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Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation Theses

**Russian Consuls in Erzurum:
Intercommunal Relations in the Ottoman Borderland
through Diplomatic Reports, 1878–1914**

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Budapest, 2026.

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Research Background and Problem Statement

The aim of this dissertation is the historical reconstruction of the Erzurum vilayet of the Ottoman Empire from the late nineteenth century to the outbreak of the First World War, from a Russian consular perspective, primarily based on the reports of Russian consuls who served in the region between 1878 and 1914. Erzurum was a strategically significant borderland located at the intersection of Ottoman, Russian, British, French, and German geopolitical interests, where social relations, political instability, and the possibilities of coexistence among various ethnic and religious groups were closely intertwined with the global geopolitical processes of the late nineteenth century. The research examines how Russian diplomats observed, interpreted, and sought to influence events in such an unstable borderland province.

The primary source base of the dissertation consists predominantly of materials from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire in Moscow (*Arkhiv Vneshnei Politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii*). These sources include official reports and confidential diplomatic correspondence, largely exchanged between Russian consuls in Erzurum and the Russian Embassy in Constantinople. The dissertation places this rich but relatively underutilized body of sources in dialogue with contemporary historiography and, where possible, with consular sources of other great powers. The aim is to uncover both the informational value and interpretive limitations of the consular perspective, thereby addressing an important gap in the historiography of the late Ottoman eastern provinces.

As one of the principal rivals of the Ottoman Empire, Russia maintained an extensive consular network within the empire, the significance of which increased after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–1878. Although the Treaty of San Stefano initially strengthened Russian influence, its revision at the Congress of Berlin limited territorial gains while simultaneously elevating the Armenian Question to the international level through the reform obligations imposed on the Ottoman Empire. These developments enabled Russia, alongside Great Britain, France, and later Germany, to present itself as a protector of the Christian population of the empire.

In this context, Russian consuls in Erzurum produced detailed reports on interethnic and interreligious relations, the functioning of the administration, and the security situation. However, the dissertation does not treat these sources as neutral descriptions but interprets them as historically constructed texts shaped by Russian imperial interests. The consuls were simultaneously observers, intermediaries, and political actors: their reports not only conveyed

information and contributed to the formation of imperial knowledge about the borderland but also influenced local processes. Accordingly, the dissertation examines not only consular discourse but also its performative effects.

The research is guided by three main questions:

How did the Ottoman administration function—or fail to function—in the Erzurum vilayet between 1878 and 1914, as reflected in Russian consular reports? This question explores the mechanisms of governance, the role of local power structures, tribal relations, and security forces, as well as how these contributed to intercommunal tensions and various forms of violence.

Which issues most concerned the Russian consuls in Erzurum, and how do these reflect the broader geopolitical objectives of the Russian Empire in Eastern Anatolia? Within this framework, the dissertation examines Armenian political mobilization, Kurdish movements, Ottoman reform efforts, and the presence of rival powers.

How did the borderland character of Erzurum shape local processes and imperial strategies? The research analyzes cross-border mobility, divisions within Armenian communities, revolutionary networks, and the circulation of ideas and actors, all of which contributed to the region's heightened geopolitical importance.

Following from these questions, spatiality constitutes a central analytical framework of the dissertation. Although the primary focus is the Erzurum vilayet, the analysis situates it within a broader transimperial context.

Methodology

The methodological approach of the dissertation is based on several closely interconnected elements. First, the research relies on an extensive review of the relevant literature, encompassing the historiography of the late Ottoman eastern provinces, Ottoman–Russian comparative and entangled history, as well as Armenian studies. The theoretical framework is therefore grounded in the approaches of borderland studies and entangled history. These perspectives make it possible to analyze Erzurum not merely as a peripheral province,

but as a borderland space in which imperial rivalry, local social relations, mobility, and ethno-religious diversity interacted in shaping historical processes.

The application of borderland theory proved particularly useful, as Erzurum in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was both a geographical periphery and a point of intersection of multiple imperial interests. The analysis emphasizes the permeability of borders, population movements, interactions among local communities, and the fact that distance from imperial centers limited the effectiveness of state control. This is complemented by the perspective of entangled history, which allows the histories of the Russian and Ottoman Empires to be understood not as separate trajectories but as mutually shaping and interconnected processes.

The primary sources of the research consist of Russian consular reports, and since no comprehensive published collection exists for the period between 1878 and 1914, archival research was indispensable. The consular reports were treated not merely as factual accounts but as historically embedded texts reflecting Russian imperial interests and perceptions. In the course of source criticism, particular attention was paid to which topics consuls emphasized, which issues they omitted, and how these related to Russian geopolitical objectives. The interpretation of the reports was compared with relevant historiography and, where possible, with consular sources of other powers. This approach made it possible to assess both the informational value and the limitations of the sources, and to interpret the history of the Erzurum borderland from a Russian consular perspective in a critical manner.

New Findings

One of the most important new findings of the dissertation is the demonstration that Russian foreign policy toward the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire was fundamentally fragmented from the Congress of Berlin until the outbreak of World War I. Although Russia maintained an extensive consular network within the Ottoman Empire, particularly in the Armenian vilayets, the reports from Erzurum reveal that this diplomatic presence was not accompanied by a coherent long-term strategy, but rather remained largely reactive in nature. Russia primarily sought to preserve the status quo, avoiding the destabilization of the Ottoman Empire, while at the same time treating the Armenian Question partly as a domestic issue, especially in connection with Armenian revolutionary movements.

The dissertation also sheds new light on the role of consular reports, showing that they were not merely observations but instruments of Russian imperial policy. By emphasizing the

failures of the Ottoman administration and the violence inflicted upon the Armenian population, these reports helped legitimize Russia's self-assigned role as a protector. At the same time, the research highlights the limited nature of Russian influence in practice. Consuls often relied on second-hand information, while Russia's economic and commercial presence remained significantly weaker than that of its British, French, and German competitors. One of the key new insights of the dissertation is that this weakness manifested not only in economic terms but also in the handling of the Armenian Question: although Russian reports documented violence against Armenians in detail, they rarely led to concrete measures.

The dissertation further demonstrates that Russian presence had an ambivalent effect on Armenian communities. Russian policy not only failed to provide effective protection but also contributed to the perception of Armenians as a potential "fifth column" in the eyes of Ottoman authorities and the local population. Within this framework, particular emphasis is placed on a more detailed mapping of acts of violence against Armenians. Through the analysis of the 1895 massacres in Erzurum, the dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the causes of violence and provides a solid foundation for further research by drawing on sources that have hitherto been little used or entirely neglected.

Another important contribution of the dissertation is the refinement of the understanding that the Russian Empire also sought to exert influence over Armenian populations through religious means, both within and beyond its borders—primarily by emphasizing the primacy of the Armenian Apostolic Church over Protestant denominations. However, the sources demonstrate that this policy proved unstable in practice. The presence of Protestant and Catholic missions, great power rivalries, and internal divisions within the Armenian community all weakened Russian efforts.

As a new analytical perspective, the dissertation highlights the importance of local, reactionary, religiously grounded resistance in the prehistory of the Young Turk movement in Erzurum. By examining opposition to secularization, it reveals a previously underexplored dimension of local politics in the period. Its significance lies in contributing to a deeper understanding of the difficulties of governing borderland regions and in uncovering the social and political processes that led to the emergence of the Young Turk movement.

Overall, the dissertation interprets the Erzurum borderland not merely as a site of local conflict, but as an intersection of entangled imperial interests. It demonstrates that the deterioration of relations among local religious and ethnic groups cannot be explained solely by local tensions; rather, it was decisively shaped by the dynamics of the Eastern Question,

great power intervention, the impact of the Balkan crises, and the emergence of Armenian revolutionary movements.

Publication

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- Gazdik, Dániel. “Intersection of Conflicting Interests in the Ottoman Borderlands: The Sanasarian School of Erzurum in Russian Consular Reports on the Eve of the Great War.” *Fundamental Armenology* 25, no. 1 (2025): 136–148.
- Gazdik, Dániel. “Az Erzurum vilájet a 19. század végén: egy határvidék az Orosz Birodalom geopolitikai és eszmetörténeti gondolkodásában.” *Világtörténet* (2025): 149–160.