# Stateless Roma Minorities in the Last Years of the Ottoman Empire and

The First Years of the Turkish Republic: Perspectives and Practices

By

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#### Introduction

In the 19th century and later, the Ottoman government began to lose its administrative power, and the nationalist revolts that started in the Balkans and Anatolia led to the enactment of some democratic laws in the last period of the Ottoman Empire. Despite these laws, the change of attitude could not prevent the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Undemocratic practices were initiated against the Roma minority in the Republic of Turkey. This thesis shows that the reasons for this contradiction were in the historic conditions and explains the reason for the different government approach of these two different states towards the Roma minority. The reason for this different understanding of administration lies in the Turkish nationalism supported by the Republican era administrators. This research will compare how stateless Romani minorities were conceptualized and addressed in the Ottoman empire and the Turkish republican system. It is the result of the experiences of the first years of the Turkish Republic and the last years of the Ottoman Empire.

My main research question asks that reason(s) explain the different governmental approaches of these two different states towards the Roma minority. To examine this question, my comparative analysis of the practices of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey is based on the method of document analysis and a conceptual analysis of terms such as 'Roma minority' and 'state'. As a first step, I will examine laws and documents found in historical archives dating from the last period of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish Republic. These documents are from Ottoman Publications - T.C. I will then interpret discriminatory laws and parliamentary reports from the Ankara Presidency State Archives Presidency/State Archives. Another example is the articles written by the famous Turkish nationalist poet, writer, teacher, historian Nihal Atsız for the Roma community. He is a person who defended Turkisness in the Republican era and was taken as an example by the nationalist people in Turkey, and his thoughts are supported.

In addition, in the original state documents used in this thesis, the words Gypsy and Kipti were used to describe the Roma people, the reason for this distinction is explained in the thesis.

#### **Historical Overview**

Before examining the question of how Roma were treated during these periods in Turkey, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the main historical events that shaped these eras. In the Ottoman Empire, citizens were divided into two main classes: Muslims and Non-Muslims. As a rule, these two groups were not equal. First, it was necessary to become a Muslim in order to enter the civil service, that is, to enter the state service and to do military service. Apart from that, the taxes collected from the two groups of people were different. Non-Muslims, called Zimmis, were socially and culturally separated from the Muslims of the empire. Their legal status was determined by a framework called the *millet* system. Non-Muslim groups maintained their social and economic relations on the legal ground determined for them by Islamic Law. The millet system was first applied in the Ottoman Empire, then this system changed completely after the Tanzimat period and especially after the Islahat edict, which these edicts, legal reforms were made.<sup>2</sup> As a result of the French Revolution, the power of monarchical governments decreased, and the interest in republican and liberal democratic governments increased. Many nations struggled for independence to separate from their empires. Furthermore, one of the most important results of the 1789 French Revolution was that it affected multinational states and empires in ethnic and religious terms.

The fact that the Ottoman Empire was affected by the nationalist movements that emerged in Europe, could not make any changes in its economic and social structure, and was supported by military failures accelerated the collapse of the Empire. As a result, the Ottoman Empire began to lose its lands in Europe and the Balkans. This situation caused a large part of the Turkish/Muslim population in the Balkans to experience a wave of immigration extending to Anatolia, and the first population exchange took place between the Ottoman state and Bulgaria. It made the issue of minorities a matter of diplomacy between the new states that were separated from the Ottoman Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

<sup>1</sup> It is the form of government in which the Ottoman state determined the legal status of non-Muslims.

<sup>2</sup> Gullu Ramazan Erhan, "Lozan Antlaşması Sonrası Türkiye'nin Azınlıklara Yönelik Politikaları /Turkey's Policies towards Minorities After the Treaty of Lausanne", Journal of Eurasian Studies, VII/2,2018, p.269

After the First World War, the Ottoman Empire disintegrated, and the Republic of Turkey was established. The Treaty of Lausanne was signed when the Republic of Turkey was founded.<sup>3</sup> The new republic aimed to create a new kind of nation-state. Which this Turkish state was determined to gather all ethnic elements in a single national identity based on the understanding of Turkishness/Turanism (Türkçülük/Turancilik), in line with the ideal of one language and one nation. Turkishness is defined by historian, politician and defender of Turkisness, Nihal Atsız, as follows; "Turkishness in the Great Turkeli is the ideal of unconditional sovereignty and independence of the Turkish nation, and the fact that Turkishness should be ahead and superior to all nations in every way." This determination manifested itself mostly in attitudes and practices towards minorities. An example is the population exchange with Greece in 1923 in the name of Turkishness and Islam.<sup>4</sup> All these events negatively affected the Roma minority. This research compares the stateless Roma minority perspective of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey by analyzing exchange, settlement laws and parliamentary reports. These sources were written directly by the state and reflect the state's thoughts on Roma groups.

Parallel to the correspondence in the Ottoman central and local bureaucracy, "Kipti" was expressed in the Settlement Law, which was highly debated in the parliamentary sessions in 1926 and 1934, the name "Gypsy" was used together with the word 'nomadic' while listing those who would not be naturalized. This distinction shows us that while the bureaucracy used the Kipti name to cover the settled Romani communities in the country at that time, the name Gypsy was used to include the wandering Roma communities, which were mostly seen as a public order problem.

<sup>3</sup> Treaty of Peace with Turkey Signed at Lausanne, July 24, 1923 From: The Treaties of Peace 1919-1923, Vol. II (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1924.) <a href="https://wwwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty">https://wwwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Treaty</a> of Lausanne

<sup>4</sup> Gurboga, Nursen, ,"Türk-Yunan Mübadelesi ve Mübadele Romanları ve Siyaset Üzerine Devlet Söylemi", "Turkish-Greek Exchange and State Discourse on Exchanged Roma and Politics", Journal of Social Sciences, 2006, Vol.9, P.1, p.14
5 According to the archive documents examined, it is the term used to describe the Roma in correspondence in the internal bureaucracy of the Ottoman state.

**<sup>6</sup>** According to the archive documents examined, it is the term used to describe the Roma in correspondence in the internal bureaucracy of the Ottoman state.

## 1. Population Exchange

After the events that took place in the Balkans and the Balkan wars in the Ottoman Empire, the idea of Turkism gained more importance. The state mostly oriented towards the regions where Turks lived intensively and structured its population policies based on nationality.<sup>7</sup> An intense Muslim migration started to the Anatolian lands of the Ottoman Empire, which lost its Balkan lands. The reason for immigration is exclusion Based on ethnic and religious belonging by the newly founded the newly founded Balkan kingdoms. Likewise, in the Ottoman Empire, the Ittihat and Terakki government carried out activities to create a homogeneous population in the remaining lands. During and after the Balkan Wars, it started to operate to send the minorities who were engaged in activities against the Ottoman Empire from the country. This situation became the agenda of both the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. On top of that, according to the secret protocol of the Istanbul Treaty signed on 29 September 1913, Turks and Bulgarians were subject to exchange. As a result of the exchange, 48,570 Muslims from Bulgaria and 46,764 Bulgarians from Turkey were displaced. After the Balkan Wars, many Muslim immigrants, including Bosnians, Pomaks, Albanians and Gypsies<sup>8</sup>, who were seen as Turks and Turks, came to Thrace and Anatolia and settled in the regions determined by the Immigration Directorate. However, some of the Gypsies/Roma who migrated to Anatolia were not accepted as immigrants because they were not Muslims. This situation shows us that the reforms did not change the religious perspective of the state and that the religion condition is still very important for citizenship. The onset of World War I caused the commission to terminate its work. This exchange set a precedent for the compulsory population exchange that Turkey and Greece would make in 1923.9 The reason why the Roma were included in the exchange is that they are Muslims, speak Turkish and are useful for business.

Another exchange to be examined is the Turkish-Greek Population Exchange between the Republic of Turkey and Greece. The independence movements of the minorities and the establishment of national states during the wars in the region gave rise to the idea that the peoples should be separated, and this situation prompted the states. On January 30, 1923, "Convention and Protocol Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Peoples" was signed

<sup>7</sup> Sanlier, Sinan. "Göçebeliğin Çingene Halleri ve Selanik Efsanesi ', "Gypsy States of Nomadism and the Legend of Thessaloniki", The Migration Conference, 22-27 August 2017 ATHENS.

<sup>8</sup> National and ethnic groups living in the Balkan geography.

<sup>9</sup> Dundar Fuat, İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyetinin Müslümanları İskân Politikası (1912-1913)", "The Policy of the Committee of Union and Progress to Settlement Muslims (1912-1913)", İletişim Publications, 2002, p.23.

between Turkey and Greece. The only criterion in the exchange of peoples was religious identities. This barter was conducted in an attempt to create a homogeneous population (ethnically, religiously), address economic concerns and follow population policies. Thus, in both countries, religious diversity was replaced by ethno-linguistic unity. In addition, groups other than the ethnic cultural community of the country in which they are located are also included in the population exchange. For example, while the Turkish-speaking Karaman Orthodox were removed to Greece while Muslim communities who spoke Greek, Albanian, Ladino, Bulgarian as well as Vlach, Slavic and Romani languages were expelled to Turkey. In other words, the main purpose of the immigration and population policy implemented by the Republican period administrators aiming to create a society that has a Turkish national identity based on culture and common social and cultural values. It was thought that these mass population exchanges would contribute significantly to this, so that the communities with the same social and cultural characteristics would be united in Anatolia and the separatist movements in the Ottoman period would be prevented. 10 According to the first rule of the Turk-Greek population exchange convention, only the religious identity of the peoples to be exchanged was taken as a basis, and linguistic, ethnic and cultural differences were not taken into account. This situation shows us that the religious system that categorizes the society in the Ottoman Empire was considered as a common denominator in the exchange.

The exchange decision was taken in line with the wishes and interests of both Turkey and Greece in terms of making societies religiously homogeneous.

The aim of the new nation-states, which put into practice the idealism of nationalism that greatly influenced the 19th century, is to export/maintain/change the communities that they do not consider themselves or think they will not be.

Turkey's unwillingness to deal with minority problems in the future and separatist tendencies were effective in the exchange decision; They were included in the exchange with the Roma in Greece to solve their population problem based on being Muslim and to use them as labor force

The reason why the Roma are not excluded from the population exchange and are not as controversial as other non-Turkish elements in the Turkish Grand National Assembly is the lack

<sup>10</sup> Dundar, Fuat. "İttihat ve Terakki Cemiyetinin Müslümanları İskân Politikası (1912-1913)", "The Policy of the Committee of Union and Progress to Settlement Muslims (1912-1913)", İletişim Publications, 2002, p.23-28

of organized national movements or national identity awareness. There has been no nation-based revolt by the Roma. The Roma lived in a geographically dispersed situation within the Ottoman Empire, and they did not attempt or form any nationalist revolt. This situation kept them away from seeing them as a political threat in the eyes of the Republican cadres. Another reason for the acceptance of Roma in the population exchange of 1923 is that most of them settled down.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Gurboga, "Nursen, Türk-Yunan Mübadelesi ve Mübadele Romanları ve Siyaset Üzerine Devlet Söylemi", "Turkish-Greek Exchange and State Discourse on Exchanged Roma and Politics", Journal of Social Sciences, 2006, Vol.9, P.1, p.14

#### 2. Discrimination Laws

The other primary documents that I have examined the Roman perspective of the Ottoman state and the Turkish republic are the settlement laws. Two states have enacted certain laws for their citizens at different times and forced them to comply with these laws. These discriminatory laws have generally affected minority groups. Prepared in 1917 by the Ittihat and Terakki government the Ottoman Empire, the third article found in the first part of the Ashair and Muhajirin Law is a good example from which point the truth began by the legislator in all times. This article also includes a provision prohibiting the acceptance of immigrants into the country by those who have diseases such as syphilis and leprosy, their relatives, Majnuns and the crippled unaccompanied by the family, those who gamble and beggars, those who are convicted of murder, anarchists, spies, and Gypsies. 12 This law clearly expresses the population policy of the Ittihat and Terakki. This approach has shown us that they exclude groups they see as problematic with a fascist point of view. It should be emphasized that under the rule of the Union and Progress (1913-1918), the According to Ittihat and Terakki in the Ottoman Empire, for economic and agricultural development was possible with the elimination of migration. In other words, it ideologically needed discriminatory policies against minorities. It saw the Gypsies as dispersed societies that did not conform to immigration and order, perhaps economically inefficient for the collective ethno-state. 13

Each of the three resettlement laws put into effect since the first years of the Republic have been the main legal regulations referenced in the control of immigration movements and applied immigration policies. These are: Settlement Law No. 885 dated 1926<sup>14</sup> and Settlement Law No. 2510 dated 1934.<sup>15</sup> The Settlement Law, which came to the fore with debates in 1926 and 1934, was accepted for years and only got rid of its pejorative content for the Roma in 2006.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Archive, BCA, TİGMA 272 00 11 11 30

<sup>13</sup> Bozkurt, Serhat, "The Settlement and Representation Guide of the Unionists: The Book of International Usûl-1 Temsîl İskan-1 Muhacirîn", Social Sciences: Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University Journal of Social Sciences Institute, Issue. 12/Fall 2015, p. 188-199.

<sup>14</sup> Official Gazette, No. 429, 1 July 1926, p. 943

<sup>15</sup> Official Gazette No. 2510 1934

**<sup>16</sup>** Sanlier, Sinan. "Göçebeliğin Çingene Halleri ve Selanik Efsanesi", "Gypsy States of Nomadism and the Legend of Thessaloniki", The Migration Conference, 22-27 August 2017 ATHENS.

# 3. Police Documents and Parliamentary Reports

Another document that is the subject of our review is the documents of the police, in other words, the transcripts of the officers. These documents are very important because, like other government documents, they show how the government evaluates Roma groups.

According to that document dated 1917, Roma groups were not wanted from the Balkans. The document explains that the Kipti convoys and some Albanian immigrants who came to the country should be followed, not accepted and returned. With the Ottoman archive documents, we understand that nomadic gypsies were followed and wanted to be supervised. The Ministry of Police gives the following information about the Romanian gypsies who came to Istanbul illegally from 1908: "Eighty Romanian Kipti come from Romania and want to go to Çorlu from Silivri today are not allowed to stay within the Çatalca sanjak and will be sent back." These documents show that Roma groups are not wanted to be taken into the country.

In another document, dated 1902, about Romanian gypsies, it was said in a more radical way: "Gypsies living in the country of Romania, which was previously non-Muslim, will be expelled. Gypsies who will not want to go to their Romanian homeland will be arrested"

Another source reviewed are the parliamentary reports, in other words, the transcripts of the officers.

On 5 November 1924, parliamentarian Halit Turgut Bey, who spoke in the Parliament on the course of the Turkish-Greek population exchange, talked about the disorder and said, "When they came, some of their brothers were in Kastamonu, their father was in Izmir, their family was in Antalya, I don't know where their son is. But we examined these situations, and as a result, we concluded that this issue occurred while leaving Greece. Among them, there are also Kiptis other than Turks. I do not know why they were brought," he said. 18

On May 30, 1926, the Settlement Law was discussed in the Assembly, the parliamentarian Esat Efendi requested information about the reasons for the resettlement of the immigrants. In response, it was stated that it was necessary for the nomadic tribes to settle down in order to eliminate banditry, which is a very important obstacle to the economic and agricultural development of the country. Among these nomads, attention was drawn to the Gypsies, who

<sup>17</sup> ZB 492-46

<sup>18</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, 2-5 November 1924

wandered all over the country and traded animals, as well as the Iranian Kipti tribes, who were also nomadic and engaged in jewelry and tattooing. Among the suggestions, it was also emphasized that those who opposed this settlement after the enactment of the law should be resettled by force and violence.<sup>19</sup> According to the information given by these documents, the Roma groups were prohibited from traveling and going to places they wanted to emigrate because they were migrant, and it was announced that they would be stopped by violence if necessary.

In different commissions and authorities, newcomers in resettlement areas were prohibited from exceeding 10% of the population, and care was taken to cut off the relations of the resettled with each other as much as possible. By giving examples of violence and banditry perpetrated by Iranian Gypsies, discussions about nomadic gypsies were carried out from this point of view. Rules 2 of the nine-article law under discussion; "Turks and non-Turks, those with syphilis, leprosy and their families, convicted murders, anarchists, spies, gypsies, and expulsions are not accepted," he says. Rules 5 of the proposal states that "Gypsies of Turkish nationality will be settled in appropriate places, and foreign nationals will be taken out of the border".<sup>20</sup>

Again, in the parliamentary debates, the following opinion was expressed on 3-7 items, both on usefulness and on Turkishness: "Even though the government has proposed not accepting all Gypsies, there are Muslim gypsies living in the Balkans and especially in Bulgaria. They do not know any language other than Turkish. Since the Bulgarians did not want to give political rights to the Gypsies, they deprived many non-Gypsies from their political rights by using this name. These hardworking people, called Gypsies in Bulgaria, are very advanced in animal husbandry, agriculture and agricultural arts. Although they have been subjected to many tortures, they have not left their Turkishness and have been proud of it. It was considered more beneficial to take the resident ones and not the travelers alone."<sup>21</sup>

In the same discussion, how the cultural transformation will be done is expressed as follows.

<sup>19</sup> Sanlier, Sinan, "Göçebeliğin Çingene Halleri ve Selanik Efsanesi", "Gypsy States of Nomadism and the Legend of Thessaloniki", The Migration Conference, 22-27 August 2017 Athens

<sup>20</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, 30 May 1926

<sup>21</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, 3 – 7 June 1934

Although it was written in the government proposal that wandering Gypsies and nomads who were not affiliated with Turkish cultivation were settled as a family in our villages with Turkish cultivation, there was no problem in their settlement in large villages, provided that they were not settled in a neighborhood or in a place adjacent to each other and could easily gather, since the purpose was to quickly forget their mother tongue and mix with Turks. For this purpose, interleaving was deemed appropriate so that they would not be adjacent to each other when they were placed, and not to see each other frequently. <sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Parliamentary Assembly, 3 – 7 June 1934

#### 3.1 Defender and Leader of Turkisness: Nihal Atsiz

I would also like to quote Nihal Atsız to show how dangerous the thoughts of Turkism and some of the writers who support it are. He witnessed the last few years of the Ottoman Empire in his childhood and the first years of the Turkish Republic in his youth. Hüseyin Nihal Atsız (12 January 1905, Kadıköy, Istanbul – 11 December 1975, Istanbul) is a Turkish writer, poet, thinker and teacher. Atsız, who has literary works and historical studies on the history of the Turks, has a Turkisness Turanci and racist world view. He was under the influence of Turkish nationalism, which was on the rise during his lifetime, and he strongly defended this idea. Atsız defined himself as a Turkist, Turanist and nationalist. The most radical spokesperson of the Turkisness-Turanist thought that gained strength in the 1930s was Hüseyin Nihal Atsız. Atsız published Atsız Magazine in 1931-1932, Orhun: Monthly Turkisness Magazine in 1933-1934 and 1943-1944. He wrote discriminatory and insulting articles against Roma groups in these magazines, and he was taken as an example by those who defended this idea because he was a historian and politician. He still has many fans who think like him. This example shows us how dangerous the people who defend this ideology are not only the problematic of the state perspective for the Roma groups.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the sentence 'Everyone living in Turkish lands is a Turk,' this is a thought that the Turkish nation can never accept, and it is a statement that will hurt a very emotional side of the Turkish nation, even though he has renounced many of his rights and failed to grasp many facts. As it is known, there are many Gypsies in Turkish lands. And the urbanized ones of them forgot their own language and started to speak Turkish. Even so, the Turkish nation has always viewed the Gypsies as inferior and showed shyness to the extent of fear of mixing with them. No matter what the provisions of the constitution are, no matter what is invented to describe the modern nation, the belief that the Gypsies are Turks cannot be imposed on the conscience of the Turkish nation.<sup>24</sup>

There is a serious prejudice against Roma groups in these sentences alone, which he manipulates society against Roma groups with more series of articles. This author, who is

<sup>23 &</sup>quot;Google Privacy Policy", last updated June 12, 2022. <a href="https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/atsiz-huseyin-nihal">https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/atsiz-huseyin-nihal</a>

<sup>24</sup> Atsiz,, Nihal. Orkun Monthly Turkcu Magazine, Issue 40,41,42

an example to everyone who adopts the Turkisness ideology, has created enmity between the society with hate speeches in this way. This problematic perspective, which started from the Ottoman Empire and continued in the Turkish Republic, is seen both in state documents and agreements, and in current journal articles.

#### **CONCLUSION**

My comparative analysis of the practices of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey is based on the method of document analysis and a conceptual analysis of terms such as 'Roma minority' and 'state'. As a first step, I examined the archive laws and documents of the last period of the Ottoman Empire and the first years of the Turkish Republic. These documents are from Ottoman Publications - T.C. I interpreted Ankara Presidency State Archives Presidency/State Archives, discriminatory laws and parliamentary reports.

My main research question is; What was the reason for the different government approach of these two different states towards the Roma minority? The reason for this different approach to government is Turkish nationalism, which is supported by governments. In addition, in parallel with the correspondence in the Ottoman central and local bureaucracy, it was expressed with the word 'Kipti'. In the Settlement Law, which was highly debated in the parliamentary sessions in 1926 and 1934, the name "Gypsy" was used together with the word "nomadic" while listing those who would not be naturalized. This distinction shows us that while the bureaucracy used the Kipti name to cover the settled Romani communities in the country at that time, the name Gypsy was used to include the wandering Romani communities, which were mostly seen as a public order problem. With the laws enacted by the Ottoman Empire, especially the nomadic Romani groups were expressed as gypsies, and the settled ones were called "kipti". In the population exchange with Bulgaria, non-Muslim Romani groups were not accepted into the country. The reforms made after the Ottoman millet system broke down did not change the disrupted order and the Ittihat and Terakki administration ruled the country according to the nationalism ideology.

Turkey accepted the Roma in Greece because they were Muslims and settled. Turkey included them in the exchange in order to solve its population problem and to benefit from the labor power of the Muslim Roma. The reason why the Roma are not excluded from the population exchange and are not as controversial as other non-Turkish elements in the Turkish Grand National Assembly is the lack of organized national movements or national identity awareness. There has been no nation-based revolt by the Roma. The Roma lived in a geographically dispersed situation within the Ottoman Empire, and they did not attempt or form any nationalist revolt. This situation kept them away from seeing them as a political threat in the eyes of the

Republican cadres. Another factor that makes the acceptance and resettlement of the Roma in the 1923 population exchange normal is that most of them are settled. In this thesis, exchanges, parliamentary reports, police reports, discriminatory laws and Turkism are examined. As a result of this examination, the perspective of both the states and the Turkism ideology for the Roma groups is problematic. Groups were accepted or rejected according to the state's benefit. The famous Turkish-nationalist poet, writer, teacher Nihal Atsiz,'s articles on the Roma in the magazine resemble a genocide scenario. Such radical thoughts negatively affect the socialization, development and even survival of the Roma, whose radical thoughts are a stateless minority.

These problematic approaches negatively affect the social inclusion of Roma groups. State prejudice and radical ideologies are the biggest obstacles to the development of society. It is not possible to have social peace with these obstacles.

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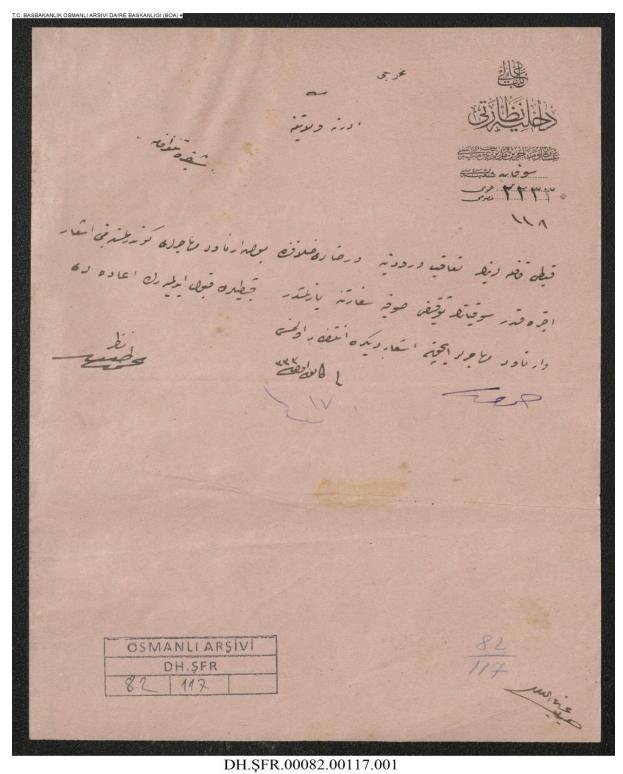


Figure 1, Ottoman archive (...), reproduced with the permission of researcher Sinan Sanlier (BOA, DH.ŞFR 82-117).

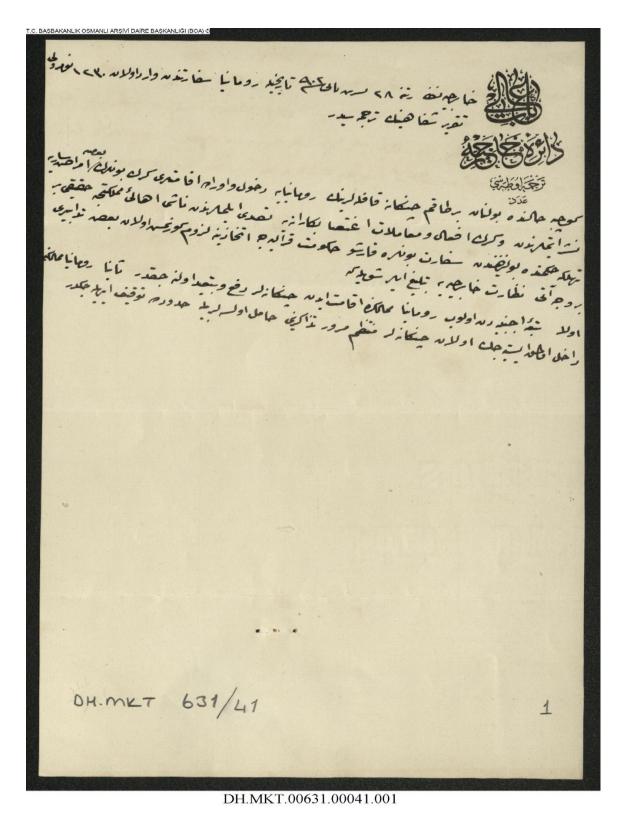


Figure 2, Ottoman archive of researcher Sinan Sanlier (DH.MKT 631-41).

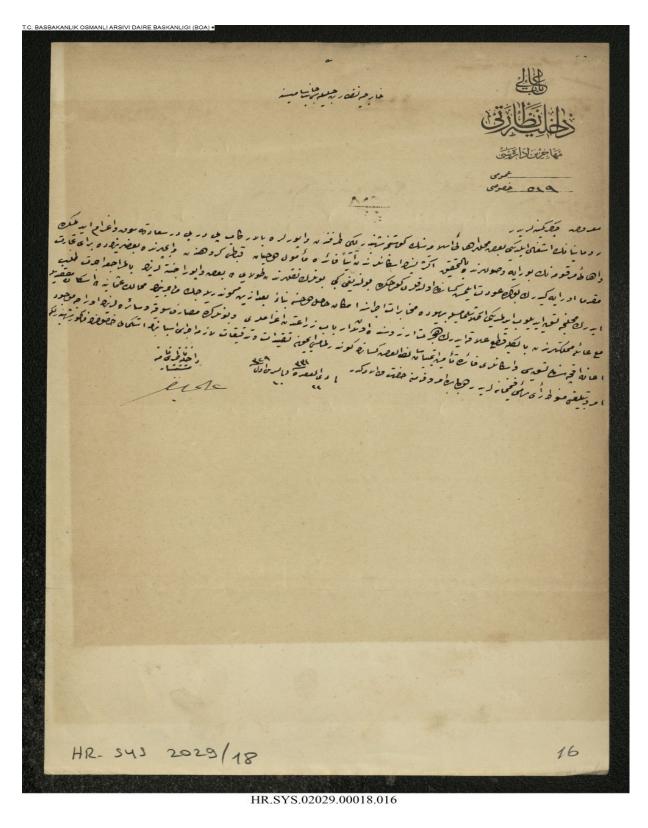


Figure 3, Ottoman archive of researcher Sinan Sanlier