

Denise Klein, Historical Accuracy and the Essence of History: Truth in Tatar Chronicles (16th–18th Century)

The idea that historians' accounts of the past must tell the truth is common to all historiographies of cultures with a God-centered worldview. Ottoman historians often spoke about, or claimed to transmit, the "truth." However, they generally dealt with the issue only in passing in their works. They did not produce theoretical works on history as a form of enquiry. Modern scholarship has paid little attention to Ottoman historical thought and writing or the issue of truth in history. Moreover, the existing studies focus, almost exclusively, on works by famous historians from Istanbul.

This paper presents some observations and preliminary thoughts on the role truth played in the historiography of the Crimean Khanate, a semi-autonomous region of the Ottomans north of the Black Sea. It follows the idea that exploring the local, marginal, and peripheral has the capacity to enhance our understanding of the complex Ottoman world. On the basis of seven histories composed between the middle of the sixteenth and the middle of the eighteenth century, the paper first discusses the main reasons why the principle of truth governed Islamic historiography in general and Crimean Tatar historiography in particular. It then analyses the major strategies Crimean historians employed to construct truth in their narratives, for example, the authors emphasized their credibility as individuals and as historians in order to add authority to their words and they put forward supernatural occurrences as support for their interpretation of past events. Finally, I suggest that we ought to distinguish between two truth concepts, one that was devoted to the accurate representation of past events and one that aspired at unveiling the divine wisdom inherent in past events and the moral lessons that history taught or, in the historians' own words, "the essence of history." Unlike in contemporary Ottoman historiography produced in Istanbul, in the Crimean Khanate, revealing the essence of history was considered more important than accurately transmitting the events.