



## A Migration Story from İstanbul to Sofia: The Ottoman Archival Records in Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library

Ahmet Altay

Kırklareli University, Kırklareli, Turkey

Tel.: +90-288-615-3303; fax: +90-288-615-3750; e-mail: [ahmet.altay@klu.edu.tr](mailto:ahmet.altay@klu.edu.tr)

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#### ABSTRACT

With the Ottoman archival records it hosts, Sofia, the capital city of Bulgaria, is the third biggest Ottoman archive center of the world following İstanbul and Cairo. St Cyril and Methodius National Library, which is located here, are extremely important institutions for Turkish history. The national library has more than one million Ottoman archival records. It is possible to come across an archival record concerning a wide geography where Ottoman State reigned. A small part of the archival records in the library consists of the records descended from the Ottoman Empire while retreating from Bulgaria. A great majority of the archival records are made up of the records sold to Bulgaria in 1931 as scrap paper due to a great deal of neglect. This study informs about the Ottoman archival records sold to a paper factory near Sofia as scrap paper by İstanbul Financial Office in May 1931 and then placed in Bulgarian St Cyril Methodius National Library. In this context, this archive was firstly displayed in general St. Cyril and Methodius National Library in Bulgaria; and the department of the National Library Rare Works, which serves within the body of the National Library. After that, the migration story of the Archive of Finance stretching from İstanbul to Sofia, which constitutes a large part of the archival records found in the Rare Works Department, and came here because of big chains of negligence. These developments experienced in this process are discussed in this study.

**Keywords:** The Ottoman archives, Records, Migration.

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### I. Introduction

Taking its name from two brothers who made up Cyril alphabet in 863, Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library is the biggest library and the oldest cultural institution of Bulgaria. Bulgarian National Library established on December 10, 1878 was moved to its new building, which was built in neo-classical style by Bulgarian architects Ivan Vasilyov and Dimitar Tsolov in 1953. The National Library still serves in this building. St. Cyril and Methodius statue in the front yard of the building has become an integral part and symbol of the National Library. (Dobrev, 1955, p. 143; Acaroğlu, 1969, p. 96; [www.nationallibrary.bg](http://www.nationallibrary.bg), 2015)

Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library shown in Fig. 1 is an extremely important institution for Turkish history. With the Ottoman archival records it hosts, this library is the third biggest Ottoman archive center of the World.



Fig. 1. Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library

There are more than one million Ottoman archival records in the national library. It is also possible to encounter an archival record of the Ottoman period concerning many cities in Anatolia as well as the Balkans (Altay, 2014, p. 36).

## II. Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library Rare Works Department

There are more than one million archival records about Ottoman Empire in the department of Rare Works of Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library, two of them are shown in Fig. 2 and Fig. 3. More than ninety percent of the records are in Ottoman Turkish language and the rest are Arabic and Persian. There are 170 Kadi Records in the library. There are also 720 notebooks in the Rare Works Department. Most of these books are related to state administration, and they contain important information about the social, economic and cultural life of all cities. The records include mukata, timar, debt records, tax records and population records. (Kenderova & Ali, 2008, p. 118-119; Shivarov, 2008, p. 133; Kenderova, 2008, p.139)



Fig. 2. A rescript for the opening of the first factory in Bulgaria, located in Bulgarian St Cyril and Methodius National Library

Some of the Ottoman archive records in the Bulgarian National Library are made up of the records left by the Ottoman Empire while withdrawing after the Ottoman Russian war of 1877-78. A large part of the archival records came to the library as a result of a big negligence when a train full of valuable records consisting of military, financial, commercial, political, legal, literary, maritime and science history, etc. was sold to Bulgaria for the price of scrap paper. (Anameriç & Rukancı, 2008, p. 109)

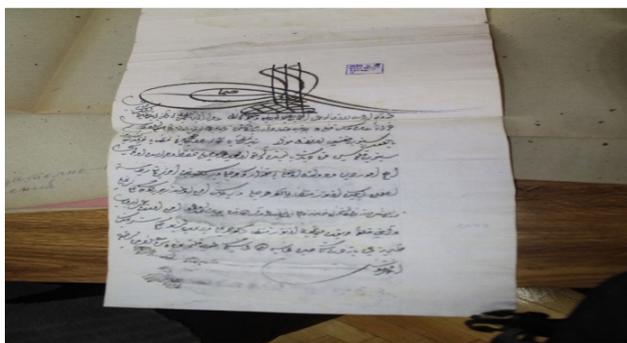


Fig. 3. An edict of 1 September 1637 belonging to Sultan Murat IV

The Ottoman archive records in the national library have been classified by the funding system. These records are classified by the name of the settlement they are related to and placed in funds. There are 328 funds in the library. It is possible to follow the traces of political, social and economic changes and development in the Ottoman geography in the records contained in these funds. The records also include important information on

trade, mining, agricultural production, administrative and military administration, demographic and ethnic processes in the Ottoman State.

The Ottoman archive records in the St. Cyril and Methodius National Library in Bulgaria include important information about the political, social and economic structure of many settlements within the borders of the Ottoman State. These records are very important sources in terms of Turkish history because they reflect the administration mentality and values of the period (Kenderova & Ali, 2008, p. 119-120).

## III. The Ottoman Archive Records Sold to Bulgaria

The migration story of Ottoman Archive records stretching from Istanbul to Sofia starts in May 1931 with the sell-out of a part of the Archive of the Treasury records by Istanbul Financial Office seeking to eliminate dead letter for the price of dry grass and rag, 3 penny 12 para (1/40 of a penny) for an okka to a paper mill nearby Sofia. Since it did not write the Ottoman archival records on the records sold in the sales announcements given to the newspapers (the ones sold in the announcements were described as scrap paper), no one was initially aware of this event. The first person to learn the sale of archive records at the price of scrap is İbrahim Hakkı Konyalı, a columnist at *Son Posta* newspaper, who was coincidentally informed when the records were being taken to the railway station in Sirkeci in bales. Konyalı announced this event to the public by the title "Old Paper Treasury Sold" in the *Son Posta* newspaper dated May 13, 1931 (Bali, 2014, p. 19-22).

İbrahim Hakkı Konyalı could not be successful even though he tried to stop the sales of records. However, Muallim Cevdet, who was one of the prominent intellectuals of the period, reached up to the period's Prime Minister İsmet İnönü ploughing on the subject with a great resolution. Firstly, Muallim Cevdet sent a telegram to İnönü. Muallim Cevdet İnönü wrote on the telegram he sent: "Hundreds cases of records were sold from the Finance Archive in Istanbul. I am bringing the samples of the records collected from the streets while being moved and taken from the children's hands for three or five pennies. I beseech you to send an order swiftly to stop this disaster in the name of science and civilization, sir." Dissatisfied with the telegram he sent, Muallim Cevdet also prepared a report on the archive records and presented the report to İnönü through a deputy. Muallim Cevdet emphasized that it was unacceptable to sell these records to the paper factory stating that these records were of vital importance in terms of political, social, economic, cultural and military history of Turkey. In the report: "Now some hundred thousands of these records must have flown away. It must have been decided to demolish some more of the books. This will happen soon too. Oh General, why would we burn these books in fire instead of granting to a museum? Are we wild?" "Taking courage from your pure conscience that enjoys brave words, I dare to say: if we have decided to commit a suicide in terms of science, history and civilization, why do we not sell these to the academies of London, Paris, Berlin, Peche for millions of Lira but hand them over to the Bulgarian factory for four or five hundred Lira?"

“Your Majesty, I beg you to save us from an act that will terribly humiliate us in the international scientific world and hint our enemies.”

Such statements clearly reflect the mood of Muallim Cevdet that objected against the occurring event. Furthermore, after the report of Muallim Cevdet, which was reminiscent of a wailing, the sale was halted with a circular issued by the order of İsmet İnönü. (Binark, 1994, p. 3-16).

Another important initiative related to the sale of archive records was performed by Manisa deputy Refik Şevket İnce. Mustafa Abdulhalik Renda responded to the parliamentary question regarding the issue that İnce gave to Grand National Assembly of Turkey. The Minister's response is highly thought provoking: “In recognition of the acceptance of the new letters, some of these records which didn't bear historical value were burned. It was thought in the ministry that they would be better to be sold to paper mills than to be destroyed and thrown hither and thither in the country.”

After the sale was stopped, attempts were made to recover the records sold to Bulgaria. However, these initiatives did not claim to have been very successful. To protect the relations, Bulgarians returned very few of the archival records that were sent. Most of the Ottoman Archive records were not returned (Hızlı, 2015, p. 21-25). The only gratifying result in the migration story of the Ottoman Archive records from İstanbul to Sofia is that these records were not sent to the paper mill. Following the news coming out in the newspapers in Turkey concerning the issue, the Bulgarian consul general of the period informed his government that the papers which went to Bulgaria are not scrap paper, but are important archival records. Thereupon, Bulgarian authorities confiscated the records sent from Turkey to the paper mill to make paper clay at the Sofia railway station and bought these records from the paper factory. Bulgarians understood the value of the Ottoman archival records that Turkey sold to Bulgaria as scrap, and they got these records examined by bringing experts from Austria. At the end of the examinations conducted, the records were kept at the Bulgarian National Library instead of being sent to the scrap plant (Bali, 2014, p.20-21). According to an anecdote conveyed by Özfatura (1995), the Bulgarians sold only a few hundred of the records purchased from Turkey at the scrap price to the Vatican for 40 million Leva.



Fig. 4. The operations of digitizing rare works of the Ottoman archival records

As shown in Fig. 4, the operations of digitizing rare works in the library are also going on rapidly. The Ottoman kadi registers in the library have been digitized and presented free of charge to the researchers on the web page of the library.

#### IV. Conclusion

The archive records in the Library of St. Cyril Methodius of Bulgaria are very important sources for our history and culture. The experiences lived in the moving process of these sources are really sad and afflictive from the perspective of Turkish archival history. Today, Turkey has no chance of retaking the history treasures here. However, it is also a fact that there is no obstacle for working on these records. The studies and projects to be carried out in this field are of great importance in terms of both Ottoman history in general and the local history of the regions where Ottoman State reigned. At this point, the universities especially in the Thrace region of Turkey have tremendous responsibility.

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**Ahmet Altay** is a lecturer at Kırklareli University. Altay was born in 1979. He completed his Bachelor's Degree at Istanbul University Librarianship Division. He worked as a librarian between 2002 and 2010. Since 2010 he has been working as a lecturer at Kırklareli University. Ahmet Altay completed his doctorate degree at State University of Library Studies and Information Technologies Bulgaria in 2015.