

## BOOK REVIEW / KİTAP İNCELEMESİ

**To cite this article:** Öktem, Ahmet Can. “Contribution to Ottoman-Armenian Historiography: Reviewing Kemal Çiçek’s “The Armenians of Musa Dagħ, 1915-1939: A Story of Insurgency and Flight”, *Review of Armenian Studies*, Issue 51 (2025): 217-224.

**Received:** 01.06.2025

**Accepted:** 16.06.2025

# CONTRIBUTION TO OTTOMAN-ARMENIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY: REVIEWING KEMAL ÇİÇEK’S “THE ARMENIANS OF MUSA DAGħ, 1915-1939: A STORY OF INSURGENCY AND FLIGHT”

(OSMANLI-ERMENİ TARİH YAZIMINA KATKI: KEMAL ÇİÇEK’İN  
“MUSA DAĞI ERMENİLERİ, 1915-1939: BİR AYAKLANMA VE KAÇIŞ  
HİKÂYESİ” ADLI KİTABININ DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ)

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**Author:** Prof. Dr. Kemal Çiçek

**Title:** The Armenians Of Musa Dagħ, 1915-1939: A Story Of Insurgency And Flight

**Publisher:** Lexington Books, 2020

**ISBN:** 978-1-7936-2916-6

**Language:** English

**Pages:** 119

**Abstract:** *Werfel’s novel tells a story of the supposedly heroic uprising of the Musa Dagħ Armenians against the Ottoman army in mid-1915. Describing his study not as a critique of Werfel’s story but as a reconstruction of the*

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*incident's history, Prof. Dr. Kemal Çiçek analysed various aspects of the Musa Dagh Revolt, its causes and aftermath, using a wide range of sources.*

**Key Words:** *Musa Dagh Revolt, Kemal Çiçek, Franz Werfel, The Forty Days of Musa Dagh novel, Anti-Turkish Propaganda, Armenian Terrorism, 1915 Events*

**Öz:** *Werfel'in romanı, 1915'in ortasında Musa Dağı Ermenilerinin Osmanlı ordusuna karşı sözde kahramanca başkaldırışının hikâyesini anlatmaktadır. Çalışmasını, Werfel'in hikâyesinin bir eleştirisi olarak değil, vuku bulanların tarihinin yeniden inşası şeklinde tanımlamış olan Dr. Kemal Çiçek, çok sayıda kaynak kullanarak Musa Dağı İsyanının, öncesinin ve sonrasının çeşitli yönlerini analiz etmiştir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Musa Dağı İsyanı, Kemal Çiçek, Franz Werfel, Musa Dağı'nda 40 Gün romanı, Türk-Karşıtı Propaganda, Ermeni Terörü, 1915 Olayları*

## Introduction

Prof. Dr. Kemal Çiçek, an Emeritus Professor of History at the New Türkiye Research Centre, presents a multi dimensional work of historical analysis that is a good read and simple to understand. This substantial work is also praised by many history professors. The first page and the back cover of the book contain praise for the work by various professors of history. The book describes in detail events that occurred before and after the rebellion, the activities of the Ottomans and Allied States, the actions of the Armenian people and the insurgents, and includes the explanations of different people (such as foreign diplomats, clergymen, some rebel Armenians). In addition, the study utilizes Turkish, Armenian and other foreign historical sources and presents the explanations of various historical researchers such as Eric Feigl, Edward Erickson, Maxime Gauin and Yücel Güçlü.

In the introduction chapter of his book, Çiçek shares a variety of interesting explanations and quotes regarding the pro-Armenian Austrian Jewish writer Franz Werfel and his 1933 novel “The Forty Days of Musa Dagh”. He illustrates why Werfel’s novel is an example of the conflict between propaganda and historical analysis. Werfel’s best-selling book led to a propaganda narrative about Musa Dagh and movies based on the same book.

## A Glance at Franz Werfel’s Novel and Armenian Propaganda

Werfel’s novel tells a story of the supposedly heroic uprising of the Musa Dagh Armenians against the Ottoman army in mid-1915. An examination of Werfel’s sources reveals that he was politically motivated and relied heavily on propaganda material and the collective memory of Armenian survivors of the Musa Dagh incident. Çiçek also states that Werfel’s knowledge of the Musa Dagh Armenians’ story appears to be based on interviews with the Mekhitarist Abbot Mesrob Habozia and Father Aginian, who granted him full access to their libraries. He also used the private papers of Johannes Lepsius, a pro-Armenian German missionary and notorious Turcophobe. Another source Werfel used to prepare his story were the documents of Naim Andonian, which have been proven to be forged (pp. 1-2).

Çiçek adds in his introduction chapter a quote of Werfel during his interview with author Vartkes Aharonian stating that history was “more than the truth, because an epic represents the truth colored by imagination. An epic written

by a true poet contains more reality than a history written by a historian” (p. 1). Such a comment gives an idea of how the widespread mindset of Werfel and people who support his book as well as the pro-Armenian claims regarding the 1915 events go against historical analysis.

It is expressed that Werfel believed in what he wrote. On the other hand, Çiçek adds viewpoints of Austrian historian Eric Feigl, who stated that Werfel had no idea about the question of the authenticity of his source (the Naim Andonian documents). Feigl explained that Werfel “originally did this in good faith, and when he found out that he had been taken in by a forgery, it was too late. Out of fear of Armenian reprisals, he did not even dare to publicly acknowledge his error” (p. 2). Thus, Feigl claimed that Werfel was not completely convinced of the accuracy of his book. Additionally, Feigl made a reference to the testimony of Abraham Sever (Rabbi Albert Amateau):

“... Before his death, Werfel told me that he felt ashamed and contrite for having written the book and for the many falsehoods and fabrications the Armenians had foisted on him. But he dared not confess publicly for fear of death by the Dashnag terrorists.” (pp. 2-3)

It is mentioned that the first print of Werfel’s book contained the note “Do not use this against the Turks”. Feigl wrote that Werfel’s book went through a “true purgatorium”, that the Armenians and their sympathizers have “cleared the book from all passages which could create doubts in the minds of the reader or any historian” (p. 3-4).

When evaluating the claims made in his novel, the reader needs to consider the comment below made by Werfel during an interview in response to a question on the authenticity and fairness of his novel:

“I never do research work... When I wrote *The 40 Days of Musa Dagh*, I described a little storekeeper and afterwards the Armenians came to me and said: “How did you know him?”. He was not a real character. He was imaginary, but the Armenians were so pleased they greeted me as one of their own. I really didn’t know much about the Armenians. I do not think it is a good idea to do too much research on any subject about which one writes. One’s mind gets cluttered up with too much detail. You should know enough about your subject, but not too much” (p. 5)

## **An Overview of What Took Place Before, During and After the Musa Dagħ Revolt**

The Musa Dagħ Revolt is one of the various subjects utilized in the Armenian narrative. Refusing to surrender and compromise, committing acts of provocation, sabotaging transportation and communications, spying for the Allied Navy (p. 55), refusing to pay taxes and planning to assassinate a tax collector (p. 52), setting fires, and using women and children as human shields to prevent Ottoman shelling (pp. 33, 69) were among the terrorist activities of the Armenian insurgents. Furthermore, at an Ottoman cabinet meeting in 1906, the government decided to send new instructions to the provinces to improve security and to more thoroughly investigate the allegations of extortion and armament by Armenian rebels. One of the serious allegations made at this meeting was that the insurrectionists were planning to poison the army's food supplies (p. 53).

The rebellious Musa Dagħ Armenians were encouraged by the Zeytun, Van, Shabin-Karahisar and Urfa uprisings. Moreover, the Musa Dagħ rebellion inspired the Urfa Armenians (p. 29). Branches of the Hunchak, Dashnak and Ramgavar parties were established in the Musa Dagħ region, threatening the peace that had lasted in the region for centuries. From the beginning of the Erzurum uprising in the 1890s, these branches began to recruit members and sympathizers that would serve what they called the "Armenian Cause" (p. 48). Additionally, it is explained with the testimonies of Armenians who chose to revolt in Musa Dagħ that the inhabitants of the region were encouraged to rebel by some Hunchak leaders, such as Kheder Bey and Aghassi Toursargsian, who had taken part in the 1895 Zeytun revolt (p. 58-59). It is noteworthy that the Armenian insurgent Haroutune Boyajian, who was about 7 years old at the time of the rebellion, was aware of the aims of the rebels and wrote the following comment in his memoirs:

"Around 1895, some Armenian revolutionaries had reached our villages from the Mediterranean Sea. They contacted the leading villagers in the area and made them realize that the mountains behind their villages could provide an excellent defence and the Mediterranean Sea an outlet to possible means of contact with the outside world, which might help us, should the Turkish atrocities threaten our area. They certainly succeeded in inculcating among the Musa Dagħians the spirit of independence and self preservation." (p. 49)

Moreover, Boyadjian expressed that even after the Ottoman governor sent a letter to the Armenians, offering a peaceful solution, the Armenians refused to surrender. Similarly, Boyadjian's statement "The Armenian spirit was aroused, and there was to be no surrender under any circumstances. It was to be either a miraculous salvation, or honorable death!" (p. 58) is among the comments that gives the reader an idea regarding the radical nationalist Armenian mentality.

Britain and Russia, aiming for the independence of the Ottoman Armenians in line with their own interests, engaged in various activities through their consulates within the Ottoman Empire to arm and incite the Armenians towards rebellion (p. 19). On January 1915, the Allied Powers expanded their operations and the cooperation between the Armenians and the Allied Navy increased. American Military Historian Edward Erickson, who has done extensive research on the Musa Dagħ revolt, stated that the Armenian insurgents were active in the Musa Dagħ region and in close contact with the Allied Powers even before the First World War. He also explained that there was an increase in the Allied naval activity in December 1914 and that British landing parties were "gleefully greeted" by Armenians. Diplomat-Researcher Yücel Güçlü indicated that the Musa Dagħ Armenians were collaborating with the Allies, especially with the British Navy's Middle East intelligence section. In addition, French Historian Maxime Gauin wrote that the French Army was planning an attack on Alexandretta to support the Musa Dagħ insurgents (pp. 47-48).

Furthermore, Çiçek writes about events that took place after the Musa Dagħ Armenians escaped the Ottoman Empire through the Allied Powers and the Armenian Eastern Legion that supported the French Army. According to a 1916 report, among the Armenians who had been taken to the Port Said camp in Egypt by the Allied Navy after the revolt, many of the former leaders and supporters of the Musa Dagħ rebellion insisted on resuming the insurgency against the Turks (p. 82). The Armenians who were rescued from the Musa Dagħ revolt by the Allied Navy returned to their homes in the Ottoman Empire after the end of the Great War. However, their return to Musa Dagħ caused incidents between them and the Muslims of the region. Hovhannes Ipredjian, one of the rebel Armenians, stated that their return caused tragic consequences for the Muslims of the region. It appears that the Armenians returned to resume the war (p. 92). A quote of Ipredjian further demonstrates the intentions of the Armenian insurgents:

"When we arrived in Port Said we sent an application to the French, saying that we wanted to fight against the Turks, on condition that our

Cilicia was given to us. The French agreed. One day, French and British doctors came and examined us. Those who were healthy were enlisted; those who were too old were appointed as guards. We, the youth, were six hundred soldiers. We laid the foundation of the Armenian Legion.” (p. 87)

### **Actions of the Ottomans in Response to the Musa Dagh Incidents**

An examination of Ottoman sources reveals that the depiction of events in the novel contradict Ottoman archival sources and foreign archives. The so-called defense of Musa Dagh is greatly exaggerated by the Armenian survivors. The number of Ottoman soldiers involved in suppressing the rebellion and the intensity of the clashes between the two sides do not reflect the truth (pp. 103-105). Moreover, it is reported that the rebellion lasted 53 days, not 40. Rachel McGinnis Kirby emphasized that the length of the struggle was deliberately altered to capitalize on the rich biblical connotations of this number (p. 4).

Various information presented in the book indicate that the intent of the rebellious Armenians on Musa Dagh was not to defend themselves, but to cooperate with the Allied forces and to facilitate their intervention. The telegrams about the rebellion characterize the incident not as a heroic defense against the Ottoman army, but as a revolt aimed at facilitating the landing of the Allied forces on the shores of Svedia by land and sea (pp. 72- 74).

The Ottoman response to the Musa Dagh insurgency was lenient. The Armenian rebels were invited to surrender several times (pp. 68-69). The Ottoman army also acted with much caution during operations in order to avoid civilian casualties (pp. 71-72). The Ottomans warned local authorities, church leaders and priests to stay out of trouble, and the local population promised to remain loyal to the state and the government (pp. 52-53).

Similarly to the events during the Shabin-Karahisar insurgency, the Ottoman army considered the Musa Dagh revolt as a local incident that could be dealt with peacefully. The Istanbul Government was not too concerned by the revolt and paid little attention to it. The available telegrams also show that the local Ottoman authorities were in continuous contact with the insurgents and especially avoided harming civilians. This was also why the final attack on the rebels was delayed and why the army did not intervene with heavy weaponry.

Although occasional incidents were reported from the region from 1890s onwards, the governorship and the Ottoman military refrained from intervening because the government believed that these armed groups were looking for an excuse before they acted (pp. 50-51). According to the Ottoman investigation, Baron Agasi, the socialist Hunchak leader of the rebels in the Svedia region, aimed to sow seeds of enmity between Armenians and Muslims (pp. 50-51).

### **A Comprehensive Historical Analysis and Valuable Contribution to Academic Literature by Dr. Kemal Çiçek**

Prof. Dr. Kemal Çiçek's book is a product of comprehensive historical analysis based on in-depth research and documentary evidence. It is also the first book aiming to present the facts against Werfel's fictionalized narrative of Musa Dagh distorting historical facts. This work is a valuable contribution to the field of historical analysis and is a must-read for those who wish to be informed regarding the events of 1915 against the Armenian claims (World War I, Armenian nationalism, revolts and propaganda). Çiçek describes his study, not as a criticism of Werfel's story, but as a reconstruction of the Musa Dagh incident's history (p. 104).

Werfel's comment claiming that a poet's epic contains more reality than a historian's work is false. However, it brings to mind the common tendency among people to find propaganda more "believable" compared to facts. People are naturally inclined to believing propaganda that appeal to their emotions, nationalism and negative biases. Even though works like Werfel's novel, which distort history and are not based on reliable sources, are far from the reality, many people tend to see the propaganda in such works as "truth". Thus, it is possible for a poet with political motives to be more convincing compared to an unbiased historian and the poet's work would likely contain more "perceived truth" than a historical study.