

# ARMENIAN ISSUE AS REFLECTED IN RUSSIAN ARCHIVAL RECORDS

**Mehmet Perinçek\***

## **Abstract:**

The Czarist Russian and Soviet archival records gain significance with regard to much debated and controversial accounts of Armenian genocides – the issue laden with accusations and counter accusations founded on concocted and fabricated narratives fed by imperial powers to facilitate the division and share of booty of Ottoman territory. Czarist Russia and Soviets were the most important witness of the event, besides contending parties of Armenian and Turkey, between 1915 and 1923. The documents include besides state records, the Dashnak documents, who themselves were controlled and exploited by imperial Russia and Soviets for their own designs. These documents reflect the tragic saga of killings, massacres of Armenians and retaliation by Turks during these fateful years, resulting in ethnic cleansing of Armenians as well as Turkish Muslims of Armenia. The records depict living conditions of Ottoman Armenians, rise of Armenians nationalism, its enticement to Czarist plans, the Dashnak design to annihilate majority Muslim population of Ottoman Armenia, besides imperialist intrigues leading to genocides with an utter disregard to human values and international moral codes of conduct.

## **Keywords:**

Russia, Armenia, Ottoman Turkey, czarist, Soviets, Archives.

## **Introduction:**

The accusation of Armenian genocide has been one of the leading issues for Turkey and the world. The events that took place between 1915 and 1923 were witnessed, apart from the Turkish and the Armenian sides, by Czarist Russia and Soviet Russia. Consequently, the Russian state archives contain documents that lead in determining the truth. The archival records are:

- Russian documents from the Czarist era, the military archives of Czarist Russia and the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs;
- Russian documents from the Soviet era, the archives of the Soviet Russia Communist Party (currently, Russian Social, Political, and Historical State Archive), the archives of the Soviet era Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Red Army archives;
- In addition, documents relating to both the Czarist and Soviet era in the Russian Federation State Archives.

## **The Importance of Russian State Archives:**

Firstly, Czarist Russia was one of the powerful states that fought a war to divide and share the Ottoman territory, and kept detailed records on the events before and after the 1915 deportation of the Armenians.

---

\* **Research Assistant, Istanbul University, Turkey:** mperincek@hotmail.com

Secondly, during the Turkish Independence War, Soviet Russia fought at the same front line as the Revolutionary Turkey in Anatolia. The Russian Caucasus front had joined the eastern Turkish front against the British Caucasus line. The Russian archive is therefore a primary source of information for this period.

Thirdly, due to the fact that Russia was in control of the Dashnaks, a good part of the Dashnak documents were kept in Czarist Russian archives. Furthermore, in the Soviet archives numerous important records exist in addition to the archives of Soviet Armenia. Many documents in the Armenian state archives are not open to public. Therefore, it is possible to obtain these records only through the Russian state archives. Azerbaijan and Georgian sources also supplement to the information available in the Russian ones.

While the observations of the German generals, English officers and American missionaries can be called subjective, still then leaving aside their imperialist intentions, Russians witnessed and recorded the events as a state at all stages. Considering that the Russian state archives also house records from both Armenian and other Caucasian republics it will not be an exaggeration to claim that they provide the most important documentation concerning the Armenian issue.

Many communications and top secret reports written by high-ranking officials from Czarist Russia, Soviet Russia, Dashnaks and Soviet Armenia are available at the Russian archives. These documents include the confessions of those who claim that an Armenian genocide took place as well as those that used the Armenian question against Turkey. They are of special importance as they reflect the observations of a strong third party such as the Czarist Russia or Soviet Russia and constitute strong and valid international evidence. Particularly, the reports and internal communications demonstrate the frank evaluation of truth by state officials.

### **Main Points Emanating from Russian State Archives:**

The common feature of the documents at the Russian state archives is that they basically debate the international false fabrication of an Armenian genocide. I carried out research for eleven years, starting in 1998, on the Armenian question in the Czarist and Soviet Russian state archives and wish to share my conclusions drawn from those records:

1. Before and after the World War I, during both inter-state wars and in the course of civilian strives mass killings were experienced. Considering that 200,000 Armenian soldiers were serving in the Czarist Russian army, it can be concluded that many of them died during those wars. Secondly, when the Armenian bandit gangs embarked ethnic cleansing of Turks in collaboration with foreign states, the Ottoman State intervened and the fights led to the loss of many lives from both sides. Thirdly, outside the war fronts between

- armies, violent clashes occurred between Armenians and the Muslim population (Turks and Kurds) where a large number of people died.
2. The documents establish that, between 1915 and 1920, Armenian bandits in Southern Caucasus followed a systematic ethnic cleansing policy towards Turks, Azeri Turks and Kurds in Eastern Anatolia, as well as in Cilicia (today's Adana-Maras region).
  3. The main responsible parties of inter-state wars as well as of Muslim-Armenian violence were the Western Imperialists and Czarist Russia. The big states that wanted to divide and share the Ottoman territory provoked the Armenian organisations to fight. Under these circumstances, the Ottoman State and the Muslim population took strong action to suppress the revolting Armenian gangs which was but a rightful war to defend the fatherland.

### **Armenian Records in the Czarist Archives:**

The records in the archives of the Czarist era on the Armenian question cover principally the period between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and 1919. There are naturally earlier records as well. Although the Czarist era ended with the 1917 February and October Revolutions, one can also find some records from later years in these archives due to the continuing existence for a while of the White Army, the Kolchak Government and of the Caucasian Front Headquarters in Tbilisi.

### **Living Conditions of the Armenians in the Ottoman State:**

The documents in the archives of the Czarist era refer to the excellent living conditions of the Armenians, and to the fact that they were particularly supported and protected by the Ottoman State until the intervention of imperialist state particularly with the 1878 Berlin Conference. According to the communications of the Czarist authorities, the living conditions of the Ottoman Armenians were superior to those of the Russian Armenians. For this reason, many Armenians fled from the Czarist Russia and found refuge in the Ottoman Empire. Ottoman dominant classes never made ethnic distinctions in their exploitation of the people. In fact, in many instances, Armenian peasants were better off than the Muslims. Armenians gained special status through their activities in trade and crafts. Furthermore, nationalities under the rule of the Ottoman State, particularly, Turks, Kurds and Armenians, lived in full harmony.

These documents provide evidence to the fact that the propaganda pursued by Western states and Czarist Russia concerning the living conditions of the Armenians within the Ottoman State was aimed at legitimizing the rationale of their intention to invade and break up the Ottoman territory. Exaggerated and falsified claims were fabricated in order to create public opinion and to justify imperialist aggression and accordingly some of the fanatic historians wrote the propagandist

theories about the living conditions of the Armenians in the Ottoman time.

**The Rise of Armenian Nationalism and its Characteristics:**

Documents from the Czarist archives of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century point to the rise of Armenian nationalism parallel to the rise of Czarist motives of using the Armenians against the Turks. Particularly, the Armenian publications and documents in the archives from that period clearly indicate the collaborative, fanatic and aggressive features of Armenian nationalism. The Armenian intellectuals in the Caucasus were dreaming of building up an Armenian State, starting from late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and were trying to forcefully spread these ideas among the Turkish Armenians.

**The Role of Western Europe in the Armenian Problem:**

Western Europe and Russia were competing with each other in the manipulation of the Armenians to break up Eastern Anatolia. The reports of Russian officials underline the provocations and incitements of the British in the Armenian issue. The same authorities observed that these were methods, on the one hand, to disrupt the Russo-Ottoman relations, and on the other hand, to support the separatist guerrilla movement in the Ottoman State to split the empire's territory.

**Missions Entrusted to the Armenians During the World War I:**

The communications and meetings of the Dashnaks with the Czarist Russian authorities show that the Armenians were entrusted with two missions within the framework of the invasion of Anatolia. Firstly, the Armenians would revolt behind the back of the Turkish Army's frontlines to weaken it. Secondly, the Armenian voluntary units would breach the Turkish army's defensive lines to make the Russian conquest easier. There are numerous reports written by Russian officials supporting this intention. All these plans were implemented under the supervision of the Western countries and Czarist Russia.

**Ottoman Armenians Enticed by Imperialist Plans:**

The Ottoman Armenians played an active role in the fulfilment of both missions mentioned above. The issue cannot be attributed to a few Dashnaks. It is also true that a large number of Armenians participated in the formation of voluntary units and in the organisation of the uprisings. The archives are full of applications by Ottoman Armenians to serve in the Czarist army and to fight against the Turks in the voluntary units. The names of thousands of Armenians of Ottoman nationality, doctors, university students, intellectuals and even simple peasants, are listed in the archives. These documents are particularly important as they demonstrate that the threat to the Ottoman State was not limited by the separatist movement leaders and revolutionaries but also by the Ottoman Armenians and hence their deportation.

**Massacre and Looting Policies of the Armenian Voluntary Units:**

Hundreds of reports written by Czarist generals as well as hundreds of records and verdicts of the Czarist military courts demonstrate that the

Armenian voluntary units committed massacres of the Muslim population in the regions invaded during World War I and looted their properties. According to these documents, it was done in a systematic manner. Even the Russian commanders that manipulated the Armenian guerrillas were horrified by their violence. For this reason, many Armenian officers and soldiers were tried in the military courts of the Czarist army and even were sentenced death penalty. It is particularly important to note that these massacres and lootings were committed before the deportation of the Armenians.

***The “Armenia without Armenians” project of Czarist Russia:***

The internal communications of the Czarist authorities provide evidence of Russian plans to provoke the Armenians to massacre the Turks and to settle Dinyeper Kazahks in the invaded regions. Czarist authorities called this project “Armenia without Armenians”.

**Armenian Records in Soviet Archives:**

Most of the records in the Soviet archives primarily cover the period after 1917; however, they also include the explanations of the Soviet officials who evaluated the past events.

**The Armenian question is an imperialist issue:**

Soviet leaders such as Lenin and Stalin and Armenian Bolshevik theoreticians made a number of statements concerning the root cause of the Armenian question reflected in many reports and communications. According to those statements, the Armenian issue was used by the imperialist states as a means to break up the Ottoman territory. While the Turks fought a legitimate war to defend their fatherland, the responsible parties of this tragedy were the imperialist countries that pursued the policy of using the Armenians and the Dashnaks that played according to their plans.

**The Dashnak Armenia and the Policy of Ethnic Cleansing:**

The Soviet leaders observed that, according to the British policy, Dashnak Armenia was meant to be wall between the reformist Turkey and Soviet Russia and that following World War I, it was one of the subcontractors in the region serving the imperialist intentions. Dashnak Armenia also served as a base of the Western countries in the East to materialise their plans.

The Soviet documents provide evidence of the ethnic cleansing the Dashnaks undertook within the boundaries of what is known today as Armenia. In order to create a “pure” national state, the Dashnak powers annihilated the majority of the Muslim population. Furthermore, the Muslim population of the Adana and Maras regions, then called Cilicia, was slaughtered under the supervision of the French. The Armenian population had also its share from the Dashnak dictatorship. Soviet documents provide evidence of the violence the Armenian population suffered under the Dashnaks.

**Turkish-Soviet Entente and the Suppression of Dashnak Armenia:**

Soviet documents show that the collaboration between the Turkish Army and the Red Army in Armenia brought an end to Dashnak power and resulted in Soviets taking control. The Turkish Army's operation towards Armenia, that is claimed to be genocide today, was supported and considered as a progressive move by Soviet officials. This Turkish operation was taken as legitimate defence of their land.

It is for this reason that today the Armenian nationalists attack the Soviet leadership as much as they do Talat Pasha and Enver Pasha. The Armenian Union of Russia published a book entitled *The Protectors and Partners in the Armenian Genocide* which is a compilation of documents on this particular issue charging leaders like Lenin and Stalin with taking part in the Armenian genocide. The Armenian diaspora as well as politicians and academicians underline that Russia bears equal responsibility in the "Armenian genocide" as that of Turkey. Many have otherwise also published documents and organised meetings to disseminate their alleged theories in a deliberate effort to condemn Russians and the Soviets.

**The Dashnak Policies Spurred by the Nazis in World War II:**

Dashnaks continued playing their WWI role during WWII, this time on the side of Hitler's Germany. Dashnaks, as voluntary units within the fascist German army, committed crimes against local populations.

**Muslim Population Versus Armenian Population:**

Czarist as well as Soviet records substantiate that the Muslim population of the region was in irrefutable majority compared to the Armenian population.

These records are therefore fundamental to reconstruct the history of Turks, Ottomans, Armenians and that of the Russians besides many others who played their role during pre and post World War I. Howsoever a nationalist one can be, history writing demands objectivity and truthfulness and Russians records help to lead towards both.