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The Address Book as Sources of Data: The Prospects and Limitations of Quantitative Methods in Turkish Business History

The study of business history through conventional sources is an arduous task for scholars working on the Ottoman/Turkish case. There are no private archives that come close to what is available in the developed countries. While the state produced massive numbers of documents, most of the resources concerning business formation in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century—primarily the records of the trade courts and registrations of the trade chambers—are not accessible to researchers. As such, most research has focused on activities of multinationals or state enterprises. It becomes all the more important therefore to unearth and utilize unconventional data sources. This study explores one such source: Address books published by the Istanbul Chamber of Commerce. By using the business entries in these address books, we assembled a novel dataset comprising the universe of more than 20,000 enterprises in Istanbul—by far, the largest and most important center of trade, finance, and industry in Turkey—between 1917 and 1950. Here we review the problems and the methods we used to address these problems in building up and analyzing this data set. More broadly, we will discuss the contributions and limitations of quantitative research on business history in Turkey and make a case for combining qualitative sources and approaches.