

## **Giant of Ottoman economic history, Mehmet Genc, laid to rest**

**Tarih:** 19 mar 2021

**Yer:** TRT World

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/giant-of-ottoman-economic-history-mehmet-genc-laid-to-rest-45158>



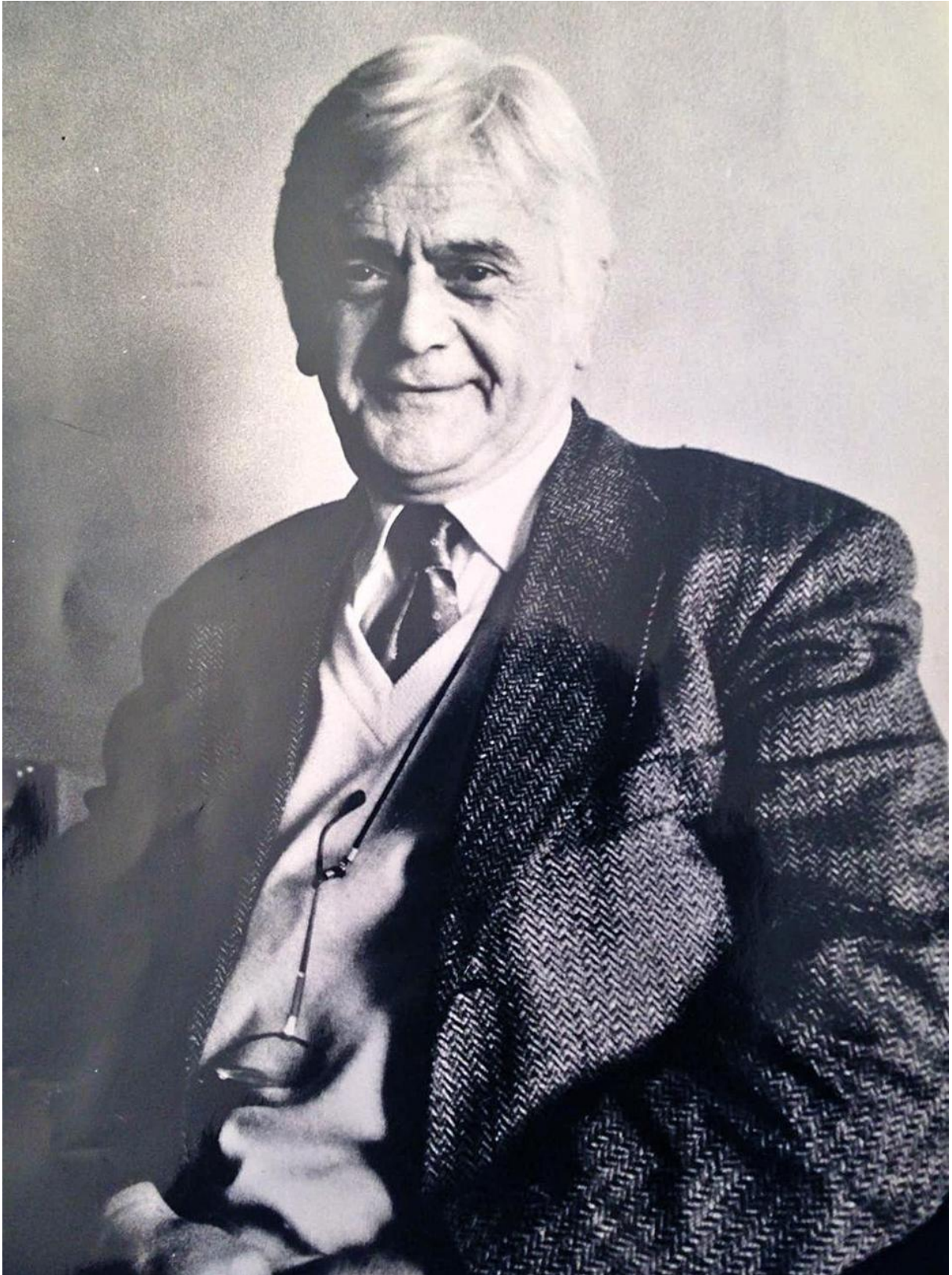
**Professor Genc was among the third generation of Ottoman historians in Republican Turkey who cultivated deep philological understanding, developed sophisticated methods and engaged with the larger scholarly world.**

One of the most influential scholars of Ottoman history, Mehmet Genc, passed away in Istanbul on Thursday. He was 87.

He had been receiving treatment for lung cancer for one and half years at Marmara University Pendik Training and Research Hospital.

A specialist in economic history, Professor Genc was one of the pioneering scholars who made the study of Ottoman history a part of global history, and engaged with the scholarly community both inside and outside of Turkey.

He is most known for his contributions to and deep understanding of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ottoman economic and bureaucratic history. Professor Genc's innovative research methods allowed him to challenge the long-held assumptions of the Ottoman decline paradigm.



His contribution and profound studies on the Ottoman system of provisionalism and the malikane system, a particular tax-farming system practiced from 1650 until the early nineteenth century, remain classic works in the highest order of the historical craft.

(Marmara University)

**"Ant on a pilgrimage"**

Known for his decades of dedication to scholarly endeavors and intellectual curiosity, Genc modestly likened himself to an “ant on a pilgrimage”; in reference to a story of an ant who set out on foot toward Mecca with the intention to make the Hajj, the Islamic pilgrimage. The ant was told by those around him that he wouldn’t be able to complete the journey, to which he replied, “Even if I never reach there, at least I’ll die on the way!”

Born in 1934 in the village of Kemerkopru in the northeastern province of Artvin, near the Georgian border, Genc was the youngest of 7 children. Passionate about mathematics, he wished to continue studying in the field after completing his high school studies at Haydarpasa High School in Istanbul in 1953. However, he pursued studies in the Department of Finance and Economics at Ankara University instead, in order to be able to support his family.

A turning point for him was a tuberculosis diagnosis in his final year of university, which started a lifelong scholarly journey that encompassed not only mathematics, but also philosophy, literature, history, theology, sociology, econometrics and economic theory.

“‘Come friends,’ the doctor called to his colleagues with great enthusiasm. ‘Look, a classic, typical example of tuberculosis, like you see in the books!’” Genc recalled the doctor’s excitement at his diagnosis, “Here he was, delivering a death warrant to a 20-22 year old man, but he had tremendous excitement in his expression. I loved math. I was solving problems, and felt delighted when I solved problems I had been struggling with for weeks, days, months, but I didn’t really know what this kind of pleasure was until then. It was the first time that I saw this delight, an excitement for knowledge, on someone else’s face.”

It was during his six-month treatment in the hospital that Genc’s thirst for knowledge - and dissatisfaction with his own - started. He pored over nearly 200 works, including those of Unamuno, Dostoyevsi, Chekhov and Gogol, reflected on music, philosophy and literature in his culture, and others. He started to wonder what sorts of relationships his culture had with others. These sorts of identity questions eventually pushed him toward the field of economic history, writes Abullah Mesud Kucukkalay, one of Genc’s students who wrote a semi-biographical literature review of Genc’s works and contributions.

In 1960, he entered the newly founded Institute of Turkish Economic History at Istanbul University as an assistant in economic history, supervised by Omer Lutfi Barkan, who, [inspired](#) by the Annales school of historiography, was applying social scientific methods to economic history.

There, [combining](#) his interest in historiography and developmental economics, Genc sought to investigate the reasons behind what is called the Ottoman State’s “underdevelopment,” or resistance to capitalism. Unsatisfied with the existing explanations, he spent decades in the archives seeking the answers to this problematique.





In 2015, he was recognised for his contributions to the intellectual with the Presidential Culture and Arts Grand Award. (AA)

When he started studying Ottoman history in the 1960s, it wasn't well-known as a field-- and was not even taken seriously; it was viewed as an old, outdated, and unsuccessful period of history, to use Professor Genc's words. However, as he delved deeper into the material, Genc quickly [realised](#) how complex the Ottoman system was, and how much it required deep research to be able to properly analyse it.

"When I first opened the door [to this question] of the Ottoman world, my aim was to examine Ottoman industry, which is a contemporary of the industrial revolution. I began to investigate, considering that it would be worthwhile to examine its reactions to the changes in the West as well as transformations experienced [by the Ottomans]," said Genc at the ceremony of his honorary doctorate.

"At that time, I was not aware of the paradox-laden magnitude of Ottoman history. I was unaware that the research that I started as an innocent doctoral dissertation meant jumping into an abyss that would turn this history into an adventure of life laden with paradoxes."

This journey turned into a decades-long endeavor in the archives studying the financial, administrative, and economic issues of the Ottoman State in a comparative method with the other early modern states of Europe. During this period, he taught countless students at Marmara University, Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul University, and Istanbul Sehir University, always encouraging his students to approach

Ottoman history both within and in comparison to the other contemporary states and empires with new questions.

His work has been translated into many languages, including English, French, Arabic and Greek.

Since embarking on his doctoral studies, he taught extensively in these fields. Always meticulous in his research, and not satisfied with the quality of his work, he famously decided not to submit his doctoral dissertation, though he has produced countless works that were of the highest calibre. “These attitudes were like manifestations of the Genc’s interest in achieving scholarly fulfillment,” wrote Kucukkalay.

In 1996, he was awarded an honorary doctorate from Istanbul University.

Perhaps even more than his research, which transformed our understanding of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Ottoman State, he was cherished for his quiet humility, kindness, and generous sharing of his knowledge and wisdom with young students and colleagues. He always spared time to engage with their questions, encouraging them in their academic endeavours.

His students and colleagues recount his elegance, respectful demeanor and courteousness, even in small interactions.

Most of all, those who met him described the exquisite modesty with which he carried himself, both inside and outside the classroom.

Even though the pandemic prevented the crowds that would have otherwise attended, hundreds, including his students, colleagues, friends, readers and those influenced by his works came to his funeral. Politicians from the AK Party, CHP, IYI Party, and MHP were also present.

He was buried next to historian Halil Inalcik at the *hazire*, or burial area, of Istanbul’s Fatih Mosque.

No matter how humbly he referred to himself as an “ant on a pilgrimage,” with his massive contributions to the literature, the countless students he influenced, and his encompassing, meticulous, and relentless pursuit of knowledge, the “ant” has long completed his knowledge pilgrimage and is on his journey to his final home.