

BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

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A LETTER FROM JAPAN - STRATEGICALLY MUM: THE SILENCE OF ARMENIANS**

(JAPONYA'DAN BİR MEKTUP -
STRATEJİK SUSKUNLUK: ERMENİLERİN SESSİZLİĞİ)

Book Title: A Letter from Japan - Strategically Mum: The Silence of Armenians

Author: Iver Torikian

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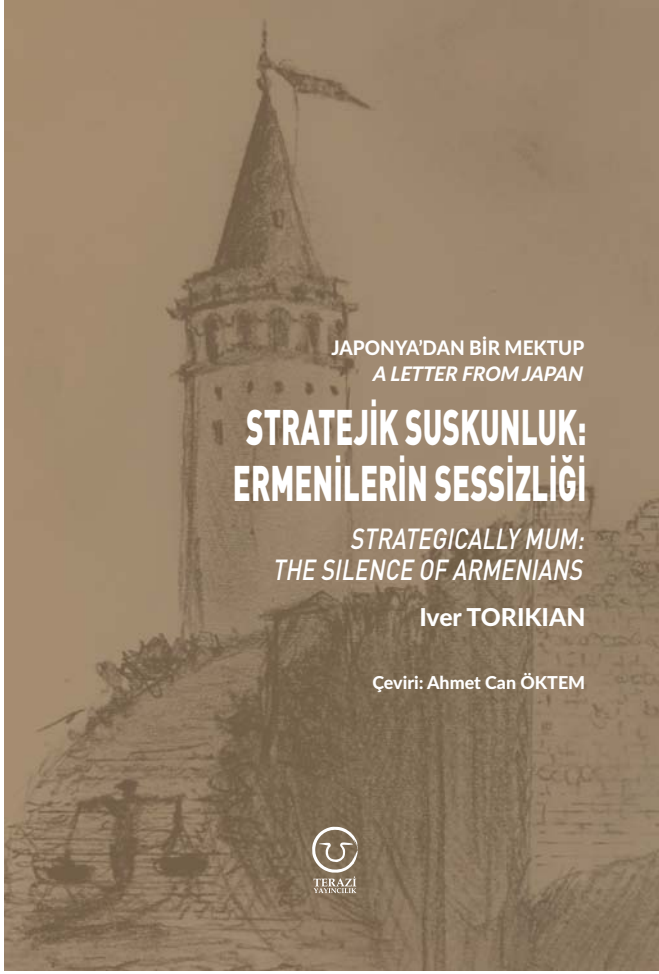
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“We, Armenians repaid Turkey by invading Turkey in 1919 with the assistance of the French army, committing many atrocities. It seems that the town of Oltu was particularly badly pillaged. As all Turkish historians know, it was these attacks — not any sort of

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‘procrastination’ by European governments — that compelled Atatürk’s nationalist army to attack Armenia. But most Westerners, particularly Americans, are most apt to accept the tales of Balakian and other Armenians than to dig out the truth. This is unfortunate, and unfair to the people of Turkey.” (p. 65)

The book under review here was prepared by combining letters written by Iver Torikian, a member of the Armenian diaspora who has lived and worked in Japan as an English teacher for many years. Torikian was born in the United States to a father of Armenian descent who was born in Turkey and a mother of German descent.

As mentioned in the preface of the book, Torikian sent the abovementioned letters to the *Center for Eurasian Studies (AVİM)* in 2021 to express his frustration at the falsehoods that Armenian scholars and regular Armenian people believe to be true about Armenia-Turkey relations, and to encourage a factual approach to history. As Torikian puts it, many of the works by Armenian authors mentioned in his book were written by hiding some important facts. Thus, in terms of controversial subjects, the biggest difference of this work from the works of many other authors in the Diaspora is that Torikian seeks to examine and interpret events in history from both sides.

Although the letters written by Torikian are in essay format; they include his personal experiences and comments on the works by various Armenian authors. There are five letters in this regard. In the first letter, Torikian recounts his various memories concerning encounters with the members of his Armenian community and analyzes the general condition of Armenian society. In the next four letters, he examines various Armenian authors and their works. From Torikian's narrative, it can be inferred that he is trying to highlight the fact that the Armenian people are being unfair towards Turkey. Torikian obviously acknowledges the suffering of his own people during the First World War, but states that not only the Armenians but also the Turkish people went through much suffering during the same period. While examining Armenian authors in the following parts, it can be observed that Torikian has dealt with this subject extensively.

As previously mentioned, in the first part of the book, Torikian gives brief information about his life, shares his memories, and makes some inferences and comments about the Armenian community. In this part, he covers the unfair comments made by his family members and some of his Armenian neighbors about Turkey and the Turks. For example, when he was spending time with his cousin living in Canada, he witnessed him making comments such as; "Jews are the small rat. Turks are the big rat" (p. 50). When we look at the later paragraphs of the part, he states that the enmity between Turkey and Armenia mostly harms the Turks, and he states that the hostile feelings of the Armenian people against Turkey has put the Turkish government in harm's way in the international arena. Torikian indicates that this is exactly what prompted him to write his letters.

Torikian dedicates the second part to the analysis of the works of various Armenian authors. He begins with Raffi Khatchadourian's *The New Yorker* article that he initially mentions in the first part and comments that the author is distorting the truth (the 19-page article by Khatchadourian mentions Armenian heroes living in the Ottoman Empire, completely ignores the plight of the Turks, and only talks about the plight of the Armenians). Concerning this article, Torikian states;

“It still amazes me that it appeared in such a prestigious magazine as *The New Yorker*. When such writing is all that Westerners are exposed to, the result is an enormous distortion of history.” (p. 54)

While talking about this article, Torikian reminds his readers that that Turks have suffered as much as the Armenians. Later in the part, Torikian talks about the book titled *There Was And There Was Not* written by Meline Toumani. In her book, Toumani quotes her own experiences on the dispute over the 1915 events, which Armenian diaspora constantly promotes as the “Armenian Genocide”. In the book, Torikian states that the controversy surrounding these events increased in magnitude and transferred to future generations by the Armenian diaspora, and that the new generation of Armenian children have been brainwashed with this information and instilled with hatred. As for Toumani, based on her experiences with the Turks, she reflected the Turks in a positive way despite all that hatred instilled in the younger generation of Armenians. Torikian regretfully informs that although Toumani wrote the truth, she was ostracized by the Armenian people and media, and her book and the ideas it defended were met with hostility. Torikian predicts that he will be met with the same kind of ostracization by other Armenians that Toumani met because of the ideas put forth in his book (p. 59).

In the third part, Torikian provides evidence for his argument that the Hunchaks and the Dashnaks are not as innocent as they are portrayed in the Armenian media. For this, he uses information contained in the book titled *The Armenian Revolutionary Movement* published by the University of California. When a general evaluation of this part is made, it is seen that Torikian highlights the fact that Armenian authors who accurately narrate the violent actions of various Armenian groups during the First World War are met with rejection from the Armenian diaspora, and the Diaspora prefers exaggerated accounts of that period. As an example, Torikian comments that;

“Unfortunately, the works of [Ronald Grigor] Suny and other more even-handed Armenians are not widely read or discussed by the general public. Their books get very little publicity. Instead, the most widely read books on Ottoman Armenians by Armenian writers are sensationalistic and misleading. Occasionally, they even contain blatant lies.” (p. 63)

At the end of the part, Torikian argues that most Armenian authors generally maintain their silence on the true nature of controversial subjects, and thus prefer to keep the truth a secret.

When we look at the fourth and fifth parts, we observe that Torikian delves into the history of Armenia and Turkey. We can interpret the reason why he

did such research was to acquire more in-depth knowledge about the events that took place between Armenia and Turkey in history before writing his letters. According to his own interpretation, Armenians pass on their grudges from one generation to the next, and for this reason they cannot have healthy views on history. Torikian also comments on Armenian authors in these two parts, as in was the case in the previous parts, and states that the Armenian people should let go of their grudges to make room for the improvement of Armenia-Turkey relations.

The above-mentioned letters written by Iver Torikian, which also form the parts of the book under review here, can be considered as constituting an “open letter” addressed to anyone -Armenian, Turk, or a third party- who is willing to listen. They are an enlightening collection of letters for readers who want to hear a different voice or get an insider’s view of what Armenian-Turkish relations have focused on for years.