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The emergence and process of ottoman historical research in the documents of Hungarian researcher Imre Karácson

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Abstract

The re-implementation of the Constitutional Era in the Ottoman Empire on July 24, 1908, eliminated the restrictions of the previous period and paved the way for freedoms in many respects. While political and social changes occurred that would yield significant results in Turkish history, there were also impacts on the cultural sphere. Foremost among these cultural developments were the steps taken toward writing a comprehensive Ottoman History.

Sultan Mehmed V Reşad, who ascended the throne following Sultan Abdülhamid II and possessed a great interest in history, ordered the preparation of a "perfect" book on Ottoman history. Contrary to traditional Ottoman historiography, this work was to be prepared in accordance with modern historiographical examples and based strictly on archival documents. For this purpose, a history committee (Tarih-i Osmanî Encümeni) was established, chaired by the last official chronicler (vakanüvis), Abdurrahman Şeref Efendi. Among the committee's members—consisting of both permanent and corresponding members—was the Hungarian Imre Karácson. Since 1907, Karácson had been tasked with researching Hungarian historical documents within the Ottoman archives and libraries. In this article, we will trace the founding stages of the Ottoman History Committee and information regarding its activities through Karácson's personal diary (The diary in which Imre Karácson recorded events from his arrival in Istanbul until his death is held today in the manuscript section of the Széchényi Library in Budapest, under file number 2651 Vol I-II. and the letters he wrote to his superiors (The letters Karácson wrote to his superior, Lajos Thallóczy, are held in the manuscript section of the same library in Budapest, under file number Fond XI/516.)

Keywords: Ottoman historiography; Tarih-i Osmanî Encümeni (Ottoman History Committee); Tarih-i Osmanî Encümeni Mecmuası (Journal of the Ottoman History Committee); Ottoman Archives; Imre Karácson

1. Introduction

National historiography based on archives and primary sources began in Europe during the late 18th and early 19th centuries, particularly following the emergence of the nation-state structure after the French Revolution. To facilitate this, state archives were first organized and made accessible to historians. Consequently, these institutional structures assumed a central role in the writing of national history.

National historiography in the Ottoman Empire followed the same path. Previously, historical works were written with the aim of reinforcing the state's legitimacy and glorifying the dynasty. However, a scientific transformation in historiography began in the first half of the 19th century through foreign historians such as Hammer and Zinkeisen, who authored Ottoman histories; this shift began to influence Ottoman historians from the second half of the century onward (Kurt, Tarih-i Osmani/Türk Tarih Encümeni Mecmuasında Osmanlı ve Avrupa Tarihlerine Yöneltilen Eleştiriler, 1 November 1922, p.315).

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As a result of Sultan Reşad's interest in history and initiatives aimed at instilling national consciousness and patriotism in the public—in line with the new political understanding of the Second Constitutional Era—the idea of penning a "perfect" Ottoman history emerged. To achieve this, the Ottoman History Delegation (Tarih-i Osmani Heyeti) was established, followed by the formation of the Ottoman History Committee (Tarih-i Osmani Encümeni) on November 27, 1909, upon the proposal of Grand Vizier Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha and the approval of Sultan Mehmed Reşad. The purpose, organization, duties, and members of the Committee were outlined in a charter prepared by Necip Âsım (Yazıksız) (Özcan, 2011, p. 83). During the Committee's first meeting, it was also decided to publish an 80-page journal titled TOEM (Tarih-i Osmani Encümeni Mecmuası) once every two months (Özcan, 2011, p. 84).

2. The Assignment of Imre Karácson for Research Purposes

Hungarians have recognized the importance of Ottoman archives for their own history since the first half of the 19th century. Through their scientific studies in this field, they contributed greatly to both Turkish history and their own by establishing Turkology as a formal branch of science. From this period onward, they began visiting Istanbul and the Ottoman archives to fill the missing gaps in their national history. The second half of the century marked the "golden age" of Turkish studies in Hungary. Research trips that began in the 1860s to locate the Hungarian Corvinas in Istanbul eventually evolved into a broader investigation of Ottoman-Turkish sources. Numerous esteemed Hungarian scholars followed the path opened by Ármín (Arminius) Vámbéry (1832–1913), a tradition that continues today.

The reasons behind the Hungarian researchers' desire to conduct work in Turkey can be summarized as follows:

- **Shifting Perceptions:** The negative image created by nearly 150 years of Ottoman rule in Hungary began to change positively after the Ottoman Empire granted asylum to famous Hungarian heroes of the war for independence.
- **Political Asylum:** Following the invitation of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II (1676–1735) and his companions to Turkish lands, the asylum granted to Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894) and his followers after the 1848–1849 Hungarian Revolution—and the hospitality they received—created a friendly atmosphere in Hungary.
- **Geopolitics:** The Habsburgs, once seen as protectors against the Ottomans, were now viewed negatively for defeating the Hungarian War of Independence. Conversely, the idea of supporting the Ottomans as a balancing force against Russian influence in the Balkans created favorable grounds for Ottoman-Hungarian relations.

This positive climate reflected onto the scientific world, increasing interest in Turkish history in Hungary. However, despite the enthusiasm, researchers faced numerous obstacles. These included the complex structure of the Ottoman bureaucracy, the difficulties of the permit system, frequent political changes, and subsequent shifts in administrative positions. Combined with financial hardships, this list of challenges was enough to discourage even the most determined researcher (Ildiko Arbanasz, 2005, pp. 7–29).

Despite these difficulties, some remained eager. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy appointed Lajos Thallóczy (1857–1916)—a historian, archivist, and the "father of Balkan studies"—as the director of the Hofkammerarchiv (Imperial Treasury Archive) in Vienna under the Ministry of Finance. After being elected president of the Hungarian Historical Society in 1913, Thallóczy played a vital role in facilitating historical research in Turkey and repatriating the remains of prominent Hungarian exiles (Şenol, 2024).

Due to his official duties, Thallóczy conducted brief archival research in Istanbul with permission from Sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), but he could not achieve his desired results due to a lack of time. What was needed was a hardworking individual with a high command of Turkish and the ability to read Ottoman Turkish archival documents. This person was Dr. Imre Karácson, whose skill had been proven through his translations and several previous visits to Turkey to master the language. His theological training and his status as an unmarried priest made him the perfect candidate (Bene, 1917). Financial support for the mission was provided by the Hungarian Prime Minister of the time, Sándor Wekerle (1848–1921).

Aware of the importance of his task and filled with enthusiasm, Imre Karácson arrived in Istanbul—a city he knew well—on April 6, 1907. A grueling process awaited him. It would take nearly a year and a half of repeated applications through the embassy to obtain the necessary Sultan's decree to work in the archives. For Karácson, who possessed a high sense of duty and a desire to start immediately, this long delay caused great distress.

While trying every possible avenue to obtain the decree, Karácson did not remain idle (Imre Karácson died on May 2, 1911, after falling ill in Istanbul for a reason not precisely known; according to Hungarian historians it was due to blood poisoning, while Turkish historians attribute it to influenza.); he conducted research in the libraries of mosques and

churches in Istanbul and various other provinces. From the day of his arrival until his death, he recorded his experiences in a diary that is today considered a valuable primary source. His diary and the letters he wrote to his superior and mentor, Lajos Thallóczy, serve as witnesses to many political, social, and cultural events of the era, particularly the Ottoman historical research that is the subject of this article.

When examining his writings from the perspective of historical research, it is evident that Karácson was most troubled by the negative attitudes toward history and historical inquiry. As mentioned at the beginning of the article, archive-based research was unfamiliar to the Turks at the time. Consequently, a researcher could face numerous hurdles. Due to internal and external political reasons, the Turks were especially suspicious of a foreigner wishing to examine old Turkish documents.

3. The Beginning of Turkish Historical Research and the Foundation of the Ottoman History Committee

Through the letters and diaries of Imre Karácson, we can trace the immense challenges faced by the Ottoman History Committee (Tarih-i Osmani Encümeni), which was tasked with writing a new history of the Empire. Karácson occasionally fell into despair regarding the future of these studies, cited by the lack of a modern archival understanding in Turkey and the dilapidated state of neglected archives. However, new developments eventually sparked hope. In a letter dated May 9, 1909, he wrote: "*...The seed of the Turkish Academy is sprouting in the Turkish Association... Yesterday was the association's meeting, and I attended. We discussed the plan to write the great Turkish history.*"

During the establishment of the Committee and the commencement of archival work, the Turks sought to benefit from Karácson's expertise. Since his arrival, he had exerted great effort in researching documents related to Hungarian history and had written informative articles for both Hungarian and Turkish media. Due to his foreign status, he was elected as a corresponding member. He attended meetings, provided guidance, and—as noted in his diaries—offered critical feedback on structural deficiencies. In an obituary written after Karácson's death, Necip Asım noted that Karácson contributed significantly to his colleagues through his deep knowledge, multilingualism, and sincere love for Turkish history and literature (Asım, 1911, pp. 516-520).

Determining the methodology for the national history book was one of the most challenging issues for the committee members. In his diary entry dated June 28, 1909, Karácson noted the dilemma regarding the approach to be taken: "*...The members of the Turkish History Committee have differing thoughts and opinions on historiography. These gentlemen are debating whether they should write this new history book based on documents or old chronicles, and whether they should use European sources or only Muslim ones...*"

This debate was eventually resolved in favor of a document-based history. However, this decision brought a new crisis: the members, visiting the archives for the first time, were horrified to find they had no idea where to locate specific documents.⁽¹⁾ For more extensive information regarding the Turkish archival system and the arrangements made, see Archive Issues, Lajos Fekete, trans. Tayyip Gökbilgin, State Printing House, Istanbul, 1939; The Place of Lajos Fekete, the Hungarian-Origin Turkish Historian and Archivist, in *Our Archival Practice*, Bilge Kaya, General Directorate of State Archives, Ankara, 1994.) The existing archives in Istanbul operated under a system entirely different from Western models and lacked catalogs. Furthermore, while state documents from the Empire's peak had been meticulously preserved, they had been neglected after the administrative center shifted from Topkapı Palace to the Sublime Porte (Babıali). This neglect led to significant damage, with many vital documents in the Topkapı Palace archives succumbing to mold and decay.⁽¹⁾ In order to ensure that many documents could be easily found when needed, in 1846 Sultan Abdülmecid issued an imperial decree for the construction of a modern archival building. Accordingly, a building that would meet modern archival needs was commissioned at the Babıali and constructed by the Italian architect Fossati. See: Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives (<https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/basbakanlik-osmanli-arsivi>). After the restoration carried out in 2007, this building has been serving as a national and international research, archival documentation, and reading hall.)

To address this, the urgent reorganization and classification of the archives were proposed. The primary concern was determining which system to adopt. Abdurrahman Şeref, the last Ottoman chronicler and former Minister of Education, sought help from Karácson. In a letter to Lajos Thallóczy dated June 5, 1909, Karácson wrote that Abdurrahman Efendi had requested his assistance—even suggesting he take full charge of the reorganization. Karácson, feeling inexperienced in this specific task, asked his superior for guidance, and Thallóczy subsequently sent a draft plan.

In the first issue of the committee's journal (TOEM, April 1909), Abdurrahman Şeref wrote regarding this draft:

"Dr. Karácson... who has been conducting research in our city for two years, is a corresponding member of our Committee. He brought a special volume from Vienna that describes in detail the images, plans, internal divisions, and regulations of the Vienna Archive. The grandeur of the building and its internal order are astonishing. One cannot help but wish for the same here. There is even a photography room to provide immediate copies for researchers..."

Despite these plans, Karácson's letter from September 14, 1909, reflects deep frustration:

"...Regarding the Turkish archives, we are treading water; as is customary with the Turks, nothing has been done. Currently, in the Kubbealtı section of the Palace, numerous writings are piled haphazardly. These Turkish brothers are strange people; they start everything with great fanfare but follow through with nothing. It is the same with the history book ordered by the Sultan. They formed a large committee under Abdurrahman Bey, held meetings with great ceremony, and gave long statements to the press, yet not a single person has actually started working. The Sultan will not see this book published."

In his diary entry dated July 10, 1909, Karacson recorded the following about the journal that the Encümen intended to publish: "...*The Turks rush into everything. Today, Ahmed Saib Bey set out to publish a historical journal without having the necessary materials in hand. Another journal, meanwhile, is something Ahmed Refik wishes to publish...*"

In his diary dated April 16, 1910, he wrote: "...*The first issue of the Turkish Historical Journal was published today, with its first page in French and Turkish. The editorial board took the name 'Institut d'Histoire Ottomane'. This institute has 12 permanent members and many auxiliary members. They also registered me as a foreign corresponding member. We shall see how they conduct this work...*"

Karácson wrote an article on İbrahim Müteferrika in the third issue of TOEM, the journal of the Association, upon the request of the members (Karácson, 1326/1910, pp. 178–185). After the journal, the article, which received great appreciation from readers after being published in the newspaper İkdam, set an example not only because of its subject but also with its references to sources and its style of writing (Kurt, 2025, p. 234).

In Karácson's diary dated August 27, 1910, we learn that a new place was allocated to the Türk Tarihi Derneği in Babiali. However, while the members of the Encümen were complaining about the smallness of this room, which was used as the Vakanüvislik office at that time, Karácson thought differently from the other members on this matter. In the article that Necip Asım wrote to TOEM after Karácson's death, he included the following statement regarding this issue: "Sir, why do you complain? Such societies begin under a tent, then move to palaces" (Asım, June 1, 1327, p. 518).

In the notes dated January 18, 1911 in the diary, Karacson, who regularly attended the meetings, makes the following observations about the methods, works, and members of the association: "*The Turks cannot give the necessary form to such an association, they cannot fully establish its purpose; only a few influential people use other individuals, who are not members but work for the association, for their own purposes, and this alienates them from the work and drives them away.*"

As the first year of the association's establishment was coming to an end, in his note dated February 15, 1911, he recorded: "...*In the afternoon I was at the Encümen meeting. As usual, they again did nothing. However, as is customary, they took new decisions that they will not be able to realize. The sixth issue of the Encümen's journal has been printed. Thus, one year has been completed.*"

Another reason for Karácson's dissatisfaction with the works of the Encümen was that some members, who at the beginning asked him many things, consulted him, and obtained information from him, later acted as if these were their own ideas. For this reason, he was offended by them and complained, saying "*if they have the knowledge, they should write the history book themselves.*"

In the notes dated January 18, 1911 in the diary, Karacson, who regularly attended the meetings, makes the following observations about the association's methods, activities and members: "*The Turks cannot give such an association the required form, they cannot fully establish its purpose, only a few influential people use other individuals who are not members but work for the association for their own purposes, and this cools them off from the work and drives them away.*"

As the first year of the association's establishment was ending, in his note dated February 15, 1911, he recorded: "...*In the afternoon I was at the Committee meeting. As usual, they again did nothing. However, as is customary, they took new decisions that they would not be able to implement. The sixth issue of the Committee's journal was printed. Thus, one year was completed.*"

Another reason for Karácson's dissatisfaction with the Committee's activities was that some members, who at the beginning asked him many things, consulted him, and received information from him, later behaved as if these were their own ideas. For this reason, he was offended with them and complained, saying "if they have the knowledge, they should write the history book themselves."

In Karácson's diary, he last attended the Committee on March 22, 1911. He wrote that the meetings before this were either held with very few participants or that there was no noteworthy issue in their content. In fact, in his note dated March 25, 1911, we read that he found interesting documents in the Divan-ı Hümayun archive and that, since he would examine them, he would not have to go to the Committee meetings.

From April 10, 1911 onwards, his health condition began to deteriorate; he frequently developed fever and, due to weakness, reached a state where he could not even leave the house. After a while, his condition worsened further, and on May 2, 2011, he passed away in the hospital.

4. Conclusion

As a result of both archival and historical research he carried out in Istanbul from April 6, 1907, when he arrived by order of the Hungarian Government, until May 2, 1911, when he lost his life, Imre Karácson made great contributions not only to Hungarian historiography but also to Turkish historiography.

He set an example in the work of reorganizing the Ottoman archives according to the modern system and in Ottoman historical studies. Karácson became a living witness of the period he lived in Istanbul. The information contained in his diary, letters, and official reports is of great importance for Turkish history in terms of reflecting the events of the period between 1907 and 1911. Karácson, who took part as a corresponding member within the Tarihi Osmani Encümeni, which is regarded as the foundation of the Türk Tarih Kurumu established in Turkey, conveyed the establishment stages of the committee and the developments as a living witness of these events in his diary and letters. Thus, he made contributions to Turkish history.

Imre Karácson, who fell ill and lost his life during his archival research, is commemorated in his country as a "martyr of science" due to his devoted contributions to historical scholarship.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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