



**Macedonian Translation of Ottoman Archival Documentation
(Development and Experience)**

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Abstract

This text shows the decades-long development of Ottoman studies, primarily in its translation segment, in the current Republic of North Macedonia. The beginnings and the development of the translation of Ottoman documents within the Macedonian historiography are shown, as well as their meaning and use as historical sources by the Macedonian historians. Attention is paid to the problems faced by this translation segment in terms of the long editorial process that is needed to educate a translator in the Ottoman Turkish language, as well as the complexity of this language. There is also a brief overview of the collections and types of original Ottoman documents and manuscripts kept in the Macedonian archives and libraries which constitute the main corpus for translation by Macedonian ottomanists.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; ottoman documentations; Macedonia; archives; translation.

Introduction

The emergence of the Ottoman Empire and its political evolution is certainly one of the most significant phenomena in the overall historical development of Eastern and Western societies and cultures. This vast empire, which spanned three continents, had a lasting and indelible effect on the development of many peoples, regions, and cultures. The Ottoman administration also left a legacy in the form of millions of documents, which today are kept in several archive centers in the world, and testify, among other things, to the history of several dozen nations and states that emerged after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Most of these documents today are kept in the Ottoman State Archives of the Republic of Turkey (Devlet Arşivleri Başkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi), in Istanbul. The foundation of this archive was laid in 1846 by the then Grand Vizier Mustafa Reshid Pasha, when in the courtyard of the Sublime Porte in Istanbul, the construction of a special building intended for an archive called "Hazine-i evraki" began¹. With this were laid the foundations of modern archival science in the Ottoman Empire. This archive was further developed as the central-state archive of the Republic of Turkey.

Among the many territories that became part of the Ottoman state and whose historical and cultural development had a huge and unique influence that is felt even today, was the territory of Macedonia. For more than five centuries Macedonia remained within the vast empire, becoming the last European territory abandoned by the Ottomans. Ottoman domination in Macedonia began with the famous Battle of Çirmen, on the river Marica (1371) near Adrianople (today Edirne in Turkey) and ended with the First Balkan War (1912). These five centuries of Ottoman domination left deep traces in the demographic, spiritual and cultural life of the population living on Macedo-

¹<https://web.archive.org/web/20140209162211/http://www.devletarsivleri.gov.tr/Forms/pgArticle.aspx?Id=0905DF74-362C-4E13-A71A-30CB455085EC>

nian territory. Therefore, the study of the history of Macedonia within the Ottoman Empire is a necessary, interesting, but also extremely complex subject for research within Macedonian historiography. Of course, that research is based on original Ottoman documentation that was left after the Ottomans left Macedonian territory and most of which is kept in the Macedonian state archive and the national library.

Method

The text we present is based on the historical-descriptive method and the thematic-chronological approach. During the research, a retrospective analysis of data obtained from research in appropriate institutions and from general historical literature and sources relevant to the respective topic was applied. Based on that analysis, certain conclusions were drawn through the descriptive-narrative method.

Result

The result of this research is the emphasis of the significance of the imperial Ottoman archival documentation for Balkan historiography, which is the basis of the comparative analysis of the cultural, social and political processes that took place in the Balkans, Anatolia, the Middle East and Africa over a long period under the umbrella of the same administration, bureaucracy and within one legal system. That imperial character of the Ottoman documents transcends today's political boundaries of the small Balkan states and represents their greatest quality. Special attention is devoted to the development of the translation of Ottoman documents in Macedonian historiography after the Second World War, as one of the most fruitful translation schools in the Balkans. The problem of lowering of the number of trained translators for those documents was pointed out, primarily due to the complexity of the Ottoman-Turkish language and the long process of translation training.

Discussion

This text aims to show the decades-long development of Ottoman studies in the current Republic of North Macedonia, and more specifically to show the beginning and development of the translation

of Ottoman documents within Macedonian historiography, as well as the subsequent use of these Ottoman written sources by Macedonian historians. However, before moving on to this aim, it is given a brief overview of the collections of original Ottoman documents and manuscripts that are kept in the Macedonian archives and libraries and that constitute the main corpus for translation.

North Macedonia is one of the countries where there is an extremely rich collection of original Ottoman documents - a result of the five centuries of continuous Ottoman presence in Macedonia and the work of the Ottoman state administration. During this extremely long period, countless documents were written, issued and archived in all major Macedonian cities, especially in places that were administrative centers of *kazas*, *sanjaks* or *vilayets*. Although most of those documents were either destroyed in the frequent wars in the last decades of Ottoman rule or taken to Istanbul when the Ottoman state left these territories, some of them remained in the municipal archives of several Macedonian cities. During many decades of existence and operation, the Macedonian State Archive managed to collect most of these documents in one place and store them in its depot in the capital, Skopje. A small part remained in the Ohrid Archive Department, while another quite small part is still in some other institutions. In this manner was created the rich archival collection in which the total number of Ottoman documents reaches tens of thousands, and in this regard, the Macedonian State Archive is among institutions that have one of the largest and most important collections of Ottoman documents in the Balkans, of course, with exception of the archives of the Republic of Turkey.

Ottoman archival documents kept in Skopje cover the period between the fifteenth - twentieth century. They consist of individual documents with different content such as *fermans*, *berats*, *buyuruldis*, court registers so-called *sidzil*, documents of the official administrative bodies which contain data on the economic history of this region,

documents on the work of the municipal bodies and authorities in the cities, especially from the last decades of the Ottoman rule, etc.

Perhaps the most important of these documents in terms of content and scope are the court protocols, i.e. the registers of litigations and decisions made regarding them. The most famous among these are the Bitola (tur. Manastir) court registers (*Manastir sicilleri*) which consist of 185 volumes and cover the period between 1607 and 1922. These registers are one of the most important sources in terms of local history, the way the legal system functioned in the Ottoman state, as well as in terms of the management of that state of its European territories. Moreover, the Bitola Court Registers are an excellent source of information regarding the position of a judge (tur. *kadi*), their way of working and their relations with the central government in Istanbul. Apart from the Bitola Court Registers, there are ten other books with court registers from the second half of the 19 century, which belong to the municipalities of Debar, Ohrid, Prilep and Tetovo.

Among the Ottoman documents, quite important are also the 117 boxes of books with title deeds belonging to the cities: Florina (today in the Republic of Greece), Bitola, Resen, Prilep, Prespa, Ohrid, Kruševo, Kičevo and Serfidze (today in the Republic of Greece) dating from the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. These books contain records of the property of tens of thousands of people in the mentioned cities and their surroundings. Through these documents, one can easily and reliably analyze the religious and ethnic structure of the property owners referred to in these records for the last decades of Ottoman rule.

Another collection of documents in the Macedonian State Archive from the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century are the documents that arose as a result of the work of the municipal administrative bodies from the cities: Veles, Kočani, Kratovo, Kriva Palanka, Kumanovo, Prilep, Radoviš, Skopje, Tetovo, the Prilep Agricultural Bank, the Police Directorate in Prilep, the Directorate for Title Deeds in Prilep, the Directorate for

Financial Affairs in Prilep and the Commission for Refugees in Skopje. They are an excellent source of information about the work of the local Ottoman administration and the inclusion of all religious and ethnic communities in that administrative structure. Among the mentioned collection of documents, the Document Fund of the Commission for Refugees (*Muhacir komisyonu*) is especially important and interesting. The work of this commission, in a vivid manner, reflects the tragedy experienced by Muslim refugees after the great Russian-Ottoman war of 1877-78, but also the urban changes that were caused by the presence of refugees especially in Skopje.

In addition to these collective Ottoman documents, a collection of individual original documents is available as well. In this collection, there are 80 *fermans* (Sultan's orders) (1469-1916), 153 *berats* (orders, commands) (1702-1911), 28 *waqifnames* (documents for founding a charitable foundation), (1463-1911) and 8 *buyuruldis* (commands of lower-ranking officials). There are also several documents for various religious communities, dervish orders and individuals. It should be noted that since 1995, xerox copies of these original documents can be also found in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul².

An important part of the collection of Ottoman documents in the State Archives of the Republic of North Macedonia is the xerox copies and microfilms of a large number of population censuses and individual documents obtained from the research of dozens of Macedonian orientalist and historians in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul, the General Directorate of Land Registry in Ankara as well as in some other institutions in Republic of Turkey. The number of these films and copies is over 30,000.

² The Ottoman Archives of Istanbul published a special catalog in which all the collections of the original Ottoman documents kept in the State Archives of the Republic of North Macedonia are presented in detail. (Makedonya'daki osmanlı evrakı, T.C. Başkanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü. Osmanlı arşivi Daire Bakanlığı, Yayın Nu: 29, Ankara 1996).

The second-largest original collection of Ottoman documents in the Republic of North Macedonia is located in the city of Ohrid. This collection is kept in 11 boxes in the Archive Department in Ohrid and it, unfortunately, remains unexplored and unclassified. It is estimated that this collection consists of 15,000 documents, but also 2,000 books, of which 350-400 are manuscripts. Of course, in addition to these collections in state institutions, there are certainly many private collections of Ottoman documents, especially among members of the Turkish community in the Republic of North Macedonia.

In addition to the aforementioned collections of Ottoman documents, in North Macedonia, there is a large and rich collection of oriental books and manuscripts written in Arabic, Ottoman Turkish and Persian. This collection is located in the National and University Library "St. Kliment Ohridski" in Skopje. The collection of Arabic manuscripts consists of 2,586 books and fragments, the Ottoman-Turkish manuscripts consist of 1,050 books, and the Persian collection consists of 107 manuscripts.

The above-mentioned archives and collections incite the interests of the Macedonian and Balkan historiography because the Ottoman state had an extraordinary influence on the development of the entire Balkan area. Even today, without any dilemma, it is possible to attribute some of the current processes on Macedonian territory to the Ottoman political, demographic and cultural heritage. Therefore, the understanding of the Balkan and Macedonian present is inevitably linked to the Ottoman past.

The translation and study of Ottoman documents in the Republic of Macedonia began with the establishment of the Department for the Study of the Ottoman-Turkish Period within the Institute of National History in 1948. To talk about the translations of Ottoman documents generally means to talk about the activities of this department, which today is the only specialized department in today's North Macedonia dealing with the translation of Ottoman documents into Macedonian and their study.

The first translations from Ottoman Turkish into Macedonian were published in 1951 entitled *Turkish Documents on Macedonian History* (Турски документи за историјата на Македонија, 1951). Until 1958, from this edition, whose authors were Panta Dzambazovski and Arif Starova, four more volumes came out. The mentioned five volumes contain translations of selected documents from the Bitola Court Registers that cover the period between 1800 and 1858. At the time of publication of these five volumes, in 1955, Dušanka Šopova published a work containing translations of dozens of original Ottoman documents about Macedonia brought from the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul (Шопова, 1955). Later, the translators Metodija Sokolovski, Fetah Isak, Vančo Boškov, Arif Starova and Kemal Aručić participated in the translation work for publishing other parts of the mentioned Bitola Court Protocols (Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ, 1963).

Even though the translations of Ottoman documents in Republic of Macedonia began with the Bitola Court Registers, the largest and most important place among the translation studies of the Macedonian Orientalists is occupied by the Cadastral Census Records (*Tapu tahrir defterleri*). These censuses, which geographically cover the whole territory of Macedonia, were brought to the Macedonian State Archives in the form of microfilms or xerox copy during research conducted in the 1960s at the General Directorate of Land Registry in Ankara (*Tapu ve Kadastro Genel Müdürlüğü*). The translations of the mentioned censuses are an extremely rich and reliable source of information for research on the demographic and economic history of the Ottoman state in general and the settlements and regions to which they refer in particular. The publication of these translations in Republic of Macedonia started in 1971 (Турски документи за историјата на македонскиот народ, 1971). Until 2008, they were published in 11 books in 20 volumes covering the entire geographic territory of Macedonia in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The main translators of these defters are Aleksandar Stojanovski and Metodija Sokolovski.

From the nineties of the last century, the State Archive of the Republic of Macedonia began publishing a new edition of translations of Ottoman censuses from the nineteenth century (Турски документи за историјата на Македонија, 1995). Within this edition, population censuses of different characters are translated (reviewing migrations, the number of active taxpayers, the property of the population, etc.). Between 1995 and 2020, 18 volumes of these notebooks were published, which provide excellent information on the demographic and social situation of the population in all major cities in Macedonia, such as Skopje, Bitola, Štip, Prilep, and Ohrid. The main translator and editor of these censuses is Dragi Ćorgiev.

At the end of the review of these translation activities of the Macedonian Orientalists, it should be mentioned that there are several individual publications composed of translations of Ottoman documents belonging to the last years of Ottoman rule in Macedonia. These documents are related to events such as the addressing of the Macedonian question in the Ottoman Parliament (1909) (Македонското прашање, 2009); the abduction of the American missionary Miss Stone (1901/02) (Турски документи за аферата Мис Стон, 2008), the Ilinden Uprising (1903), the amnesty of political prisoners granted by the Ottoman sultan in 1904 after the Ilinden Uprising (Амнестирани илинденци, 2003); the armed conflicts on the territory of Macedonia (1903-1908) (Турски документи за оружените борби, 2007), the Jews in the Ottoman censuses (Евреите во османлиските пописи, 2014), memoirs of some revolutionaries from the period of the Young Turk Revolution (Ахмед Нијази Реснели-бег, Спомените, 2010; Шемсудин Селаникли, Македонија, 2001; Мехмед Тевфик, Историја на Битолскиот вилает од Мехмед Тевфик, 2016), etc. These translations were also made by Dragi Ćorgiev and most of them were published by the Macedonian State Archives.

The aforementioned translations of Ottoman documents contain more than 10,000 pages. This enormous corpus of translated documents, which quantitatively and qualitatively surpasses the corpus of

translations of all other archival documents from the Middle Ages to modern times relating to the history of Macedonia, has become an inevitable and basic source of information for research and evaluation of the Ottoman period in Macedonian history. Therefore, not only Macedonian historians, but anyone who wishes to write about Ottoman Macedonia, can not ignore this source of information.

If we wish to talk about a certain shortcoming of these translations from a historical point of view, then one of their main drawbacks is that they do not cover the entire Ottoman period equally. Most of these translations focus on the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and a smaller number on the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Most of the seventeenth century and almost the entire eighteenth century remain uncovered. This is also felt in historiography, where the eighteenth century is the most obscure and least researched. Nevertheless, these translated Ottoman documents, manuscripts and books are an inseparable and integral part of every serious historical study of Ottoman Macedonia and the Balkan Peninsula. Due to these materials, many studies and papers have been published regarding the economic and urban development of the cities in Macedonia, the structure of the Ottoman feudal system, the various social and semi-military organizations composed of privileged classes of Ottoman subjects, then the process of Islamization, the forms of agricultural relations, the tax system, the bandit movements, *waqf* institutions, migrations, guilds and traders, etc. In this way, the Ottoman perception of the common Ottoman past of the Balkan peoples is included in the historiographical works on Macedonia's past starting from the end of the fifteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth century. This is very important because it is the Ottoman perception that is very little present in the Balkan historical literature when writing about the relevant period, although the Ottoman state was the main "opposing" side in the struggle of the Balkan peoples for liberation and formation of their states.

The works of Macedonian historiography in the field of Ottoman science can be evaluated positively due to at least two important facts.

The first is the fact that although the number of experts in the field of Ottoman studies in Macedonian historiography has always been very small, the results are still very solid. Even today, there are only three doctors of science who translate Ottoman documents and based on them they conduct serious research related to the Ottoman period. This is because mastering the Ottoman Turkish language is an extremely difficult, complex and time-consuming process, which requires knowledge of three languages: Turkish, Arabic and Persian. The Ottoman Turkish language is a hybrid language composed of the mentioned three languages and it retained this characteristic almost until the end of the existence of the Ottoman state. It should be borne in mind that at different times in its long existence, one or another of the three languages dominated. Thus, in the eighteenth century, when the complexity of Ottoman Turkish reached its climax, almost 70% of the vocabulary used in the administration belonged to Arabic and Persian, and the grammars of these two languages succeeded in penetrating the semantics of Turkish. As a result, this artificial language was almost incomprehensible to the ordinary Turkish population. In the nineteenth century, when this language began to be gradually "Turkified", i.e. purified from Arabic and Persian vocabulary, it began to get closer to the modern Turkish language. Therefore, translating and working with Ottoman documents from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries required a greater knowledge of Arabic and Persian, while documents from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries required a thorough knowledge of Turkish, again with a solid mastery of Arabic and Persian vocabulary.

Also, in certain segments of social life, some of these languages were preferred. Thus, in the religious and scientific texts in the classical Ottoman period, the Arabic language was preferred, while in the field of literature, the Persian language dominated. Therefore, the cre-

ation of experts and translators who will be able to translate Ottoman documents from different periods and different segments and spheres of social life in the Ottoman state is an extremely complex and long process. It should be taken into account that to translate these documents, besides the knowledge of the Ottoman Turkish language, it is necessary to know the historical context, as well as the appropriate historical terminology. It is a condition without which the meaning of the Ottoman archival documentation, as well as of the literature and manuscripts created in the respective period, cannot be well portrayed, and its literal translation is of no value.

The second reason why the number of Macedonian Ottomanists and translators is very small is the fact that in Macedonian historiography, the Ottoman period is "secondary" in its importance compared to the "national periods", which have always been more attractive and important for the state, nation and identity. The Ottoman period has always been neglected and treated as a dark period of "slavery" where "the nation did not exist". But, on the other hand, this "neglect" enabled the segment of Ottoman science to be part of the Macedonian historiography which is based and built on a large corpus of credible and original documents and arguments. At the same time, it was least exposed to the influence of communist ideology. Although attempts were made for ideological influence and although these attempts are felt in some studies relating to the Ottoman period, it was still impossible to implement and maintain such "ideologisation" due to, above all, the content and character of the Ottoman documents. And this is the second fact why the works of Macedonian historiography in the field of Ottoman science can be evaluated positively. However, it must be noted that the publication of translations of Ottoman documents in the Republic of North Macedonia continues, although it is becoming less frequent. This tendency, of course, is because translators and scholars who know the Ottoman Turkish language are decreasing, which limits the use of these documents by other researchers. Such a trend, especially the absence of translations of Ottoman documents,

will of course be detrimental not only to Macedonian historiography, but also to all other Balkan historiographies.

Conclusion

Ottoman documents do not have the ethnic or geographical boundaries of today's modern states, but refer to a large and unique imperial space in which unique laws and unique social realities applied. Hence, it is impossible for the importance of the Ottoman documents referring to Macedonia to be limited only to its territory. The translated Ottoman censuses and documents for the Macedonian region are equally important for the regions of Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Serbia because they are the result of a single system of joint power and administration within a common state.

The comparative analysis of these sources of information shows that some Ottoman sources are as important for Macedonia as for Anatolia, and through them, it is possible to monitor and compare certain processes in Macedonia, Anatolia and Bosnia. This "unlimitedness" of the Ottoman documents, together with their "impartiality", constitute their most important quality. No matter how limited we are within the borders of our modern states, Ottoman documents go far beyond those borders and provide information on much wider territories and much more complex processes. Therefore, their presentation to the scientific community in a "living" language is one of the basic conditions for studying the past during the Ottoman domination.

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