) praised Talaat as the savior of imperial Turkey, a model for progressive politics...” (p. 335); and “Most times Talaat enjoyed good press, particularly [by the] Jewish press...” (p. 304, 314).

However, according to Mr. Kieser, Talaat had another face; one akin to the “Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde” situation. According to Kieser, Talaat was in fact a monster who was able to dupe and mislead everybody. On this, Mr. Kieser writes: “Many Germans had not understood, or did not want to understand, even at the end of the war, that Talaat was the architect of genocide...” (p. 333); “He was suspicious of all non-Muslim groups ...” (p. 10); “Talaat was seduced by the idea of an Islamic-Jewish alliance of sorts, opposite Europe” (p. 305); “The collective targeting of Armenians released and spurred anti-Christian hate and cupidity in broad parts of society..” (p. 10); “there was no (Armenian) conspiracy; but in Talaat’s calculated conspiracy theory, which was spread during spring 1915, there was” (p. 10); and his “chauvinism merged with daredevilry...” (p. 12).

As can be seen, Mr. Kieser depicts Talat Pasha as a comedian who was able to deceive everyone. Kieser also gives conflicting information about Talat Pasha and, at one point, he cannot control his apparent hostility for Talat and claims that “... several weeks of daily contacts with European statesmen in Brest-Litovsk, Berlin and Vienna has stimulated Talaat and permitted him to catch up the education that he lacked...” (p. 357).

In many instances in his book, Mr. Kieser alleges that Talat Pasha was the forerunner of the 20th century despots who reigned in Europe and he even extends this description to Atatürk: “After Talaat’s fall, Lenin, Stalin, Mussolini and Hitler led empires. All claimed to be backed by domestic majorities- the people, the working class... In this way they justified systematic persecution of ostracized domestic groups...” (p. 29); “Atatürk revolution of the 1920’s did not make a break from, but built on, the demolitionist groundwork of its predecessors...” (p. 30); Talat was “a prototypical revolutionist for the post-Ottoman world; a partisan statesman whose legacy is traceable not only in Turkey...” (p. 30); “Atatürk... followed the former legacy and obeyed its logic to a considerable extent and relied on Talaat’s team...” (p. 31); “...Talaat’s inaugural speech of 15 February 1917, its rhetoric and contents could almost verbally be from Atatürk” (p. 325); “General Mustafa Kemal, started to inherit Talaat’s political role, including his staff and finally his post-1918 organization of Turkish nationalism...” (p. 319).

Mr. Kieser depreciates the legal reforms carried out under the Republic of Turkey and even uses the term “so-called” to describe them: “Atatürk’s so-called Law Revolution.”

According to Mr. Kieser, “The synergy of Islamism and Turkish ethno-nationalism, an aggressive pattern of power concentration did not die off after the World War II” (p. 354).

Mr. Kieser does not conceal his lopsided views on the Treaty of Lausanne either and goes on to misrepresent them as well. Was it the Ankara Government who suggested the exchange of populations based on religion? According to Mr. Kieser:

“We must see why generations of diplomats had come to believe that the 1923 Near East Treaty of Lausanne had solved the late Ottoman questions, although endorsing Talaat’s legacy it evidently failed to do so in a constructive way... The Peace of Lausanne endorsed authoritarian rule and the unmixing of population according to religion. It seemed to have opened a new chapter for the post-Ottoman world, but instead it perpetuated patterns and principles of Talaat’s governance, even making them part of an attractive paradigm for law-breaking radical solutions far beyond Turkey.” (p. 34)

Mr. Kieser also accuses Mustafa Kemal of committing genocide against Pontic Greeks: “This time the target was the Rum of Pontus... As soon as he (Mustafa Kemal) landed in Samsun on 19 May 1919, Talaat’s heir, Kemal was to continue the destruction of this Christian minority... Led by Kemal’s general Nureddin Pasha... (a notorious fanatic) action, was the first military action... of the ‘Turkish war of salvation.’” (p.355); “Mustafa Kemal resumed Talaat’s Pontus policy of 1916-17,” “this involved collective physical annihilation of the Rum of Pontus at the Black Sea” (p.320).

Mr. Kieser accuses Turkish authorities of genocide denial. It seems that Kieser could not accept the fact that Doğu Perinçek, convicted by the Swiss Courts for saying “Armenian Genocide is an international lie,” successfully sued Switzerland and won his case at the European Court of Human Rights: “Successors ... of Talaat on a continuous basis supported the denial of the 1915 genocide. This was and is an unethical opportunism that trivializes genocide denial” (p.309).

When reading Kieser’s books, a passage which led me to lose all respect for his study reads as follows: “[Talaat’s] striking emphasis on honesty, modest property and a limited amount of money... may suggest a strategic lie... He may have taken important assets with him that allowed him to agitate in and from Berlin...” (p. 382). Kieser’s allegations are completely baseless. I had listened to the relevant facts first hand from Hayriye Hanım and my mother who had lived through such tragic times. In Berlin, the family had to endure

great financial difficulties and had to live on by selling Hayriye Hanım's jewellery. Kieser's baseless accusations of Talat Pasha in this regard leads us to the conclusion that the historian used his pen to reflect his political views rather than presenting an academic study.

The information provided by Mr. Kieser regarding Hayriye Hanım is also misleading. Kieser alleges that Hayriye Hanım was from Yanya and came from a "modest" Albanian family. In fact, Hayriye Hanım was from Konitsa and was the daughter of a local notable family and not of a modest one.

I reach the following conclusions on Mr. Kieser's study: Many Turkish and non-Turkish academics have already disproved the accusations and claims reflected in Kieser's study as well as proving the unreliable nature of Kieser's sources. One can assume that Kieser wrote his study to pay his debts to those who ordered it from him in the first instance. Disguised under a scholarly outlook with footnotes and lengthy discussions, the book in fact carries resemblance more to a political manifesto, written with the specific purpose of bashing Talat Pasha, the Republic of Turkey, and Atatürk. The author's condescending attitude seeks to put the Ottoman Empire and its peoples, its institutions, the Republic of Turkey, and Atatürk into the strict shapes defined by the author and does not take into consideration the flow of events and the existential threats that the Ottoman Empire had faced. He also fails to take into consideration the existing legal norms of the events described in his biography and instead anachronistically passes judgments on the basis of norms which did not exist at the time.

Coming back to Yücel Güçlü's analysis of Mr. Kieser's book in question, Güçlü notes that Kieser's distortions of the record start with the subtitle of his book wherein Talat Pasha was described by Kieser as "the father of modern Turkey", when in fact this is an assertion based not on reality but Kieser's creative imagination. As Mr. Güçlü notes, it is "common knowledge and a universally accepted fact that the 'Father of Modern Turkey' is Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), founder and the first President of the Turkish Republic" (p. 441) and not Talat Pasha.

Mr. Güçlü correctly observes that Mr. Kieser offers "few arguments or insights that are original. More problematic is author's tendency to reach beyond his supporting evidence in sweeping condemnations of Talaat Pasha and his policies" (p. 442). According to Güçlü, Kieser exaggerates the role of the 1915 events in Raphael Lemkin's career, trying to portray 1915 as the main reason why Lemkin decided to pursue a legal career when in fact in his 700-page book titled *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Lemkin does not even mention the Armenians or Talat Pasha.

Similarly, according to Mr. Güçlü, while Mr. Kieser accuses Talat Pasha for large-scale removal of Kurds from Eastern Anatolia, but Kieser "provides no evidence nor does he elaborate [further]" (p. 442). Likewise, Kieser tries to

cover the fact that Talat Pasha tried to prevent the abuses committed against the Armenians and attempts to downplay Talat's efforts to punish the criminals. Kieser alleges that "there was not one officially filed case for crimes against Armenians," when in fact:

"...more than a thousand people belonging to gendarmerie, army, judiciary, fiscal and other civilian administrations who mistreated the Armenians were tried and condemned... some 1,376 people were given varying degrees of penalties for offenses ... In mid-1916 fifty-one Ottoman soldiers, convicted of mistreating Armenians expelled from the province of Van, had been executed... Government employees found guilty of similar abuses had been deprived of their offices and delivered to the military courts for trial." (Güçlü, p. 442)

According to Mr. Güçlü, an additional problem with Mr. Kieser's account is his use of propagandistic sources such as the memoirs and letters of American Ambassador Henry Morgenthau. Morgenthau's accounts had a strong propagandistic motive, "to uncover or manufacture news that would goad the United States into joining the war against Germany" (Güçlü, p. 443).

Mr. Kieser's discussion of the 1909 Adana events presents similar problems. According to Mr. Güçlü, Kieser overlooks the extensive arming among the Armenians of Adana which contributed to the outbreak of violence in the region. This was so serious that even an American missionary admitted that "even in missionary schools one had difficulty in keeping revolvers, daggers, etc. out of the hands of Armenian students" (p. 444).

Similarly, Mr. Kieser misrepresents the discussions in the Ottoman parliament, alleging that from April to July 1909, the government in İstanbul and most deputies, including those in the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), took "at face value the report of the vali (governor) of Adana, Mehmed Cevad" (p. 444). The reality, however, was much more different. Not only the members of the parliament and cabinet questioned the governor's version of events but, according to Mr. Güçlü, many deputies even requested the dismissal of the governor. In addition, Kieser fails to mention that "that the mufti of Bahçe, İsmail Hakkı, and his brother were hanged by the military court-martial for their crimes of massacres of April 1909" (p. 445). A further 25 persons connected to the violence in the province were also hanged by the government. None of these are mentioned by Kieser.

Mr. Kieser likewise ignores the efforts of Ahmet Cemal Bey (later Pasha) to help the victims of the Adana catastrophe of 1909. During his governorship of the province of Adana in 1909–1911, "Ahmet Cemal took several measures to alleviate distress among the Turks and Armenians. Ruined towns and villages were reconstructed. Many of the burned streets were rebuilt, new streets were opened up, old streets widened" (p. 445). During Ahmet Cemal's tenure in the province, trade boomed, attracting a large volume of business and "thousands

of parentless children were being cared for under conditions that were better than they had ever before known, Armenians built their lives anew” (p. 445). All of these were done with the active support and assistance of the CUP and Talat Pasha, yet these are entirely ignored by Kieser.

Mr. Güçlü also takes issues with Mr. Kieser’s flawed use of the term genocide for the Armenian experience of 1915. Noting that “genocide” is a legal term defined by international law that can only be determined by competent tribunal, Güçlü questions Kieser’s expertise in the legal field and reminds the readers that “court decision exists for the Holocaust and for Rwanda but not for the Armenian suffering” (p. 446).

In constructing his narrative, Mr. Kieser relies “mainly on memoirs, diaries, letters, and an array of secondary literature” (p. 446). He uses archival sources selectively and only occasionally. Major and crucial collections of the Ottoman archives are left out. Similarly, holdings of the ATASE (General Staff Archives) are neglected. Relevant French and American archives are also not consulted by Kieser.

Finally, Kieser’s study suffers from an unusually high number of factual errors. To quote Mr. Güçlü on this point:

“...the Central Committee of the CUP had its headquarters in Şeref Street not in Nur-i Osmaniye Street in İstanbul (p. 2); Joseph Pomiankowski, the Austrian Military Attaché in İstanbul from 1909 to 1918 was not a General but a Lieutenant Field Marshal (p. 12); Midhat Şükrü (Bleda) was not a Dr., having no doctoral degree in any field of study (p. 46); in 1909, Gabriel Noradunghian was not the minister of economy and culture but minister of commerce and public works (p. 82). No post of minister of economy and culture existed at the time; the name of the social club in the Beyoğlu area of İstanbul in 1913 was not Club d’Orient but Circle d’Orient (p. 149); Cemal Pasha was not the military governor of Syria but the commander of the Fourth Army and governor general for Syria, Palestine and Sinai in 1914–17 (p. 253); the grand vizier who was assassinated on 11 June 1913 was Mahmud Shevket Pasha and not Mahmud Cevdet Pasha (p. 303); not five but seven Unionist leaders left İstanbul on the night of 1 November 1918. Dr. Rüşühi and Cemal Azmi were also included (p. 381); Talaat Pasha did not flee but left Turkey (pp. 381 and 418). Because he did not hold any office nor had any official duty at that date, he did not need the prior permission or consent of any authority to depart from the country; there was no government investigation nor any legal proceedings against Talaat Pasha that would compel him to continue residing on Turkish territory; the translation into Turkish of Oriental Club is not Şark Kulübesi but Şark Kulübü (p. 385); it was not the Ambassador Franz von Papen but the German Consul in İstanbul and not the Prime Minister Şükrü Saraçoğlu but his representative who attended the burial

procession of Talaat Pasha's remains on the Hill of Eternal Liberty in Istanbul on 25 February 1943 (p. 420); the remains of no other member of the CUP were brought back to the Hill of Eternal Liberty for reburial after those of Enver Pasha's near Belcivan in the present-day Republic of Tajikistan on 4 August 1996 (p. 420). Cemal Pasha's soul continues to rest on the grounds of Kars Kapı military graveyard in Erzurum and those of Bahaettin Şakir and Cemal Azmi at the Muslim cemetery in Berlin. It is the earnest hope of the present reviewer that their bones are disinterred and transferred to the Hill of Eternal Liberty where their comrades are laid to the ground; Celal Bayar was not born in 1893 but in 1883 (p. 453 n157); the subtitle of Celal Bayar's memoirs is not *Milli Mücadeleye Giriş*, but *Milli Mücadeleye Gidiş*, (p. 491)." (p. 448).

Mr. Güçlü concludes that Mr. Kieser's study fails to make an important and impartial contribution to the literature. The Swiss author did not bring new material about Talat Pasha, his origins, his upbringing, his political career, and family life. His inquiry does not supply a correct evaluation. Ninety-seven years since Talat Pasha's death, Kieser's study represents an empirically and interpretively flawed account, thus leading many readers to "wonder how Princeton University Press published it" (Güçlü, p. 449) as a scholarly historical work.