

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

LIVES DARKENED BY CALAMITY: ENDURING THE
FAMINE OF WORLD WAR I IN LEBANON AND WESTERN
SYRIA

by
AARON TYLOR BRAND

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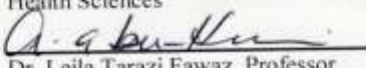
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AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Aaron Tylor Brand for Doctor of Philosophy
Major: History

Title: Lives Darkened by Calamity: Enduring the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria

Because the famine of World War I marked the cusp of the Ottoman and French eras of rule in Lebanon and Syria, the crisis has been regarded in the historiography as a pivotal event – but one which primarily derives its significance from its context in national history. The unintended consequence of this outlook has been the diminution of the period of the crisis as a distinct historical unit, reducing its value to that of a stepping stone between eras. However, the complexity of life in the famine period suggests that the greater historical value of the famine lies not in what caused it or came after, but in the systemic dynamics of the famine itself as it evolved over the course of the crisis from 1915 to 1918. Drawing from meteorological and medical reports, price lists, diaries, correspondence, relief documents and memoirs, this research explores how it was to live during the famine and how the aberrant conditions of the period fed back into the crisis to determine both how it developed and how individuals responded to it to survive. Over time, the high prices and social disintegration prompted transformations in individuals and society, increasing risk for many of the most vulnerable and compelling people to alter their behaviors and attitudes in order to cope with a world that had been redefined by the experience of the famine. Whereas many previous investigations of this topic have dwelled on death and suffering, the focus of this work is life: in spite of the appalling death tolls across the region during the famine, the dominant experience of the period was survival and endurance, not death and resignation. This dissertation seeks to reclaim these forgotten elements of life in the calamity that have so often been overshadowed by the horrors of the crisis.

Key Words: Famine, World War I, WWI, Lebanon, disease, environment, survival

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NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

This work uses a simple standard transliteration style. Arabic quotes have almost all been translated in the text into English, and use of Arabic is largely restricted to footnotes to render extreme detail largely unnecessary. This choice was made to enhance readability and to ensure compatibility. No distinctions have been made regarding emphatic consonants (e.g. ص) or long vowels (e.g. ي). Familiar terms and proper nouns will use their normal or colloquial spellings rather than the more specific transliterated one (Beirut rather than Bayrut, Chouf rather than Shuf). For reference, see the following chart:

أ	a	ص	s	ء	‘
ب	b	ض	dh	ة	a or at
ت	t	ط	t	و	w or u
ث	th	ظ	th	ي	y or i
ج	j	ع	‘	آ	A
ح	h	غ	gh		
خ	kh	ف	f		
د	d	ق	q		
ذ	dh	ك	k		
ر	r	ل	l		
ز	z	م	m		
س	s	ن	n		
ش	sh	ه	h		

ABBREVIATIONS

- AUB – American University of Beirut
- CFR – Case Fatality Rate
- FAD – Food Availability Decline
- PHS – Presbyterian Historical Society
- USC – United States Consular Documents

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: LIVES DARKENED BY CALAMITY

“We live and act in an age of great calamities... Like a fell demon they cast their shadow on every thought we think and every action we perform.”

- Pitrim Sorokin¹

1915 was a war year. At first glance, this would seem a rather pedestrian designation for the residents of Syria – for whom every year since 1911 had been a war year – but the nature of the war into which the Ottoman Empire had been unwillingly drawn in 1914 was far different from the comparatively petty spats with Italy and the Balkan states that had preceded it. The Allied blockade of the Mediterranean coast in 1914 threatened thousands with unemployment, poverty and an uncertain future of unseen duration. Compounding the growing economic malaise was the cessation of foreign remittances which had been the lifeblood of the Lebanese economy in normal times. As the first year of the conflict progressed, prices began to rise in response to a poor harvest, uncertainty, corruption and hoarding. High prices and unemployment combined infelicitously for those wage laborers who comprised the most vulnerable of the urban and rural poor. Suffering and despair took hold of many as poverty gnawed at the extremities of society. The military administration of Jamal Pasha imposed strict order that inspired a sense of dread and indignation for many in a population that had grown notorious in the preceding decades for its sense of independence and self-reliance. Deprived of even normal means of counteracting the effects of dearth and high

¹ Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 9.

prices, many in the region began to feel the pangs of famine in the fall of 1915. Unlike the cases of previous famines, recovery was to be tragically delayed.

As the years passed, the world of those living in Mount Lebanon and western Syria underwent a grotesque metamorphosis. High prices and rapacious poverty forced many to flee to the cities, bringing little but desperate hope and an increased risk of epidemic disease with them. In the formerly prosperous *souqs* of Beirut, poverty became a fact of life for poor and provisioned alike. Stoical women picked minute flecks of meat from animal hides, children bickered with dogs over scraps and sucked discarded horns for even the slightest flavor of meat. By 1917, the horror of the existence of the poor was such that Edward Nickoley of the Syrian Protestant College wondered in his diary, “it is amazing how tenaciously the human being clings to life, to what desperate measures the individual will resort to keep the vital spark alive.” The only other option was death, yet for Nickoley it is unclear which alternative was worse.² This was the obscene face of the world in Lebanon and western Syria during the period of the famine, one which greeted the residents of the region from the winter of 1915-1916 until the fall of 1918, when the arrival of the Arab Revolt and the British Expeditionary Force finally began a process of recovery.

The story of the Ottoman Empire in World War I is sordid, tragic, and ultimately quite terminal – not only for the empire as a political entity, but for untold thousands living within its borders as well. As the centennial of the war approaches, there has been an increase in interest in the period of the war as a unit of historical analysis unto itself. Given the abundance of memoirs, diaries and archival sources, it has not been

² Edward Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” (1917). Edward Nickoley Collection, 1873-1937. ARCHIVE AA 2:3.3. Box 1, File 2. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 17.

particularly difficult to trace a narrative arc for the history of the war, with all of its backroom conspiracies, clashes of personality and the usual heroics, failures and follies to sweeten the plot.

However, while recent research has done much to clarify our understanding of the period, the famine that dominated the Syrian homefront remains a grisly spectacle in the historiography. Even well-reasoned, theoretically sound interpretations of the event have at times been confounded by the necessity of accepting the credibility of sources that offer little to suggest that they should be trusted. Because of this, the story of the famine and life in the period has remained subject to distortion and exaggeration, which in the end often rendered the era as a ghastly caricature of itself. In this narrative, famine happened, people died, and then it followed the Ottoman army out of the region in the late summer of 1918, leaving a gutted husk of a nation to pick up the pieces in its wake. It is this narrative that remains the foundation of historical inquiry into the period.

Though clearly the worst of the famine's effects were experienced by the poorest and most vulnerable, the famine of World War I was a systemic catastrophe that reverberated throughout society, impacting each and every member of society in one way or another. Conditions in society at the time of the famine were time dependent and responsive to minor changes. Shifts in the agricultural system and the commodities markets, for instance, had social impacts that influenced patterns of daily life and even the human and disease ecologies of the region. Social, economic and ecological changes had consequences for a variety of other links in the system – and tragically, also for those who depended upon this system for their livelihoods or even their lives. These changes did not merely alter the fabric of social life; instead, those individuals who

experienced the famine in their daily lives found themselves changing in response to effects of the famine as it slowly began to dominate their lived reality.

I argue that it is necessary to view the famine as a constantly evolving, active social and personal experience. The famine did not simply happen to the people in the region, but it developed over time, often in spite of or because of the efforts of the population to mitigate its dreadful effects on themselves and on others in society. Change prompted responses that determined future developments. As the social and physical impacts of the famine worsened as the years dragged on, individuals, families and communities adapted their own lives in an attempt to compensate for the hardship and the emotional toll exacted by the terrible suffering of the crisis. The surge in refugees and population migrations placed many at greater risk of starvation and likewise altered the human and disease ecologies of the area, increasing the risk of starvation and epidemic disease. To survive, individuals sought support networks, resorted to coping strategies, and even began disregarding social and legal norms in their attempts to sustain themselves. Over time, the social disintegration produced by the famine began taking an emotional toll on those who lived it, forcing many to adapt coping mechanisms to help them deal with the terrible emotional effects of their own suffering or the secondary effects of the suffering of others. The profound changes wrought by the famine began to define behaviors and decisions, reshaping the world and how it was interpreted according to the internal logic that had developed over the course of the crisis.

This systemic interpretation raises interesting questions about the nature of agency (human or otherwise) in historical developments like the famine. Ultimately even deliberate actions and their consequences are determined by time, place and the

environmental, social, economic, cultural and situational and even emotional contexts in which they arise. The conclusions this dissertation draws raises compelling questions about the nature of agency in times of crisis, when powerful exogenous factors play decisive roles in determining one's survival and ability to adapt while also potentially redefining the very values and social interpretations that inform how an individual identifies himself in relation to the world.

A. A Theoretical and Substantive Critique of the Historiography of the Famine in Syria during World War I

This dissertation is an attempt to apply multidisciplinary interpretations to the central problems of the famine to clarify the understanding of the period, while also seeking to understand the famine as a lived experience. Continued dissonance between established theory and statistical data and the contemporary representations suggest the need to critically reassess not only the explanations of the famine period, but also how the sources are interpreted and what can be learned from them. For those individuals who wrote as contemporaries of the period, the famine was an evolving, reactive social phenomenon that encompassed over three years of their lives. It is this aspect of the famine, and the variety of perspectives that this encompasses, which demands a reassessment.

To some extent, focus has been diverted from this topic due to the strong emphasis on suffering and causality in the historical record. The problem of causality has been and remains a nettlesome issue for historians seeking to make sense of the famine that afflicted Lebanon and western Syria from 1915 to 1918. Implicit in the discussion of causality is the issue of blame and agency, or the apparent lack thereof.

Historians and contemporary observers alike have muddied the waters in their search for the one real cause of the famine, as opposed to the many secondary factors that undoubtedly contributed to, but were not (in their opinions) the *decisive* element in the descent from dearth to crisis to outright famine. Recent research has sought to clarify and objectively analyze the admittedly complicated causal web that led to the creation and development of the famine crisis from 1915 through 1918 (with its effects lingering thereafter). Nevertheless, to date, the weakness of the theoretical understanding of famine in general has diminished the effectiveness of famine analysis as anything but a social event rather than a dynamic, evolving phenomenon. Although causal factors have been listed and described in exacting detail, they lack explanatory value without a strong theoretical structure or logical taxonomy to determine not only why these contributed to the famine but how and for whom.

At the heart of this issue is ultimately the question of what a famine actually is. Classical Malthusian understandings of famine that have guided most interpretations of the crisis have viewed it as a period of diminished food supply, leading to large scale starvation and often death.³ This assumption is the foundation of the argument that the famine partially due to the transition of the Lebanese economy to sericulture and other cash crops in the 19th century, which raised Mount Lebanon's susceptibility to famine

³ The name derives from the work of Thomas Malthus, who published the classic overview of famine in his two part work, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Food Availability Decline (FAD) theory is a descendent of the classical economic theories by Thomas Malthus and Adam Smith. Malthus was made famous by his theory that famines were the result of population pressures, which were subject to correcting checks in the forms of plagues and famines. The arrival of Sen's entitlement theory has rendered the FAD interpretation largely irrelevant since it could be demonstrated that food production could keep pace with population growth and that famine could occur even in periods of surplus if fluctuations in endowments or entitlements did not permit people to acquire sufficient sustenance. Thomas Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: J.M. Dent, 1983).

by reducing its self-sufficiency.⁴ However, such an argument neglects economic factors that were the catalysts of the poverty that ultimately produced such widespread suffering. Several counter examples indicate why a departure from such Malthusian interpretations is so necessary. First, the presence of famine in regions whose economies were primarily dedicated to diverse types of edible crops, such as in Jabal ‘Amil, the Biqā’ Valley, and even in the wheat producing region of the Hawran indicates that it meant little to produce grain if the poor had no legal right to it or the prices were too high for them to purchase it. This was especially relevant in the Lebanese *qada’* of the Kisrawan, where many agrarian workers rented their land as sharecroppers.⁵

Moreover, analysis of the famines and shortages that struck the region during the decades prior to World War I in 1874, 1879, 1902, 1907 and 1911 suggests that neither growing wheat in the mountain nor importing it from the usual sources would have been entirely effective at preventing famine when it struck the region. These earlier crises affected both the mountain and coast, in spite of the fact that the country was still connected to the global markets by sea at the time. Though the Lebanese may not have produced enough food to meet their needs (2.5 million kilograms of wheat were grown

⁴ This is a point that has been suggested by Kais Firro, “Silk and Agrarian Changes in Lebanon, 1860-1914,” *IJMES* 22, no. 2 (1990), 152; Melanie Tanielian also argues to this effect in her dissertation. See: Melanie Tanielian, “The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon,” Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013).

⁵ Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy*, 159. This aspect of famine is something that is consistent with numerous subsistence crises, from the famine in Ethiopia in 1972 to the Bengali famine of 1943 to the Irish famine of the 1840s to the Italian famines of the 17th century – those who suffered most were poor, often rural or wage earning urban, populations who practiced husbandry or worked the fields that produced the food but who either had no right to it or were unable to sell it to gain enough money to purchase food of their own. See: Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*, trans. by David Gentilcore (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 86; Cormack O Grada, *Famine: A Short History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

locally and 21 million were imported),⁶ the imports came from regional markets that were determined by the same regional environmental and climatic forces that affected the agriculture in Mount Lebanon. If Lebanon had been a subsistence economy during the crisis, the locust invasion and the concurrent climatic factors that diminished agricultural production across the region would still have resulted in low yields and high prices. And without the cash reserves provided by lucrative silk exports and factory labor, the mountain would have been primarily comprised of the riskiest famine demographic: poor subsistence farmers.

Better interpretations can be made using the theoretical tools provided by the economic theories suggested by Amartya Sen,⁷ Stephen Devereux⁸ and Alexander de Waal.⁹ This school of thought, rooted in Sen's paradigmatic entitlement theory, interprets famine as a condition of the market wherein there was a gap between the cost of entitlements (essentially, necessary items required to sustain life) and the ability of a large number of people to acquire them. Proponents of this economic paradigm regard starvation in famine as the end result of a social and economic crisis in which many in society cannot command enough food to meet their needs, either due to high cost or insufficient means. As Sen and his colleagues have demonstrated, starvation in famine

⁶Jalal Bey, "al-ahwal al-zira'iya wa al-tijariya wa al-sana'iya wa al-iqtisadiya fi Jabal Lubnan," in *Lubnan: Mabathith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, vol. 2, ed. by Antun Bishara Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1993), 86-87.

⁷ This theory was laid out in full in Sen's seminal work *Poverty and Famines*, the subtitle of which is a clever play on Malthus' seminal *Essay*. Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

⁸ Stephen Devereux, *Theories of Famine* (New York: Harvester/Wheatsheaf, 1993).

⁹ Alexander de Waal, *Famine that Kills* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

is a matter of allocation and acquisition, which among other things offers an explanation of the very pertinent fact that people can starve even when food is available.¹⁰

For the purposes of this dissertation, the key theoretical points to consider are not Sen's contribution to the notion of moral economy of famines, but rather the analytical framework that he and his colleagues have provided to explain the patterns of famine and the economic factors that produce the suffering in such crises of entitlements.¹¹ As a working definition, famine was a social condition in which high prices and diminished entitlements led to the development of widespread poverty and mounting starvation and social decay, which in turn led to high rates of disease and death. A crucial point of this conception is the idea that famine is a social phenomenon that people experienced and recognized as famine *as they lived it*. It is helpful to view such famine crises not as a static event, but a dynamic context defined by social disintegration, a marked increase in poverty, suffering and in most cases a dramatic rise in morbidity and mortality rates due to starvation, disease and exposure. The catastrophic physical and social consequences of the famine crisis modify social dynamics, attitudes and norms, redefining the everyday lived experience of the period around the central experience of the famine itself.

In a manner typical of famines across the globe, historical and contemporary writers have sought to make sense of the unbridled catastrophe in Lebanon and Beirut by identifying pattern of human agency in the causes and consequences of the crisis. In

¹⁰ Not that they *do* starve, which is a straw man critique by Peter Bowbrick in his refutation of Sen. Peter Bowbrick, *A Refutation of Professor Sen's Theory of Famines*, (Oxford: Agricultural Economics Research Institute, 1988).

¹¹ It is important to note that Sen's theory was less interested in causality, which he deemed could be any number of factors alone or in conjunction, but rather in interpreting famine dynamics once a crisis was already festering. See: Stephen Devereux, "Sen's Entitlement Approach: Critiques and Counter-Critiques," *Oxford Development Studies* 29, no. 3 (2001): 248.

this portrayal, the suffering of the Syrian poor acquired a moral purity that was at times rendered hagiographically, rendering the relationship of the sufferers to their perceived antagonists in stark, Manichean terms. Because of this, the famine's traditional narrative¹² has often drawn a simplistic hard line of causality from discrete events to complex consequences that were often the combination of many factors. The clearly tenuous claims of many contemporary writers has inspired an almost reflexive skepticism among scholars of Lebanon regarding the period of the First World War. Though they rarely openly critiqued the sources for their attitudes or liberties with the truth,¹³ both of the major academic accounts of the famine have dwelled to great lengths on the factual and interpretive errors of the historiography.¹⁴ To a great degree, this has helped to carve away many of the nationalistic or sectarian interpretations of the crisis, whose often parochial and persecuted interpretations of the famine rested on the notion that the Christians of the region were being punished for their independence.¹⁵

¹² The "traditional" accounts of the famine include both primary and secondary sources, and include: Antoine Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère* (Cairo : Imprimerie Hindi, 1922); Margaret McGilvary, *The Dawn of a New Era in Syria* (New York: Fleming H. Revell & Co., 1920); George Antonius, *The Arab Awakening: The Story of the Arab National Movement* (Beirut: Khayat's College Book Cooperative, 1938); Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, *A'tham harb fi al-tarikh* (Beirut: al-matb'a al-'ilmiyya, 1927) ; Philip Hitti, *Lebanon in History from the Earliest Times until the Present*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan & Co., 1967).

¹³ With the notable and amusing exception of Nicholas Ajay, whose footnotes in his foundational dissertation, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918" were filled with often wry asides about the claims and attitudes of his sources. Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973). Tanielian, "The of Famine."

¹⁴ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut;" Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria," in *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honor of Albert Hourani*, ed. John Spagnolo (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992); Tanielian, "The War of Famine."

¹⁵ Jamal Pasha's ruthless suppression of the "*lamarkaziya*," or "decentralizationist," movement in Damascus and Beirut and the anti-smuggling "blockade" of the mountain and behaviors of corrupt officials provided convincing evidence for many writers that the Turks were embarking on a broad policy of eradication of Lebanon's troublesome Christian population. Jamal's aggressive demeanor and willingness to resort to a hangman's noose certainly did nothing to dissuade people about the truth of this. Nor did the Maronites harbor any illusions about the tense relationship between their community and the Sublime Porte over the previous half century. Such an attitude was not unknown even among

The ability to affix blame and even volition to the causes and developments within the crisis gave the suffering a certain comforting logic and for many a sense of commiseration and outrage that provided a shared point of identity for a broad section of society. However, the sectarian character that the famine acquired in these early periods has made its analysis a far more daunting task, and the deeper the historian explores the experience of the war, the less satisfying and more untenable the well-worn metanarratives of the wartime years become. As compelling as the image of a nation lying down to starve as one may seem for the writer seeking to reach the national audience, a more accurate account of the famine period must necessarily be far messier, more complicated and more nuanced.

Many of the challenges in the sources arise from the fact that there was little contemporary agreement about the exact cause of the famine, which left the literature riddled with arguments and counterarguments that did little to clarify the already complicated topic. To a large extent, this was a problem of perspective. In the traditional historiography of the famine or wartime period, a writer's interpretation of causality often corresponded to their geographical location during the famine, their social status, and their politics. For writers and historians of a nationalist bent or anti-Ottoman inclination, such as George Antonius or Antoine Yammine, the Ottoman state was implicated for a variety of reasons in the willful starvation of the troublesome

contemporaries of the crisis, who had speculated as much as early as 1917. As Edward Nickoley observed, "in view of their attitude in the past, the Lebanese had little ground for expecting kindly treatment from the Turks when these once (sic) secured authority over them." Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 8. Notable examples of this interpretation include: Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*; Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère*; Butrus Khuwayri, *al-rihla al-Suriya fi al-harb al-'umumiyya: akhtar wa ahwal wa 'aja'ib* (Cairo: al-maktab al-'arab, 1921); Dominique Baudis, *La passion des Chrétiens du Liban* (Paris: Editions France Empire, 1979), 173-193; Blanche Loheac-Ammoun, *History of Lebanon*, translated by Wilton Wynn (Beirut: Systeco, 1972), 173-176.

Christian populations of the mountain and coastal areas.¹⁶ This became one of the fundamental assumptions of what could be termed the “traditional narrative” of the famine, which has been in part fed by the prevalence of partial or even propagandistic contemporary and retrospective sources. Such interpretations often relied upon antagonistic depictions of the Ottoman state and a victimized conception of the Lebanese (largely Christian) public, making such sources questionable providers of reliable information about life on the ground in Ottoman Syria during the war.

Interpretations naturally varied according to one’s vantage in society and view of the relations of power and moral economy in Lebanon and the *wilaya* of Beirut at the time. For instance, American writers Margaret McGilvary and Bayard Dodge concerned themselves primarily with the social impacts of the famine, which was somewhat natural since both were involved in the relief projects that sought to alleviate the effects of the crisis. In contrast, chief of Ottoman Internal Security, Aziz Bey¹⁷ and to a certain extent Lebanese Druze leader Shakib Arslan, sought to defend the state from accusations of complicity in the tragedy, instead attributing the suffering primarily to the Allied blockade’s embargo on food and medical relief at a time when they were desperately needed.¹⁸ For Sulayman Dhahir of the market town of Nabatiya, the locust invasion was terrible, but the *cause* of the famine was government ineptitude, conscription, requisitioning, cupidity and corruption.¹⁹ For historians of rural communities, the coming of the locusts often marked the beginning of the terrible

¹⁶ Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*; Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère*.

¹⁷ The title “Bek” will be rendered in its popular Lebanese form.

¹⁸ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya*, translated by Fu’ad Midani (Beirut: 1933). See Shakib Arslan, *Sira dhatiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-taliya’a, 1967).

¹⁹ Sulayman Dhahir, *Jabal ‘Amil fi al-harb al-kawniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-matbu’at al-sharqiyya, 1986), 43.

famine.²⁰ Other contemporary observers were less sanguine about casting primary blame to one of the numerous factors and more judiciously attributed the famine to the situational developments as a whole – though they hardly let those deemed complicit in the suffering off lightly in their often critical analysis.²¹

In recent years, a greater number of historical researchers have followed this latter path, and through their more rigorous critical analysis have revealed a great deal about the social and political factors that contributed to the development of the famine situation. Nicholas Ajay's monumental 1973 dissertation "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The War Years" detailed the diverse social, political, medical and environmental developments that produced the famine conditions in a remarkably comprehensive manner.²² Linda Schilcher and Melanie Tanielian have concurred with these assessments, with the former placing particular emphasis on the failures of Ottoman production and control policies that contributed to inefficiencies and inflated black market sales that drove up point-of-sale prices across the country,²³ and the latter noting the disastrous effects of the aforementioned problems in conjunction with the monetary crisis, transportation and provisioning. Şevket Pamuk's excellent analysis of Ottoman monetary and economic policy during the war interpreted the crisis as an economic event that was closely tied to state manipulation and the

²⁰ Ghalib Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya, imaratan wa turathan wa maqamat hatta nihayat al-harb al-kawniyya al-thaniyya* (Sidon: al-matba' al-'asriyya, 1997); Ghazi Ja'ja', *Tarikh Bsharri al-hadith: 1415-1920* (Bsharri: Bsharri lil nushir, 1990).

²¹ Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, *A'tham harb fi al-tarikh* (Beirut: al-matb'a al-'ilmiyya, 1927); Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi 'ahd Al-'Uthman* (Beirut: Dar al-nahar, 1991); Edward Nickoley, "Historic Diary," Rev. George Curtis Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria: A Book of Personal Experiences*. (unpublished, 1920).

²² Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut."

²³ Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918;" Tanielian, "The War of Famine."

catastrophic inflation of Ottoman paper currency that gradually took place after its introduction in July of 1915.²⁴

Tanielian's 2013 dissertation, "The War of Famine" is significant both for its attempt to offer a social history of the famine period and for offering the most rigorous theoretical dissection of the famine period. Taking a very literal position on Amartya Sen's determination that famine is a human construct,²⁵ she places particular blame on the economic developments that marked the transition from a subsistence economy to a cash crop economy, which, in conjunction with the varied political and social developments of the famine period itself, contributed to market scarcity and high prices. Tanielian, following in the footsteps of Elizabeth Thompson,²⁶ has continued a promising trajectory of historical famine analysis that has sought to engage not only the human and political effects of the crisis but its social implications as well. Tanielian's theoretical approach is particularly important since it is the first attempt to combine an inclusive account of social and political factors with modern theoretical famine analysis, relying primarily on Sen's entitlement theory.²⁷

Even if much progress has been made by such recent reinterpretations of the famine period, there remain major issues of interpretation and explanatory gaps to be filled. The suspect nature of many of the primary sources has skewed interpretations of the severity of the crisis. In his work *Man and Society in Calamity*, Pitrim Sorokin

²⁴ Şevket Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 112-136.

²⁵ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

²⁶ Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

²⁷ Which she augments with complementary economic arguments by Alexis de Waal and Stephen Devereux. On entitlement theory, see Sen, *Poverty and Famines*.

observed that the terrible effects of starvation promotes an obsessiveness by those who lived side-by-side with famine, which tends to overemphasize the dreadful effects of famine and sensationalize the most emotionally inconceivable scenes.²⁸ It is apparent from the sources that the myopia of contemporary observers skewed their ability to conceive of the crisis beyond what they saw and heard, leading them to project their personal interpretations as representations of the experience of society as a whole. As contemporary sources demonstrate, this was particularly true when such suffering involved the innocents, children, families and babies, who were used as intensifying literary devices to convey the cruel tragedy of the situation to their readers.²⁹

However, not all of those who lived in Lebanon or coastal Syria were poor refugees, and those who were poor did not simply acquiesce to their fate and lie down to perish. Even if many of the desperate attempts at self-preservation undertaken during the war did not avert the final, fatal impact of the crisis, the dominant experience of the war was not death, but survival. If the high, but somewhat realistic death toll of 20% that was estimated by Nicholas Ajay for the combined area of Lebanon and the *wilaya* of Beirut was close to the actual figure, this means that 80% of the population managed to endure all three years of the crisis.³⁰ A history is needed not merely for those who died, but for those who lived as well.

²⁸ Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity*, 30.

²⁹ Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 122-123.

³⁰ Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and Wilayat Beirut," 1: 432-433.

B. The Geographical Limits of this Inquiry

One of the lingering problems with many traditional Lebanese accounts of the famine has been the assumption that the famine was manufactured to specifically target the Maronite and Christian populations of Mount Lebanon and Beirut.³¹ Certainly the narrative of the famine has assumed a more prominent role in the collective memory of the Maronite population than among any other, primarily because the residents of Mount Lebanon were the most terribly affected of any group, and have thereby associated the horrific suffering of the period with a deliberate policy of extermination by the Ottoman authorities akin to the ethnic cleansing of the Armenian population in Anatolia.³² However, the mountain was not the only area to suffer from famine, nor were the only sects to suffer Christian. A more comprehensive understanding of the famine (indeed of famine in general) requires an understanding of the crisis as a social and regional catastrophe, not a confessional or political one.

Scholarly efforts to expand the analysis of the famine period from such confessional pitfalls have nevertheless remained indebted to the basic assumptions of the narrative by primarily focusing on Mount Lebanon and the city of Beirut in their analysis – the two epicenters of Maronite social and political life – in the process

³¹ Notable examples include: Antonius, *The Arab Awakening*; Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère*; Lahd Khatir, *'ahd al-mutasarrifiyyin fi Lubnan: 1861-1918* (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1986); Ohannes Kouyoumdjian Pacha, *Le Liban à la veille et au début de la grande guerre: mémoires d'un gouverneur, 1913-1915* (Paris: Centre d'Histoire Arménienne Contemporaine, 2003).

³² For recent discussions of this issue, see: Christoph Schumann, "Individual and Collective Memories of the First World War," in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006): 247-263; Yusuf Moawad, "Jamal Pasha en un version libanaise, l'usage positif de un légende noir," in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006): 425-446; Dennis Walker, "Clericist Catholic Authors and the Crystallization of Historical Memory in Lebanonist-Particularist Discourse, 1918-1922," in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006): 91-128.

inherently neglecting the various regions outside of this scope that suffered terribly from the crisis.³³ For this reason, I have expanded the limits of the work in favor of the more inclusive terms Mount Lebanon and western Syria. The vague latter region includes not only Mount Lebanon and the northern and central reaches of the *wilaya* of Beirut, but also the hinterlands of these areas, which were perhaps not socially significant enough to warrant close inspection in previous works, but nevertheless were vital links in the economic and provisioning chains for the larger urban areas. Geographically, the area of inquiry extends from ‘Akkar in the north to Nablus in the south, and from the coast to the Biqā’ valley. This does not neglect the fact that famine afflicted the entirety of the Near East, ranging from Anatolia to Iran and, to varying degrees of severity, throughout the Arab Ottoman world during the war; however, the selected region formed a more compact and interwoven unit about which more general conclusions could be drawn. Although Palestine, Damascus, Aleppo, the Orontes Valley and the Hawran were all climatically and economically tied to the fates of Mount Lebanon, and the *wilaya* of Beirut, the unique sets of political, environmental and social circumstances of these diverse regions would make such a broad inquiry excessively complicated and the conclusions less acute.

The goal of the use of this geographical unit is to demonstrate that the famine was a broader regional phenomenon rooted in the same basic environmental, economic, social and political circumstances, but which varied in its effects according to the unique characteristics of individuals, communities and regions. The diverse economic,

³³ Most notably in Ajay, “Mount Lebanon,” and Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” both of which include Lebanon and Beirut in their titles and make the two areas the primary focus of their work.

social and geographical landscapes within the chosen area provide a wide range of cases from which to compare and contrast the divergent experiences of the crisis.

C. Structure and Purpose

The chapters of this dissertation have been topically organized in order to address three questions that are fundamental to the understanding of the experience of the famine:

1. What challenges did individuals face that determined how they experienced the famine, and why did these arise?
2. How and why did the context of the famine evolve?
3. How did individuals and group adapt to meet these challenges, and what were the consequences of these changes?
4. How can we reinterpret our understanding of life during the famine with respect to the previous three questions?

Rather than attempting yet another comprehensive discussion of the multitude of factors that contributed to the development and exacerbation of the famine, this dissertation is organized around critical case studies and cross-disciplinary topical inquiry. To achieve this, the scope of this work proceeds from the broadest levels that affected all of society, gradually narrowing in scope. Whereas the first chapter deals with prices and their relation to environmental and social factors (a regional problem), the second and third explore how disease, risk and coping strategies contributed to the diversity of experience across the region. The final two chapters narrow the focus even more to examine the personal experience of the crisis and its implications for individuals and society. The purpose of this organization is to draw out the complexity of experience

without having to resort excessively to empty generalizations and guesswork, which are often more obstructive than instructive in determining the complexities of famine. The directed focus allows a more detailed understanding of not only the causes, but also the consequences of the events and developments that shaped the experience of the famine period. From this, one is able to better understand the nuances of a crisis that was mutable, cumulative, self-reinforcing and comprehensive.

The content and aims of the chapters are as follows:

Chapter 1 – An Inclement Ecology: Defining the Role of Environment in the Famine

This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the rise in prices and mortality from the famine were not an artefact of the state that only affected one group, but rather reflected regional trends that were problematic for all of the diverse populations and communities of western Syria. Although the continual rise in prices following 1916 was closely linked to governmental and merchant intrusion into the agricultural sector and commodities markets, the foundation of the price increase was the combination of the climatic shift that took place from 1915 to 1918 and the locust invasion of 1915 – two environmental disasters that dealt a staggering blow to agricultural production at a time of high demand from the war. The reverberations from these events and the continued climatic instability in 1918 were felt through the July harvest of 1918, playing a definitive role in the increase in the price of necessary commodities across the region.

Relying on heretofore unused climatic data from the Syrian Protestant College's Lee Observatory, this chapter explores the climatic basis of dearth and famine in the region. Using these statistics, consular data, and regional accounts, this chapter proposes

a climatic analysis of patterns of dearth in the western Syrian region corresponding to famines of varying intensity that struck the region from 1873 until 1918. Comparing monthly rainfall data, seasonal harvest times and price data recorded by the Yuhanna Marun monastery,³⁴ I have constructed a model of the climatic circumstances that correspond to years of dearth, as well as the seasonal patterns that such famines take. Comparing data from previous famines, I argue that the shift from a wet stage in the Bruckner cycle³⁵ to a dry one during the war had already placed the region at risk of famine, even before the locust invasion of April 1915 devastated the grain harvest of that year. The coincidence of the climatic and environmental catalysts was particularly deadly since the conclusion of a dry year (1915) nearly always transitioned into a cold, wet winter (1915-1916), which harmed the spring vegetable crop that was necessary to relieve market pressure at a time when grain was already dear. The combination of these circumstances and the destructive heat wave in 1916 led to systemic instabilities that were not corrected until the climatically normal season of 1917. By that point, the devastated agricultural sector, and the social, economic and political responses to the high prices and market instability locked the region into a self-reinforcing cycle that continued until July 1918. The increased cost of agricultural goods that resulted from this confluence of factors contributed greatly to the dramatic increase in poverty, displacement, and ultimately starvation across the region.

Ultimately, these findings provide a statistically-supported interpretation of the economic and agricultural roots of the famine and demonstrate conclusively why the famine was not merely localized in Mount Lebanon, but was experienced across the

³⁴ Published in Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 814, 815, 819.

³⁵ The Bruckner Cycle is a cyclical transition between wet periods and dry periods in the region that occurs in roughly ten year increments.

region. These conclusions decisively reverse previous denials of the relevance of environment in the development of the famine while also firmly establishing the cause of the price increases in the first place. To date no other researcher has analyzed the famine in the region using climatic data, seasonal trends, climate cycles and both vegetable and cereal price statistics, which has led to a poor understanding of how prices affected life in the region. These conclusions about the effect of climate on dearth in the region provides a firm starting point for future analysis of famine and environment in the Near East, which has to date been quite limited.

Chapter 2: Ecology, Society and Disease in a Time of Famine

Whereas the first chapter attempts to define the shared basis of famine for the inhabitants of the region, the second aims to explore the roots of the diversity of experience and of suffering in the famine through an inquiry into the epidemiology of the famine. This chapter seeks to demonstrate how environment and ecology contributed to the growing health crisis throughout the region from 1916 to 1919. Previous interpretations by Ajay, Tanielian and Robert Khuri³⁶ have considered the social and medical causes of the increased incidence of those epidemic and endemic diseases during the famine, and correctly concluded that they were primarily responsible for famine mortality. Ajay, Ozdemir³⁷ and Tanielian have to varying degrees considered the increased mortality to have been consequences of population movements and the depletion of the medical infrastructure by the blockade and Ottoman military

³⁶ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon," 1: 402-420; Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 70-106; Robert Khuri, *La médecine au Liban de Phénicie jusque'à nos jours* (Beirut: Les Editions ABCD 1988), 237-250.

³⁷ Hikmet Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army, 1914-1918: Disease and Death on the Battlefield* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008).

conscriptio. However, these interpretations have largely neglected the decisive roles of climate and ecology in the development of the health crisis despite the clear links between ecology and the etiology of the diseases that were most important during the famine period. Moreover, by relying excessively on contemporary observations, previous historical interpretations have misconstrued the relative magnitude and impact of disease on the populations of the mountain and city of Beirut.

Using the same neglected climatic data, information on disease etiology, and an ecological interpretation³⁸ of the epidemiology of the famine period, I challenge the assertion that the wartime epidemics were the result of medical or pharmaceutical deficiencies. Instead, I argue that the climatic circumstances in the years 1916-1918 and the modification of the human and disease ecologies due to the declining social situation and refugee crisis encouraged the uptick in endemic and epidemic diseases, for which malaria and typhus serve as the primary case studies. The vector-borne malaria that was endemic to the region showed both seasonal and social patterns in its incidence, responding positively and negatively to yearly climatic fluctuations and ecological changes that affected mosquito breeding sites or provided the vectors with a larger host of people on which to prey. I also show that the widespread social disintegration prompted by the crisis altered levels of economic risk, adjusted local population patterns and modified the human ecology of the region. These shifts in turn stimulated local

³⁸ P. Philippe, O. Mansi, "Nonlinearity in the Epidemiology of Complex Health and Disease Processes," *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 19, no. 6 (1998); J.S. Koopman and I.M. Longini, "The Ecological Effects of Individual Exposures and Nonlinear Disease Dynamics in Populations," *American Journal of Public Health* 84, no. 5 (1994); Ronald Waldman, "Infectious Diseases in the Context of War, Civil Strife, and Social Dislocation," in *The Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases* (London: Academic Press, 2007): 310; Peter Bloland, Holly A. Williams, *Malaria Control During Mass Population Movements and Natural Disasters* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2001); Eds. Kenneth Mayer and H.F. Pizer, *The Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases* (London: Academic Press, 2007).

disease ecologies, providing additional fuel for the epidemics and resurgent endemic diseases that accounted for the majority of the famine deaths from 1915-1918.

For this analysis, I focus upon the two most noteworthy diseases in the region during the famine: malaria and typhus. Malaria is important since it was not only the most prevalent disease in the region at the time (to the extent that the League of Nations retroactively deemed the years 1917-1919 a malarial crisis), but also indicative of the influence of the conjunction of climate, ecology and poverty on the health status of the region during the war. I argue that the climatic shift encouraged the proliferation of the malarial mosquito vector while the increase in poverty and displacement created an advantageous disease ecology, which contributed significantly to suffering and mortality in the period of the famine. The second case study focusing on the typhus epidemics aims to demonstrate the intersection of social disintegration and disease ecology in the eruption of epidemics during the famine. The study of typhus also provides an example of the dangers of uncritical source analysis. I argue that the severity of the typhus epidemic has been overstated by contemporary analysis due to its virulence and terrifyingly random transmission. I demonstrate that like malaria, the typhus epidemic favored certain geographical and social patterns that made some areas more prone to epidemics than others.

The goal of these case studies is to provide examples of how and why the experience of the famine varied across the region and to account for the high mortality and incidence rates of specific diseases in certain areas as compared to others. These conclusions also support my argument that the famine was a self-reinforcing crisis: climatic influences and shifts in human ecology catalyzed disease ecologies by increasing risk factors like poverty and malnutrition and physically altering the

environment through population movements, poor hygiene and crowding. These arguments provide a far more convincing explanation for the decline in the health situation in the mountain than a medical analysis alone, and correspond well with ecological analysis of epidemics in other circumstances.

Chapter 3: From Everyday Adaptations to Acts of Desperation: Famine Survival Strategies

Recently, historians of World War I in Europe have begun to explore the subtle, wholly human elements of life during the war, offering deeper insight into life in the period that has been long overshadowed by the carnage of the front lines.³⁹ Along similar lines, this chapter aims to explore daily life in the famine, starting from the assumption that the experience of the period varied among individuals and communities. Rather than relying on preconceptions about the impacts of famine that were broadly reported in secondary literature, this chapter aims to understand survival by examining various coping strategies and risk factors that determined how and why people suffered during the crisis. Where some of the most direct analysis of the famine has sought to understand the top-down causes of the crisis⁴⁰ or has (promisingly) sought a theoretical foundation for both vertical and horizontal roots of the crisis,⁴¹ this chapter seeks a theoretical and practical understanding of suffering and survival on the community and individual levels. In the famine, the rich were not always safe, and the

³⁹ Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds. *Capital Cities at War: Paris, London, Berlin 1914-1919* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Tammy Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War, 1914-1918* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Schilcher, "The Syrian Famine;" Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy;" Tarif Khalidi, "The Arab World," in *The Great World War, 1914-45 Volume 2: The People's Experience*, edited by Peter Liddle, J.M. Bourne and Ian Whitehead (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 291-308.

⁴¹ Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 19-48.

poor were not universally eradicated. This chapter takes this as a thematic foundation and proceeds to determine why this was so.

The chapter begins by problematizing preconceptions about suffering during the famine and offers a theoretical formulation indicating why experiences could vary even within a given social status. By accounting for pre-existing risk factors, developed risk factors, catalytic developments, coping responses and mitigating factors, it is possible to determine what aspects of one's life played the greatest role in determining his experience during the famine. This approach allows for a more nuanced and specific analysis of suffering and survival in the period, while also accounting for the diversity of experience among individuals who ostensibly occupied a similar tier in society. The chapter explores some of the social and economic challenges posed by the famine and analyzes means of coping that were employed during the crisis. This inquiry focuses on how individuals modified behaviors, utilized support systems and engaged in extralegal activities to survive or even profit from the crisis.

The image of the passive famine sufferer that was prevalent in the reports and retrospectives of the mission community and observations by wealthier contemporaries of the famine is summarily rejected by the conclusions of this chapter. Those who suffered from poverty and even starvation were not quiescent victims, but actively engaged with their environment. The actions that they took to survive aimed to mitigate their risk factors or evade the effects of catalytic influences on their own lives. In certain instances, these were little more than acts of desperation at the end of a long period of starvation and agony. Often these were too little, too late. But for many who survived the period, these adaptations enabled them to endure the years of famine and emerge in the aftermath alive, if not unscathed.

Chapter 4: Emotional Survival and Perseverance: Where the Social and Personal Experiences of the Famine Met

Also:

Chapter 5: A Famine of the Spirit: Attitudes and Social Interpretations of the Famine

The fourth chapter moves from the general social developments of the crisis to the emotional and psychological toll that the famine period took on those who lived through it and the ways with which people sought to cope with the strain, stress and ennui of the period. The aim of the chapter is to critically analyze aspects of daily life in the famine and the ways that people confronted the effects of the crisis on the streets and in their own minds. The daily experience of the famine was not always of a “loud” crisis – even in its darkest days.⁴² Nevertheless, even the subtle residues of the famine had transformative effects on many who lived in its midst. Over time, individuals made conscious and unconscious adjustments to make the period more bearable for themselves and their loved ones – ensuring their emotional and physical survival.

Chapter 5 continues the theme of the previous chapter, but with a slightly different aim. Whereas the fourth chapter seeks to understand survival and adaptation in the crisis as a means of coping and surviving the strains of calamity, the fifth argues that these coping mechanisms were not always benign and often had significant implications for the attitudes and behaviors of those who lived through the period. Relying primarily on the detailed personal accounts left by the American community and a number of

⁴² A loud crisis is one that produces significant suffering and mortality, whereas a quiet one involves long-term poverty and malnutrition or undernutrition.

contemporary Arabic sources,⁴³ this chapter details how individuals and communities altered their perception of the crisis and of those within it as a result of their experience with suffering and the denatured social order that emerged from the destructive momentum of the famine situation. This demonstrates that the experience of the famine was an active one – changing in response to how an individual observed and conceptualized the famine. Moreover, because these social interpretations of the famine informed social interactions among individuals and groups, these judgments and shifts in attitude actually had social consequences as well.

The methodologies employed in the final two chapters are less traditional since the aims of the chapters are somewhat unconventional. Instead of addressing external factors that influenced daily life, these chapters explore the nuances of the personal experience of the famine and how it affected those who lived through it, and in turn how it reflected back onto society in social interpretations, attitudes and changes in behavior. Although some of the issues analyzed in these chapters have been discussed to some degree in previous work,⁴⁴ this chapter seeks to understand the changes in social behaviors and attitudes as part of the adaptations that individuals had made in response to the suffering and strains of the famine period. I argue that experiencing the famine, even as a distant observer, caused people to modify their own attitudes, perceptions, discourses and behaviors in order to cope with the crisis. Their world and their

⁴³Most notably, Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*; Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie*.

⁴⁴ A. Tylor Brand, "Years of Horror: The American Experience of the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria," in *Southern Horrors: Northern Visions of the Mediterranean World*, edited by Gilbert Bonifas and Martine Monacelli, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013): 173-185; Thompson, *Colonial Citizens*, 25-29. Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 64-67, 135-167; Ajay, "Mount Lebanon," 1: 422-431; Najwa al-Qattan, "Eating Grass in WWI Syria: Animals and Identity in the Discourses of the Famine," presented at Middle East Studies Association annual conference, New Orleans, October 11, 2013.

responses to it became conditioned by their experience of the famine. For some, the changes were persistent and troubling; others were less cognizant of the shift.

On a practical level, two sets of problems face the historian wishing to access the lived experience of the past. The first is the question of how one can read a text to extract contemporary attitudes, beliefs, feelings or responses that are nearly always neglected, forgotten, suppressed, denied or repackaged. In the absence of outright declarations delineating the subject's emotional state, feelings or attitudes – which are uncommon but exist – one is reduced to inductively ascertaining attitudes and feelings from descriptions, quotes, marked changes in portrayals, and literary style.

The necessarily intuitive nature of this sort of inquiry leads to the second question: what are the limits to what can be concluded from such a methodology? Despite the authority and earnestness of the words that the writers recorded on paper, their true mental states are inaccessible to the historian. The experience of an event is fleeting for even the individual who experiences it, and his memory of it is merely an interpretation of previous psychological states from a later context. In this sense, the subject himself is not an objective commentator on his own previous experiences, particularly when a significant amount of time passed between the experience and its recording – as was the case of most of the memoirs written on the famine years. Diaries and personal correspondences are somewhat free from these sorts of problems of temporality since they are often a direct commentary on the writer's immediate states of mind. But even they are not entirely reliable since the process of writing is a matter of commentary rather than direct reports of visceral reactions.

Sources intended for a particular audience provide further reason for suspicion.⁴⁵ Especially in reports intended for popular consumption, the raw emotional responses to an event or a situation are refined into purified essences of thought and emotion, passed through the filters of time and contemplation and finally judged for their worthiness before finally being written and edited. It is rare to find evidence of this process, but those instances can be instructive. The original draft of Frederick Bliss' retrospect on the war is littered with intensely personal passages that had been struck through as he appeared to struggle with how much honesty his work required before it became *too* honest for his readers.⁴⁶ Ultimately, one must question how honest the sources actually are. If they are not honest, how reliable are they as reporters of motivations, let alone mental and psychological states? Do we have to trust the writer if his writings suggest something other than what he tells us? The answer to this final question, of course, is no. In fact, some of the most revealing information about wartime attitudes fell between the lines of what the writer had intended to convey.

As Foucault argues, deriving meaning from statements is not a matter of simply decoding the structure and content of the statement itself, but rather as its role as “an

⁴⁵ For this reason, this dissertation has intentionally avoided the use of journalistic sources for narrative, statistics or analogies. As Chapter 4 will discuss, strict censorship within the Ottoman Empire during the war reduced the utility of direct press reports from the few newspapers that were still in operation during World War I. For the opposite reason I have eschewed journalistic sources in the *mahjar* during and after the war, the most important of which were published in Cairo and New York. Although the local paper *al-Itihad al-'Uthmani* at times contained interesting information, the broader narratives in sources such as *al-Hoda* and *al-Muqattam* (to name two) did not convincingly depict life on the ground, skewing towards extreme, provocative representations of suffering and oppression. Given the ties between the Cairene Maronite community and French intelligence and the subversive activities of the British during the war, such sources provided too many reasons for skepticism while returning few tangible or at least verifiable benefits. Given the problems that this dissertation had to resolve with other narrative sources whose biases were less cryptic, I decided that such popular sources were best avoided in this particular work.

⁴⁶ Frederick Bliss, “The Question of Syria: Retrospect or Prospect,” Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, (1920).

element in a field of coexistence.”⁴⁷ In this formulation, the context of the statement, subjective interpretation and the intension⁴⁸ behind its obvious objective content are the keys to unlocking its *potential* content. This does not encourage the researcher to ignore the structural aspects of language or to suggest that one can read anything into statements, but rather point out that the functional intent of a statement does not exhaust its semantic possibilities. Meaning can be found in the context in which the work was written and in the specific terms that were chosen to represent it. What does an author mean when he describes the starving on the street as “beasts” or “wretches?” Possibly nothing. But what does it mean (contextually) when a series of authors from various backgrounds and using different languages make the same observation?

The frequency with which references to attitudes, emotions and psychological pathologies occur in contemporary and retrospective sources is an indication that the emotional impacts of the famine were of great existential significance to the people who lived through the period. Piero Camporesi’s work on the Italian famines of the early modern period suggest that such emotional and conceptual changes are typical for individuals living in famine and are indeed an important part of the social interpretations of famine and those within it as time passed.⁴⁹ By studying the language, attitudes, style and substance of the writers, and knowing what patterns of behavior to expect in analogous circumstances, we can reasonably evaluate the effects that the traumas of the famine period had on those who lived through it. Even if all we have are

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, “The Statement and the Archive,” *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, translated by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 109-110.

⁴⁸ Intension is the connoted meaning of a particular word, phrase or expression.

⁴⁹ See Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams*; O Grada, *Famine*.

mere representations and distillations, these are representations and distillations of *something*, which, with honesty and a critical eye, can contribute extensively to our knowledge of how it was to live in the past. These findings have implications not only for the historical understanding of the famine in Lebanon and western Syria during World War I, but for the analysis of human responses to crisis generally.

CHAPTER II

AN INCLEMENT ECOLOGY: DEFINING THE ROLE OF ENVIRONMENT IN THE FAMINE

“A full and proper understanding of these events requires not only an appreciation of the social and economic forces at play – something historians have skillfully offered for a long time – but also an appreciation of ecological contexts and concurrent environmental trends.”¹

- John McNeill

Though the above quote specifically references a particular aspect of the history of colonialism in the sugar islands of the Caribbean, it could equally apply to one of the persistent deficiencies in the social and political historiography of the Middle East. When contrasted with the nuance that environmental analysis has lent to the understanding of the social history of other regions by scholars of the *Annales* school and their cohorts,² it is apparent that this relative neglect by scholars of the Middle East has left a significant blind spot in the social historiography that has concealed some of the most fundamental aspects of the historical lived experience of many parts of the region. It was not until the increase in interest in the topic in recent years³ that

¹ John McNeill, *Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean, 1620-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3.

² Emmanuel LeRoy Ladurie, *Times of Feast, Times of Famine: A History of Climate since the Year 1000*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971). Andrew Appleby, “Epidemics and Famine in the Little Ice Age,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10, no. 4 (Spring 1980): 656. John D. Post, “Climatic Variability and the European Mortality Wave of the Early 1740s,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 15, no. 1 (Summer 1984), 1; Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean world in the age of Philip II* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972-1973.); Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974); William McNeill, *The Human Condition: an Ecological and Historical View* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

³ Notable works include: Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Alan Mikhail, *Nature and*

environment was regarded as more than the passive landscape in which events occurred. When aspects of the environment were mentioned, it was often due to the environment behaving badly, creating inconveniences or even fatal crises for the human subjects of the works.

Consequently, the understanding of the relationship between environment and humanity has been somewhat dichotomous, if not outright antagonistic, as though environment existed outside the realm of humanity, sporadically lashing out at mankind through drought, flood and disaster. To a certain degree, this has been unavoidable due to the role that environmental factors have assumed in the narrative or scope of the works. In the case of Sam White's *Climate of Rebellion*, for instance, the social consequences of climatic shift naturally created a dynamic of opposition between the environment and the social and political forces that were arrayed against them.⁴ Similarly, in *Rule of Experts*, Timothy Mitchell explores not only the relationship, but the nature of the "agency" of environmental, political and technological factors in his inquiry into malaria, agricultural interventions and the political ecology of Egypt in the 20th century. The titular question of his first chapter, "Can the Mosquito Speak," hints at the difficulty in reconciling the unique and instrumental roles of the agents or factors that seem to engage or conflict with each other within this shared ecology.⁵ Given man's predilection for altering his ecology to mitigate the negative impacts of

Empire in Ottoman Egypt: An Environmental History Studies in Environmental History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *Water on Sand: Environmental Histories of the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Alan Mikhail (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). In the Syrian context, see: Andre Latron. *La vie rurale en Syrie et au Liban* (Beirut : L'Institut Français de Damas, 1936) ; Jacques Weulersse, *Paysans de Syrie et du Proche-Orient* (Paris : Gallimard, 1946) ; Abdallah Sa'id, "Tatawwur harakat al-as'ar wa al-ujur," *Lubnan fi al-harb al-'alamiyya al-ula*, ed. Antoine al-Qassis (Beirut : Manshurat al-jami'a al-lubnaniyya, 2011), 1 : 373-416.

⁴ White, *Climate of Rebellion*.

⁵ Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 29-30.

environment, it is understandable that this relationship should assume a posture of opposition.

The ecological context of a given period encompasses a wide range of environmental, social, political, technical and economic factors. Rather than viewing these as complementary or potentially oppositional forces that aid or complicate the agency of human actors, it should be assumed (as Mitchell does) that such factors are “ambivalent” elements of a system in which humans have been granted (by default) the privileged perspective. When perturbations affect the stability of one or more of these factors, the effects can be felt across the whole of the system. These can be passive, as in the case of climatic fluctuations, or intentional, as in the case of state interventions. Regardless of the volition that inspired them, any changes were consequential.

Famine is by its very nature man-made in the sense that it is a market phenomenon that can be negatively or positively impacted by both economic and political action. Nevertheless, prices do not fluctuate arbitrarily – they are reactive, varying in response to immediate and anticipated changes in supply and demand and to factors that build or release market pressure. Analysis of price fluctuations collected during the war in conjunction with climatic data suggests that perturbations to the system created by environmental disruptions corresponded in predictable ways with the fluctuations in prices and the development of the humanitarian crisis between 1915 and 1916. The systemic changes introduced by environmental crisis and climate compounded structural problems to the agricultural system tied to debt and wartime conscription, contributing greatly to the social and economic instability in the agricultural regions. The consequence of the agricultural crisis was diminished productivity and poor harvests from 1915 through 1916, which were reflected in the

high and irregularly fluctuating prices that began in the late summer of 1915. The social, economic and political responses to these initial changes – some constructive, some reactive, some ambivalent - largely contributed to the growing poverty and budding humanitarian crisis that had begun to affect the entire country by late 1915. Because the war continued to demand food and men, and because the state was unable to correct the systemic shock through foreign grain imports, the famine continued to worsen between 1917 and the end of the war in 1918.

A. Causality and Measuring Multiple Agency in the Development of the Famine

This ecological framing is highly relevant to the question of causality in the famine historiography. Social historians like Nicholas Ajay and Melanie Tanielian have with great detail demonstrated the influence that human agency has had on the development of the famine.⁶ Their efforts have shed much light on the politicized question of not only cause, but blame, which has dominated the traditional and popular representations of the crisis. The complex and cumulative series of factors that contributed to the crisis and the immense human suffering of the period are nevertheless difficult to adequately evaluate, particularly given the tendency of the sources to seek a “primary mover” type of cause.

The recent publication of price lists by John Nakhul in his work on Batrun during the famine has provided an invaluable tool with which to weigh the causes and effects of these various factors against their influence on the system (represented by the

⁶ Melanie Tanielian, “The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon,” Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013), 27. Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918 – The War Years,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown (1973); Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, “The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria,” in *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honor of Albert Hourani*, ed. John Spagnolo (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992): 229-258.

cost of certain key food items).⁷ The mere fact that there was war was not sufficient to prompt the famine since the Ottoman Empire had been at war from 1911 through 1913 (albeit at a much reduced scale compared to the World War). In this period, the only famine year that occurred was in 1911, and was largely due to environmental factors, notably a poor harvest in 1910 and a cold winter. Conscription or requisitioning were a factor in the decline in the agricultural sector, but was more influential later in the war. The crops for 1915 had been planted prior to conscription in 1914, and even by early 1915, prices were not exceedingly high by normal standards. Alone, wartime requisitioning during the late fall months of 1914 would have resulted in an uptick in prices that were already on the rise as part of normal seasonal fluctuations. However, the plentiful grain reserve in Syria at the time,⁸ local cultural practices like the *muna*,⁹ and the promise of the spring vegetable harvest in late February and March meant that it would have had only a nominal, temporary effect on prices.

The claim that it was due to the blockade has some credibility, but again, price data shows that the dramatic increase in the cost of wheat did not set in until long after the blockade had been instituted – as such it must be seen as an aggravating factor rather than a primary causal one. Blaming the famine on the introduction of paper money is credible since inflation caused major market problems, but the inflation was not an issue at the time that the famine set in in late 1915 since paper money was only introduced in July, 1915 and did not depreciate significantly in value until July of 1916, meaning the

⁷ John Nakhul, “Bilad al-Batrun fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula: al-jarad, al-ghala’, al-maja’a, al-wafayat,” in *Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula* 2, edited by Antoine Qassis (Beirut: Manshurat al-jami’a al-lubnaniyya, 2011), 2: 814, 815, 819.

⁸ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya*, translated by Fu’ad Midani (Beirut: 1933), 59; Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 120.

⁹ An annual practice of preserving perishable foods for use in the winter or later during times of need (more on this in chapter 2)

majority of its damage came nearly half a year after the crisis began.¹⁰ The price inflation due to black market speculation and the impact of price fixing clearly contributed to the increase in prices. Likewise, while some blame can be leveled at the decisions of the Damascene Municipal Council to cut exports from the town's grain market to Lebanon, Beirut and Palestine,¹¹ the council's decision was based on fears of famine that were already threatening in Damascus following the locust invasion of 1915. All of these points are quite relevant to the high prices and increasing severity of the famine after early 1916, but none adequately explain why the region faced it in the first place.

To understand the development of the famine, it is necessary to examine how environment impacted the human ecology of the time – and how disruptions to this ecology affected society. At a time when agricultural practices were still quite antiquated and public health practices unfit to the tremendous task they faced, climate and ecology were primary determinants of many of the central elements of daily life. Even without the war, the difference of 100 millimeters of rain at a certain time of the year or a severe winter could be the difference between a plentiful harvest or dearth across the region. In this fragile system, an environmental catastrophe like a locust invasion could transform regional markets for years and devastate small farmers. A flood or even an especially wet spring season often resulted in devastating outbreaks of malaria and typhoid. On a more mundane level, environment determined social and economic life cycles in the city and the countryside. The summer harvest set in motion the practice of the *muna*, wherein freshly harvested products were purchased when

¹⁰ Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 144.

¹¹ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan*, 59-61.

prices were low and preserved for the high prices of the months to come. The seasonal arrival of the crops throughout the year provided laborers with food and wages – or in the silk regions of Mount Lebanon, necessary cash to purchase imported food to store away for the cold, snowy winter season.

Statistical analysis of climatic and price data seems to confirm the prominent role that climate and environment played in the development of the famine. Historical trends show that the climatic circumstances of 1915 predicted dearth in the winter, spring and summer of 1915-1916 – spring drought would have led to poor grain harvests in 1915 and the subsequent cold, rainy spring would have risked a poor vegetable crop in 1916. Moreover, this already diminished crop was devastated the locust swarm that reached Syria in March and April of 1915. The damage to the summer harvest drove up market prices in the fall of 1915, pushing the region towards economic and social crisis.

Research in European contexts has determined that a decrease in normal yearly output by even 20% generally resulted in a price increase of around 80% - though there is little exact indication to what percentage below normal the harvest of 1915 sunk in Syria, all signs indicate that it may have been diminished by up to 30 percent (figures across the empire showed a 20% decline in 1915, Syria was likely worse than this due to the locusts).¹² The coincidence of catalytic crisis and with inopportune climatic developments amplified the normal seasonal price patterns. The inability to relieve

¹² Following the 1915 harvest, prices reached roughly double their normal levels prior to the second, poor harvest in 1916 drove them higher. On theoretical analysis of shortfalls and price, See E.A. Wrigley, "Some Reflections on Corn Yields and Prices in Pre-Industrial Economies," in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, ed. John Walter and Roger Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 236. For Ottoman production figures, see Şevket Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," in *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 120.

market pressure due to the destruction of the 1915 grain harvest by the locusts and the effect of climate on the spring vegetable harvests in 1916 prevented the annual spring decline in grain prices, feeding “red noise”¹³ back into the already unstable market and influencing food prices in the years that followed. Dearth compounded other social and economic problems, leading to a crisis of entitlements for many in the region by the end of 1915, which was amplified as poor harvests in the spring and again in the summer grain harvest of 1916 locked the region into a multi-year agricultural crisis.

Although environmental factors were at the heart of the initial crisis of the agricultural system, the aforementioned political, economic and social responses to this initial setback transformed a potentially short-term famine of the sort that was not unfamiliar in the region into a long-term, self-reinforcing calamity that lasted until 1918. Beyond inflating prices, this blow to the agricultural system contributed to the growing social crisis in an already depopulated countryside, where many of the farmers who had avoided conscription were unable to repay debt or were forced to eat seed corn to survive. Subsequent governmental attempts to control production and distribution after 1916, as well as shortsighted taxation policies, worsened the crisis and contributed to corruption, hoarding, price fixing and black marketeering. The social effects of the initial crisis hindered the market’s ability to readjust to the shocks to the agricultural system, and overall production plummeted by a third of 1914 levels in 1917 and 1918, driving prices to previously unseen heights.¹⁴ Crucially, the importance of this crisis was not the absolute decline in the availability of food, which could be had in one form

¹³ “Red noise” is the feedback of earlier periods of dearth in prices in the years that followed. See William James Burroughs, *Does the Weather Really Matter? The Social Implications of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 42.

¹⁴ See Şevket Pamuk’s analysis of Ottoman wheat production: Pamuk, “The Ottoman Economy in World War I,” 120-121.

or another throughout the war if one could afford to pay for it, but rather the effect that these fluctuations had on the prices of wheat and other vital commodities. This gradual amplification of the cost of living ensured that many could not acquire enough food to sustain themselves or their families, leading to hunger, malnutrition and, for many, starvation.

B. Environmental Crisis and its Effect on Prices

If there are three aspects of the wartime years that can be considered ubiquitous in the primary and secondary source material, certainly one would be the arrival of the *jarad* and the dramatic transformation of the verdure of the countryside into a barren wasteland.¹⁵ The “plague” of locusts was by far the most visible and immediately devastating of the environmental crises that took place during the war, and the terrible magnitude of the invasion left a deep impression on those individuals who experienced the invasion first-hand. In spite of the notoriety that the swarm has gained in wartime accounts, the historical record has consistently underestimated the effects of the locusts’ destruction. Most descriptions restrict the effects of the invasion to the catastrophic destruction of the local flora and (at worst) the summer crop of 1915. However, this *prima facie* interpretation ignores the vast social and economic consequences of the shortfall, which were felt for years after the invasion itself in agrarian areas and in the prices of grain that continued to rise in cumulative response to the growing crisis in the countryside.

¹⁵ The others would be the famine itself and Jamal Pasha’s political oppression.

Brought out of dormancy by unusually heavy rain in the Sudan in early 1915,¹⁶ the locusts began swarming up over the Arabian Peninsula across parts of Egypt through the Near East, leaving a steady path of devastation in their wake. The sources disagree on the long term effects of the locusts, though they concur that it was devastating for local agriculture and society at large in the immediate aftermath of the attack. Divergent interpretations arose because localities were impacted differently depending on where they were situated, their economic reliance on agriculture and the degree of poverty of the inhabitants.

Although the arrival of the locusts was a calamitous development, they were certainly not altogether rare in the history of Syria. As Zachary Foster has shown, Syria and Palestine hosted 17 distinct locust invasions from 1865 until 1916, including one peculiar eight year stretch from 1891-1898 when the Bija' Valley dealt with annual recrudescence of the creatures.¹⁷ A similar instance of "domestication" took place as a result of the swarm of 1908, wherein a variety of locust became endemic to the region and made seasonal revivals until the government eradicated them.¹⁸

However, unlike previous swarms, the 1915 invasion was dense enough to blot out the sun, and the swarming creatures were demonstrably undeterred by the feeble acts of man, who were anyways physically unable to defend entire regions of

¹⁶ Philip D. Curtin "Nutrition in African History," in *Hunger and History*, Eds. Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):176.

¹⁷ Zachary Foster, "The 1915 Locust Attack and Its Role in the Syrian Famine during the First World War." unpublished paper, 2012. I would like to recognize and thank Zachary for his assistance and willingness to share his work.

¹⁸ Ruppin, *Syria: An Economic Survey*, 14.

farmland.¹⁹ Unlike some of these invasions, which were somewhat localized, the massive swarm of 1915 blanketed the region, affecting agriculture and the environment from the Mediterranean to the peaks of Mount Lebanon and across large swaths of Syria. Local accounts described the land as having been denuded of all greenery,²⁰ striking a tremendous blow to agricultural areas with their vulnerable grain fields, once during the swarm and again after the eggs hatched and the voracious “hoppers” emerged to denude the landscape before they swarmed again.

The familiarity that many local regions had gained with locusts allowed them to mitigate their effects through assertive civic campaigns.²¹ The zeal with which many threw themselves into the defense of the city was such that the collection campaign became a source of income for enterprising young locust wranglers in need of supplemental income.²² Accounts from across the region discuss the measures used to deflect the invasion, ranging from loud noises, to metal barricades to pyres and flaming ditches. However, in the end the efforts to quell the locust invasion in Beirut and the towns were somewhat inconsequential – the city was not a major agricultural zone. Indeed, the effects of the locust invasion on the cities were for the most part merely secondary, seen in the rise in the price of goods, migration from the countryside, and often an increase in disease and mortality.²³ In the countryside, a large portion of the

¹⁹ For examples from across the region, see Ghazi Ja’ja’, *Tarikh Bsharri al-hadith: 1415-1920* (Bsharri: Bsharri lil nushr, 1990), 164-165. Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya*, 118; Margaret McGilvary, *The Dawn of a New Era in Syria* (New York: Fleming H. Revell & Co., 1920).

²⁰ Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya*, 118.

²¹ This was a point argued with some validity by Melanie Tanielian. Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 26-27.

²² Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 26-27.

²³ Among the most immediate effect was the rise in gastrointestinal problems due to the consumption of inadequate or improper food since usual fare was beyond the economic means of many

population depended upon a sufficient harvest to cover the debts incurred by seasonal planting and yearly taxation – the loss of a harvest was financially devastating and unrectifiable until the next season came, assuming that the debtor’s farm had not already been confiscated as collateral or repossessed by the landowner. In many cases, an individual was simply thrown into prison after he defaulted on his loan.²⁴

From a broad economic standpoint, the devastation was calamitous. Regionally, Arthur Ruppin estimated the immediate economic impact of the swarm totaled 100,000,000 francs,²⁵ a figure which does not account for the secondary financial costs to the population in the form of rising commodity prices and lost wages for laborers, nor does it include the more amorphous human cost of the starvation that began to develop throughout the region in late 1915.

These costs were exacerbated by another secondary consequence of the crisis - the increase in purchases of grain still on the market by influential merchants and large organizations. In order to ensure their own grain supplies (and make a sound investment), Jirjis al-Maqdisi wrote that the wealthy “snapped up” grain and flour from the markets in anticipation of rising costs in the coming months.²⁶ This move had broader market implication than simply reducing the food available to the poor, as is usually assumed; theoretically, the high cost of wheat should have diminished demand

in the population. Dr. Ira Harris discusses this issue in his reports on the years 1902 and 1907 – years of mild famine in Tripoli due to poor harvest the year before. Ira Harris, “Medical Report of the Tripoli Station – Syria Mission: for 1907,” PHS Archives RG115-19-10, Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital 1914-1963, 1. Ira Harris, “Medical Work – Tripoli Station – Syrian Mission – 1902,” PHS Archives RG115-19-10, Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital 1914-1963, 1.

²⁴ Ghalib Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya, imaratan wa turathan wa maqamat hatta nihayat al-harb al-kawniyya al-thaniyya* (Sidon: al-matb’a al-’asriyya, 1997), 117.

²⁵ Arthur Ruppin, *Syria: An Economic Survey*, trans. Nellie Strauss (New York: The Provisional Zionist Committee, 1918), 14.

²⁶ Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, *A’tham harb fi al-tarikh* (Beirut: al-matba’a al-’ilmiyya, 1927), 57.

from the poor and allowed prices to resettle,²⁷ but the large purchases by the wealthy kept demand artificially high and prevented the market from correcting itself.

As this final point implies, the importance of the locusts cannot be simply relegated to the diminished quantity of food in the marketplace. Though the catastrophic short term effects of the invasion has been discussed to some length, the impact of such a powerful disruption to the economic and agricultural system has not been truly considered. As spectacular and terrible as the invasion was for those who witnessed it, the cumulative impact of environmental calamity and climatic disruption allowed the shocks of this initial disaster to reverberate red noise throughout the agricultural and economic system for years. The disruptions that the locusts caused in 1915 set into motion a destructive pattern of market instability leading to a dramatic rise in the prices of commodities that took considerable tolls on the population.

For farmers, the impacts were immediate but lasting. Climatic failures and locust invasions were a perpetual risk to their livelihood, particularly since many small farmers relied on loans for their seed grain that they paid only after the harvest. Although a poor harvest could actually be more profitable than a large one, a devoured harvest was worth nothing. Compounding this depressive influence on agriculture was the practice of conscription in the countryside (which Yalman called Turkey's "soldier mines") and the excessive taxation that had devastated the agricultural regions. In 1916, William Miller made the (exaggerated) observation in Aleppo that, "all reports indicate that less than fifteen per cent – some say ten per cent – of the arable fields of Turkey are being

²⁷ John Walter and Roger Schofield, "Famine, Disease and Crisis Mortality in Early Modern Society," in *Famine, Disease and the Social Order in Early Modern Society*, ed. John Walter and Roger Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 15

sown this spring.”²⁸ Out of sheer necessity, the dearth of 1915 and 1916 forced many farmers to eat the seed grain that they had saved, or that had been provided to them by the government for the following year. The cumulative effect of these ecological, social and administrative blows was a decrease in productivity and a subsequent increase in the prices of agricultural commodities from 1915 through 1918 as diminished supply failed to meet the elevated demand from the government, local markets and (insidiously) the black market.²⁹

Looking for direct correlations between the locusts and the mortality of the famine would be futile since the mortality spikes due to crop failures feature a lag, the worst effects are first felt months after the poor harvest or environmental crisis.³⁰ Indeed, while the crop failures of 1915 had effects as early as the fall of that year, conditions became truly bad in 1916. To date, Foster has been most correct in his assessment of the role of the locust invasion, describing it as a “catalyst” for the humanitarian catastrophe that followed.³¹ However, his thesis must be modified slightly: the locust invasion was one environmental catalyst (among many) of the agricultural crisis that emerged between the fall of 1915 and the end of 1918. The “ripple effect”³² of agricultural failure and market disruption means that the locust invasion increased

²⁸ James Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930) An Interpretation* (New York: MacMillan Co. 1930), 372.

²⁹ Andre Latron observed that those who had liquid resources used them to speculate on agriculture, which drove up prices. Andre Latron, *La vie rurale en Syrie et au Liban* (Beirut : L’Institut Français de Damas, 1936), 34.

³⁰ William James Burroughs, *Does the Weather Really Matter? The Social Implications of Climate Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 30.

³¹ Foster, “The 1915 Locust Attack,” 1.

³² Andrew Appleby has made similar observations about the effects of inclement weather on famine in England and France in the time of the Little Ice Age. Appleby, “Grain Prices and Subsistence Crises in England and France, 1590-1740,” *Journal of Economic History* 39, no. 4 (1979): 869.

prices in the short term while also pushing the effects of the crisis into 1916, when the consequences of dearth were amplified by another poor harvest, speculation, hoarding, inflation, corruption and requisitioning. The destruction caused by the arrival of the locusts prompted a systemic shock that reverberated through the economic, political and eventually social branches of the ecology, leading to higher prices, defaulted debts, and social instability in the countryside. This further destabilized the system, eventually contributing to a worsening of famine conditions, social disintegration and ultimately a futile policy response by the state.

C. The Ripple Effect: The Effect of Climate and Crisis on an Unstable System

Although the locust invasion is the most notorious environmental cause of the famine, the climatic circumstances of the time also contributed to the agricultural failures, high prices and subsequent increase in mortality. Since the climate of the period has received scant attention in the sources apart from passing mention in diaries and memoirs, to date, historians of the famine in Syria have not been able to engage in statistical analysis to understand how or if the environment and the famine were linked. Until the end of World War I, the only reliable climate data available was collected by the Lee Observatory of the Syrian Protestant College, which technically only corresponded to Ras Beirut³³ – then a farming area, but one of minimal importance for

³³ Other stations existed in Sidon and near Zahle, but the data was inconsistent. Complicating research is the fact that some of the accounts do not agree – Subhi Mazloum’s data, apparently taken from the Lee Observatory, differs slightly from the more precise records from Frans Bruin, which is more accurate. Frans Bruin, *Lee Observatory, The American University of Beirut Meteorological Summary 1876-1967* (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1967). Subhi Mazloum, *De la variabilité des pluies dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranée, Publications techniques et scientifiques de l’école française d’ingénieurs de Beyrouth*, no. 5 (Beirut: l’école française d’ingénieurs, 1944) ; Jacques Plassard, “Notice explicative de la carte pluviométrique du Liban.” Beirut: Service Météorologique du Liban, (1972).

regional prices. Moreover, since Beirut and much of Mount Lebanon imported much of its grain from cheaper markets in Palestine and Anatolia to avoid the astoundingly high cost of transporting grain from the interior regions, historians might question the utility of statistics from the city as indicators of climate across the region.

However, because the whole of the Eastern Mediterranean was subject to the same seasonal weather system that provided Beirut with its rainfall, correlations can be drawn between the relative rainfall patterns in the different areas.³⁴ Comparing climatic data with observations on grain output and the presence of famine in areas clearly indicates that the climatic events observed in Beirut were comparable in type (if not scale) to the climatic patterns in the primary agricultural regions near Aleppo, Damascus, Palestine and in Mount Lebanon. As such, annual and cyclical weather patterns had regional effects, not simply local ones, a fact that simplifies analysis of climatic impacts on price fluctuations.

Various factors influenced how climate affected the human ecology of the region. The first was the somewhat cyclical progression of dry and wet periods characteristic to the Eastern Mediterranean zone known as the Bruckner Cycle.³⁵ This was a phenomenon that influenced the patterns of annual precipitation that so profoundly determined the fate of agriculture and market prices in the region.³⁶ Good late winter rains between November and April were essential to the success of the summer harvest – even a dry month in the early spring could diminish the returns on the grain crop and drive up prices during the winter months that followed. An excessively

³⁴ Plassard also draws relative relationships between the zones.

³⁵ Mazloum, *De la variabilité des pluies*, 28, 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

cold winter did not necessarily harm the grain harvest (in fact, cold winters actually foreshadowed a good crop), but it risked damaging the important vegetable harvest that came in February and March and was often fatal to animals that had gone hungry. This is particularly significant since cold winters typically followed a dry season during cusp years of the Bruckner Cycle – the cold exacerbated the dearth in a manner that was often devastating to the inhabitants of the mountain and their livestock.³⁷

Even in more mundane contexts, climate was determined seasonal market patterns and price trends. This was most evident in the spring vegetable and summer grain harvests – the two events most critical for the price cycles in the food market across the region. In normal circumstances, the price of food commodities fluctuated over the course of the year in response to harvests periods, market saturation or dearth, previous agricultural conditions, and anticipated market responses to positive and negative forces (like a good harvest, available imports – or conversely war or environmental crisis). Annual food purchases were planned according to the seasonal price shifts as individuals sought to take advantage of times of plenty to prepare them for times of need.

This phenomenon has been more thoroughly charted in the European context. In his work on early modern France, Olwen Hufton traced the normal chronology of such price trends, isolating three annual phases which can explain the price cycles seen in Syrian data. Hufton distinguishes three phases, A, B, and C, which correspond to market

³⁷ This was evident in the famines of 1879 and 1911, among others. See USC No. 190 U.S. Consulate, Beirut, October 15, 1880; Ira Harris, “Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission” RG115-19-10 Tripoli – Kennedy Hospital Correspondence 1914-1950.

prices in relation to the grain harvest.³⁸ In Phase A (the harvest) prices were low due to the high supply of grain left over from the previous Phase (C) and the anticipation of the increased supply following the harvest itself. In this phase, small farmers immediately put their grain on the market to allow them to pay their creditors and realize a profit to allow them to purchase supplies and food.³⁹ In Phase B (the time of sowing), prices began to rise as demand rose for the cheap grain for consumption, warehousing, and sowing, which effectively removed a portion of the grain from the market to invest in the next year's crop. In Phase C, prices peaked as wheat was slowly removed from the market, diminishing supply. In this phase, most members of society waited cautiously for the next harvest, when good became affordable again. If it promised to be good, large merchants and farmers began to release grain onto the market before the crop arrived to avoid being caught with old surplus when the prices dropped before the harvest. However, as noted above, if the harvest was expected to be poor, those large landholders and other institutions with enough capital to accumulate large quantities of grain often hoarded in anticipation of higher prices in the months to come.⁴⁰ This artificial stimulation of the market essentially ensured that prices would increase during times of dearth – a development the Ottomans had clearly anticipated with their failed

³⁸ One issue with applying Hufton's otherwise excellent analysis to the Syrian context is that he does not take into account the spring harvest, which also had an influence on grain prices by lowering demand on the grain market.

³⁹ Because small farmers were more sensitive to demands from their creditors and had less room for error in case prices dropped significantly, Hufton claims that they were less likely to engage in price speculation by waiting to release their produce when prices began to climb (like the large holders). Olwen Hufton, "Conflict and Grain Supplies," in *Hunger and History*, Eds. Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983):122-123.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 123.

attempt at instituting production and distribution controls after the onset of the crisis in 1916.⁴¹

Although Hufton's time range is slightly skewed due to variations in the agricultural cycles between his case study in France and the various regions of Syria and Mount Lebanon, his observations about the market largely hold true in the Syrian context, even during the war once the climate assumed normal patterns in the year 1917.⁴² The seasonal price fluctuations and the anticipation of environmental and economic crisis were anticipated in Syrian culture by the *muna*, an annual practice of preserving perishable and durable food items that were grown or purchased in Phase A when prices were cheap, then prepared for storage and use during the "*period de pénurie*" of the winter.⁴³ Even during the alimentary crisis from 1915-1918, seasonal price fluctuations remained major determinants of the price paid for food across Syria. By laying aside food for use or sale, families could reduce the need to make expenditures when necessities were expensive – particularly wheat, which was both the most expensive variety of grain and the staple *par excellence* of the regional food culture, used extensively for such items as bread, burghul, *kishk*, *kibbe*, *smeed* and *frike*.⁴⁴ In normal times, Afif Tannous observed that the Lebanese would eat an average

⁴¹ Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918;" Ahmed Emin Yalman, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 128-130.

⁴² For more on this, see Andre Latron, *La vie rurale en Syrie et au Liban*. (Beirut : L'Institut Français de Damas, 1936), 92.

⁴³ On this practice, see Aida Kanifani-Zahair, *Mune: La conservation alimentaire traditionnelle au Liban*, (Paris : Maison des sciences de l'homme, 1994), 1.

⁴⁴The Lebanese and Syrians preferred the hard, durum wheat known as *hente* rather than the softer kernal wheat, (*qamh*). Burghol is cracked parboiled wheat (the equivalent to bulghur), *kishk* is dried, fermented strained yogurt pounded with burghol, *kibbe* is a mixture of burghol and minced meat, *smeed* is the equivalent of semolina, and *frike* is a dish made with green wheat berries. Salim al-Asfar, "al-zira'a fi Lubnan," in *Lubnan: Mabahith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, vol. 2, ed. by Antun Bishara Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1988), 26.

of two pounds of bread per day, and in his ethnography of the coastal village of Munsif, John Gulick was told “a meal is not a meal if there is no bread.”⁴⁵

One of the inadequacies of research done on the price of agricultural goods during the war that many have focused entirely on the wartime prices in terms of their relationship to *prewar* figures, which were irrelevant during the famine when wages and costs were dramatically skewed by the economic crisis.⁴⁶ For those seeking to purchase food for their personal consumption or storage during the expensive months of the late winter and spring, the most relevant price fluctuations were those determined by the crop cycles. The overall increase in cost merely determined how much they could afford to purchase during the (relatively) cheap season and how much they would suffer when they were forced to buy during Phases B and C. Although there was a gradual upward trend and a number of price increases due to the increased demand from the war, monetary instability, hoarding and the cumulative effects of poor harvests, it is important to note that wheat and barley prices still responded to normal seasonal cycles. Phase A began between July and August, when regional harvests increased the supply across Syria, alleviating the pressure on the market. Prices began to trend up soon thereafter in Phase B, as planting began in August and September to ensure the seeds would root prior to the onset of winter, spiking in Phase C in winter as movement decreased and individuals hoarded supplies in anticipation of high prices during the winter months. Prices were alleviated briefly around March, as spring agricultural

⁴⁵ John Gulick, *Social Structure and Culture Change in a Lebanese Village* (New York: Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., 1955), 40.

⁴⁶ ‘Abdallah Sa’id notes the importance of seasonal fluctuations in his analysis of the price movements during the war in relation to the harvest, planting and *muna*. Other work has primarily focused on the yearly differentials, which had no meaning except taken as an average of all 12 months and viewed as a progressive trend, rather than an upward trend within the usual cycles. Abdallah Sa’id, “Tatawwar harakat al-as’ar wa al-ujur,” in *Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula*, vol. 1, ed. by Antoine Qassis (Beirut: munshurat al-jami’a al-lubnaniyya, 2011): 373.

products like vegetables entered the market or were harvested at home.⁴⁷ Prices began rising again in May before the release of the past year's holdings prior to the July harvest, which decreased prices by an average of 30% in the years in question.

The early vegetable harvest also exhibited seasonal tendencies, generally coming at the end of February and early March, which decreased prices across the board. These harvests were somewhat less predictable since a large amount of this relatively fragile produce was grown locally or in nearby regions.⁴⁸ A poor season for local vegetable crops might create a spike in prices that lasted through the summer and winter until the next harvest stabilized the market. Likewise, shortfalls in the vegetable harvest could prevent the spring decrease in the price of grain. In a year of dearth, the famines which began in the previous winter would then worsen as prices continued to rise, only dropping again in July when the grain harvest came.

The fact that the harvest dates of crops were staggered was of vital significance for those living in poverty since it allowed individuals to purchase freshly harvested crops at lower prices prior to the harvest of the staple food, wheat. In times of famine, this was literally a life-saver. Shaykh Muhsin al-Amin from the town of Shaqra in Jabal 'Amil wrote that the arrival of fava beans (locally known as *ful*) relieved the hunger of the inhabitants of the region during the summer prior to the decrease in prices following the grain harvest. He noted that the combination of the grain and later fruit harvest at the end of the summer "dissipated the troubles" of the population,⁴⁹ ushering in a period of

⁴⁷ John Gulick, *Social Structure and Culture Change*, 39.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴⁹ Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiïte du Gabal 'Amil, tiré de: les notables chiïtes*, translated and annotated by Sabrina Mervin and Haitham al-Amin (Damascus : Institute Français de Damas, 1998),168.

low prices during which those who had the resources to purchase food were able to stock up for the costly months ahead.

Multi-cycle deficiencies like the one seen from 1915 to 1918 contributed to longer term price increases since the following year's grain harvest was often poor as well, often leading to a second year of famine before the market could right itself. This trend was certainly evident in the analysis of price cycle irregularities across Syria from the winter of 1915 through the spring of 1917, suggesting that the agricultural sector never recovered from the initial blow to the system. The consequences of these early years, compounded by conscription and the human effects of the famine led to a continued decline in grain production throughout the years of the war, driving the agricultural regions into a long term crisis. The figures provided by Şevket Pamuk indicate that from 1914-1915, wheat production across the Ottoman empire declined to 80% of the 1914 baseline, to 73% in 1916, 64% in 1917 and 62% in 1918.⁵⁰ Without the ability to import food from abroad due to the blockade, it was impossible to compensate for these shortfalls to arrest the continuing rise in the cost of living.

D. Climate and Prices

Because prices were so contingent upon specific climatic circumstances during the late winter and spring, two particular meteorological aberrations put the region at risk of dearth: an excessively dry late spring or an excessive cold late winter. Too little rain in the late winter and spring was a guarantee of a poor harvest and high prices in the grain market. This increased the risk of famine among the vulnerable poor

⁵⁰ These figures were likely more severe in Syria in the initial years due to the locust invasion. Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," 120.

populations (especially those in rural areas) and the loss of valuable livestock due to the high cost of fodder. A cold winter often killed livestock and could damage the vegetable crop, preventing the harvest from offsetting the high grain prices when it did arrive.

The relationship between these climatic conditions and famine is apparent evident if one correlates rainfall patterns and the occurrence of famine. Though famine did not necessarily always arise due to climate, it is apparent that certain climatic circumstances led to a dramatic increase in the risk of famine across the region. Local and consular sources frequently correlated dry years with dearth or famine, and often the death of livestock from the cold or starvation. In contrast, cold and rainy years were often associated with epidemic disease and the death of livestock.⁵¹ Significantly, data demonstrates that these two circumstances tended to be linked – a dry year was often followed by an extremely rainy one with a cold winter and spring. Although the wet years often compensated the region for the previous year’s dearth with a large harvest, the intervening time period was frequently devastating for the populations and often damaged the spring harvest, driving up the already elevated prices. This pattern was confirmed by observations and climatic data from 1873 through 1919. During this period, dry years in 1873, 1879, 1890, 1895 1901-1902, 1908-1909⁵² and 1915 were followed by wet years with exceptionally cold and often snowy springs. The years 1873-1874, 1879-1880, 1902-1903, 1911-1912 and 1915-1916 were all indicative of this trend, of which 1874, 1880, 1902, 1911 and 1916 were all confirmed dearth or

⁵¹ See USC No. 190 US Consul in Beirut, October 15, 1880; Daniel Bliss, *Letters from a New Campus: Written to His Wife Abby and Their Four Children on their Visit to Amherst, Massachusetts, 1873-1874*, (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1994); Henry Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years in Syria* (Reading: Garnet Publishing, 2002), 2: 435-437; Harris, “Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission,” PHS Archives RG115-19-10, Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital 1914-1963.

⁵² This was a rare two-year drought, which was made worse by the strangely dry February and exceptionally wet March in the spring of 1910, resulting in yet another poor grain crop.

famine years. Henry Jessup pointedly observed that the drought of 1873 led to a winter famine, which was followed by exceptional rains in the winter that contributed to “unprecedented sickness” in 1873 in the form of various fevers, undoubtedly malarial, but also likely including typhoid.⁵³

The multi-year impact of environmental disturbances can be seen particularly in the mild to moderate famines of 1902 and 1911, each of which corresponded to agricultural failures and climatic fluctuations in the prior year. The crisis of the dry year 1902 came on the heels of the second driest year since 1879,⁵⁴ leading to what Ira Harris of the Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital described as “mild famine and deprivation,” resulting in a 14% increase in cases at the hospital over the 1901 totals (5,672, up from 4,988 in 1901). A similar situation occurred in the famine of 1911. The crisis was preceded by two relatively dry years (1908 and 1909) and an exceptionally dry spring in 1910. Though 1910 was comparatively wetter as a whole,⁵⁵ the region received little rain in the important month of February (49 mm, compared to the average of 142.67 mm), precipitation that normally contributed to much of the snowpack in the mountains and nurtured the vegetable crops that arrived in late February and March, which were necessary to keep down the price of grain. One of the effects of this multi-year climatic dip was a wheat harvest that was a third less than the average in 1910⁵⁶ (echoing red

⁵³ Jessup, *Fifty-Three Years*, 435-437.

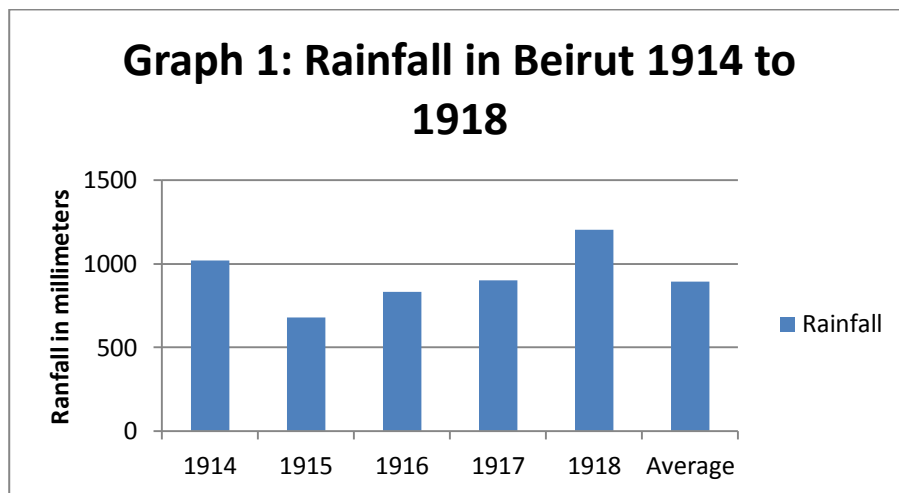
⁵⁴ These observations reflect those made by Helmut de Terra – see: Helmut de Terra, “Rainfall Periodicity in Relation to Agriculture and Malaria in the Near East,” *Science* 101, no. 2634 (1945): 630-631. The driest years on record (as noted in the records of the Lee Observatory at the Syrian Protestant College) came in 1879, 1890, 1901 and 1921. 1909 and 1910 were dry relative to the years surrounding them. For figures, see Bruin, *Lee Observatory*, 12.

⁵⁵ Subhi Mazloum, “De la variabilité des pluies dans le bassin oriental de la méditerranée,” *Publications techniques et scientifique de l'école française d'ingénieurs de Beyrouth*, no. 5 (Beirut: L'Ecole française de ingénieurs, 1944), 10.

⁵⁶ Ruppin, “Syria: An Economic Survey,” 15.

noise from the poor harvests the year before as well), which caused higher prices in the exceptionally cold and wet winter. Famine conditions in were evident in 1911.

Certain patterns were of particular relevance in determining if the year in question was going to be particularly susceptible to famine. First were the wet and dry phases, known as the Bruckner cycle. De Terra has observed that wet years were nearly always preceded by one to two years of low rainfall. According to Mazloun, the wet trend that began in 1904 ended in 1917, corresponding to the dry year of 1915.⁵⁷



Graph 1 shows Rainfall patterns throughout the period of the war..⁵⁸

The monthly trends that characterized the final years of the cycle were also significant. Although the annual precipitation totals are tabulated according to the calendar year, looking at monthly statistics indicates the existence of a similar transitional period between the dry and wet years (notably 1910 and 1915). These transitional periods were characterized by dry or spotty spring precipitation, culminating in an exceptionally cold

⁵⁷ Mazloun, “De la variabilite des pluies,” 28.

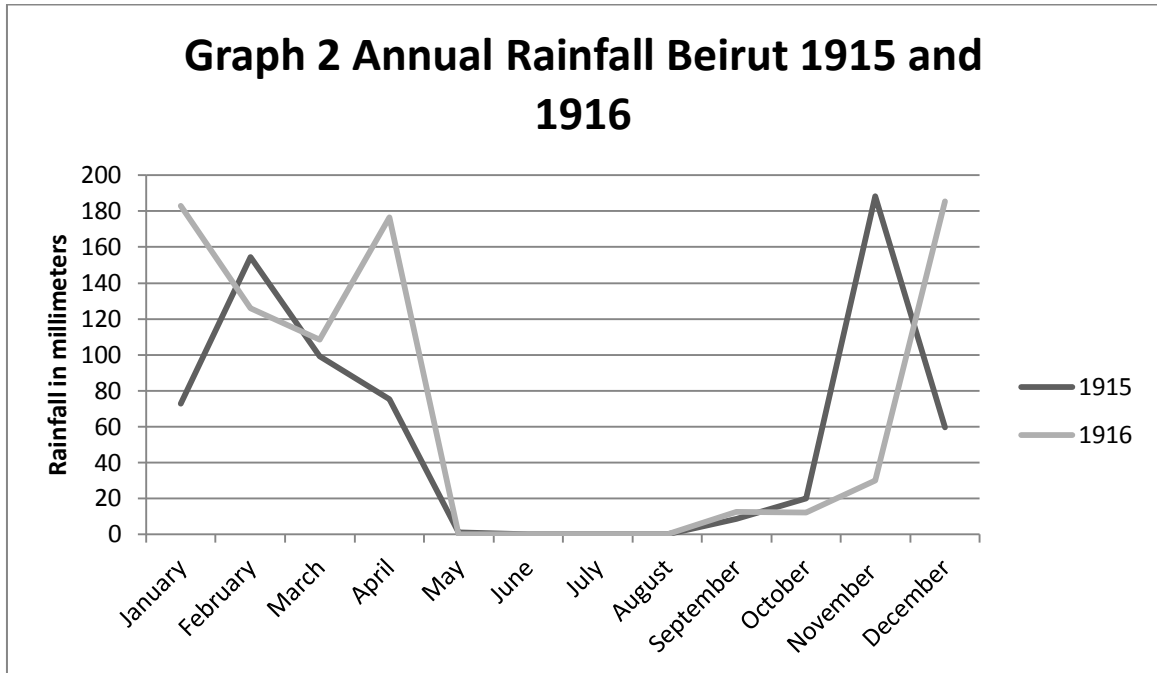
⁵⁸ Data taken from Bruin, *Lee Observatory*, 12.

and wet winter and spring. These transitional cusp years frequently corresponded to dearth and famine – 1915 was one of them.

E. Climate and Prices during the War

In spite of the greater attention garnered by the spectacular locust invasion, normal climatic effects did not cease to influence market prices during the war. The unexceptional harvest of 1914⁵⁹ was followed by the dry year of 1915, which saw a meager 679.2mm of rain fall in Beirut - far short of the 893mm average. Even without the locust invasion (which did more damage than a climatic dip alone), the impact of this drought on the harvest would have been severe, leading to higher grain prices and dearth in the winter of 1915-1916. The poor vegetable crop due to the exceptionally cold and wet winter prevented the harvest from alleviating the pressure on a market already strained by the poor harvest of the year before. This prevented the price of wheat and barley from decreasing in March and April as usual, and instead prompted a gradual climb from March through the harvest in July. The arrival of an exceptional heat wave in 1916 exacerbated these tendencies, doing additional damage to a summer harvest that needed to be strong in order to balance the previous year's deficiencies.

⁵⁹ The year 1914 was exceptionally rainy, but experienced a lull in February that may have impacted the harvest. Ahmed Emin Yalman, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 120.



The contrast between 1915 and 1916 demonstrates the pattern of the Bruckner Cycle. Spring rains in 1915 were exceptionally low (apart from February), but were followed by an exceptionally wet period that extended into May 1916.⁶⁰

The climatic theory can be tested by matching the complete monthly climatic data available for the period⁶¹ with the relatively complete barley, wheat and onion price lists taken from the Yuhanna Marun Monastery, as recorded by John Nakhul in his article on Batrun during the war.⁶² Because the price lists were from a single source and showed purchases that took place on a relatively regular basis, a chart of the relative monthly progression of prices can allow the analysis of the yearly price trends, not merely the inflation in prices as a function of prewar levels.⁶³ It should be clear that

⁶⁰ Bruin, *Lee Observatory*, 12.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶² Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun, 814, 815, 819.

⁶³ In months with multiple purchases, the mean was derived and used as the data point. The monastery data corresponds well with other price lists, suggesting that the monks' purchases reflected regional trends.

these records were chosen because the lists were complete enough for wheat, barley and a vegetable crop (onion)⁶⁴ that it is possible to track the seasonal effects of prices and to thereby analyze the relationship between prices and climate. The prices themselves are not intended to be representative of the general price situation since the price of commodities varied according to the purchaser, seller, type of payment (gold or paper), location of the purchase and specific market conditions at the time of sale (from one day to the next prices could range by several percent). However, evidence taken from other price lists around the same time indicates that the monastery's price fell within a normal range – as one example, in September, 1916 the Hamlin Sanitarium paid 17-19 piasters per ratl of wheat (other local prices ranged to 25 per ratl)⁶⁵ – at the same time, the monastery paid 15 piasters.⁶⁶

This data is especially valuable since most figures found in secondary sources isolate the price of an item at a specific point in time, an extreme, or an annual price. Individually, prices are utterly meaningless except as an indication of the obscenely high cost of living at the time. Moreover, because the inclusion of high prices was often intended to demonstrate the severity of life at a particular time, rarely is there any note about the effect of inflation on the price. However, since the monastery's price list was intended for accounting, not narrative, there is less reason to suspect that the data has been skewed intentionally. By not accounting for the difference between the value of paper money and the absolute price of the grain, other sources have made it appear that

⁶⁴ Onions were specifically chosen because of the completeness of their price list as well as their close correlation to the spring harvest of other vegetables.

⁶⁵ Affeffi Saba', "Letter to Anna Jessup September 1, 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27.

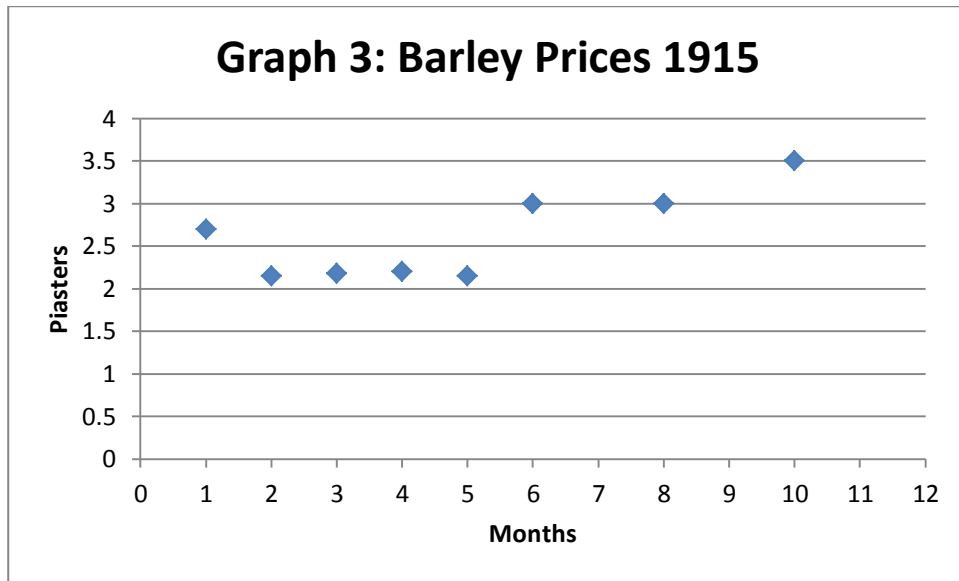
⁶⁶ Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 814.

the price of food skyrocketed up to 40 or 50 times the normal value, when in fact the actual value of the food purchased was much lower in relation to the gold lira, though still prohibitively expensive for those whose livelihoods or access to remittances had been cut by the war. Ahmed Emin Yalman observed that the value of the paper lira in Istanbul had reached 22.8 percent of its value against gold currency (a rate that was slightly lower in Syria). By early 1918, wheat prices were roughly 150 piasters a ratl (although they have been listed as high as 300 in one report), which given the inflation had the nominal value of roughly 32 piasters in coin – or nearly exactly what the monks of Yuhanna Marun Monastery paid for wheat in the tremendously expensive months of March (30.6 piasters) and April (33.6 piasters) of 1918.⁶⁷

The integral nature of the food markets and the seriousness of ecological factors was evident in comparing the influence that the produce and grain markets had on each other. Outside of the environmental catastrophes of 1915 (locusts) and 1916 (cold winter and heat wave), the prices of the various food items continued to follow normal seasonal trends, albeit on a dramatically higher scale. Although the price of grain seems to have been less decisive in its impact on the variability of vegetable prices – the high prices of wheat in 1917 came when onion prices that were lower than at any point between February 1916 and March 1917 – the price of vegetables was clearly a factor in the fluctuation in grain prices. This is logical, since the highest demand was on the grain market during the winter months, when transportation and high prices made purchasing expensive cereals difficult for many of the most economically vulnerable. This was evident in the price lists for both 1915 and 1917, when barley prices declined after January as the vegetable harvest alleviated the demand for grain on the market – a trend

⁶⁷ Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 144.

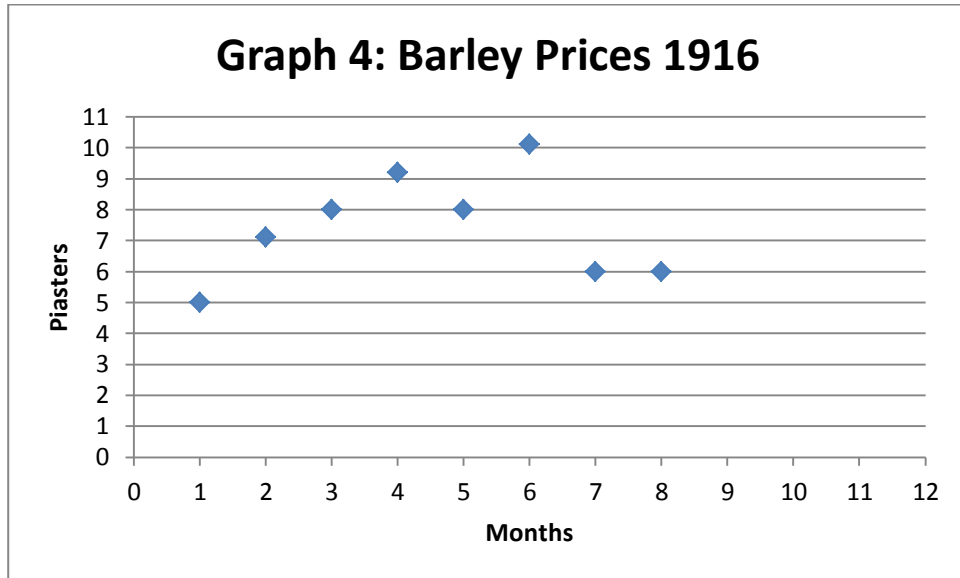
also seen in the wheat harvest of 1917, wherein prices declined from February to March and then increased slowly until May. However, due to the poor vegetable harvest in 1916 (Graph 5), the cost of barley increased steadily from January until May, and wheat spiked rapidly from 8 to almost 14 piasters per ratl⁶⁸ from April to May.



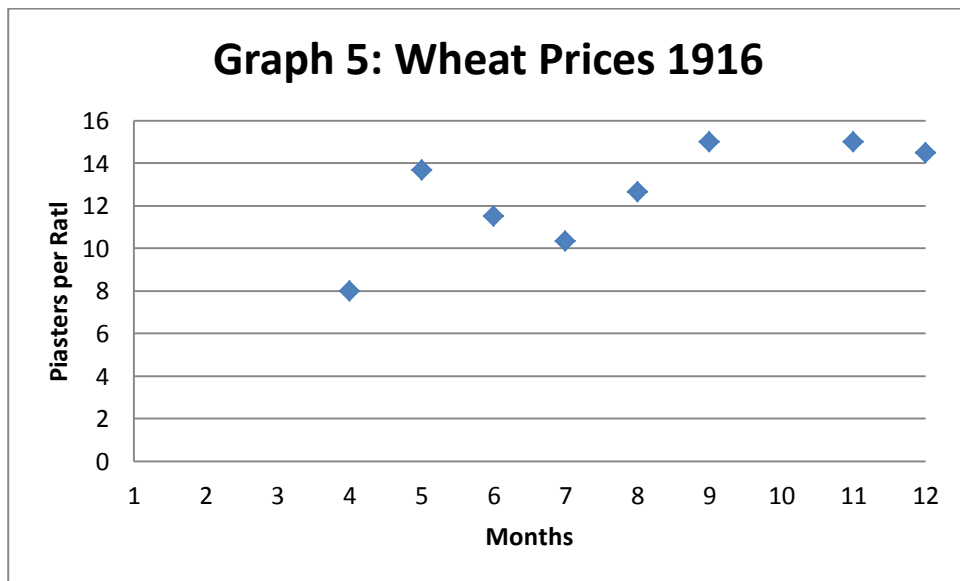
Graph 2 shows the effect of the locust invasion on the barley harvest. Note the increase in prices in July (month 7), normally a period of low prices due to the weak crop. Note that even at the highest point in October, barley was still only 3.5 piasters per ratl.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ A ratl equates to roughly 2.564 kilograms, though Issawi notes that different towns had slightly different calculations. Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent, 1800-1914: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 477-478.

⁶⁹ Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 815.



The impact of the weak spring harvest of 1916 can be seen in the increase in barley prices through the spring, when there is normally a drop in the cost of grain.⁷⁰



Graph 4 shows the wheat prices paid by the Yuhanna Marun Monastery in 1916. The effect of the summer harvest can be seen in June (month 6) and July (month 7), after which prices rose in anticipation of the winter.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Ibid., 815.

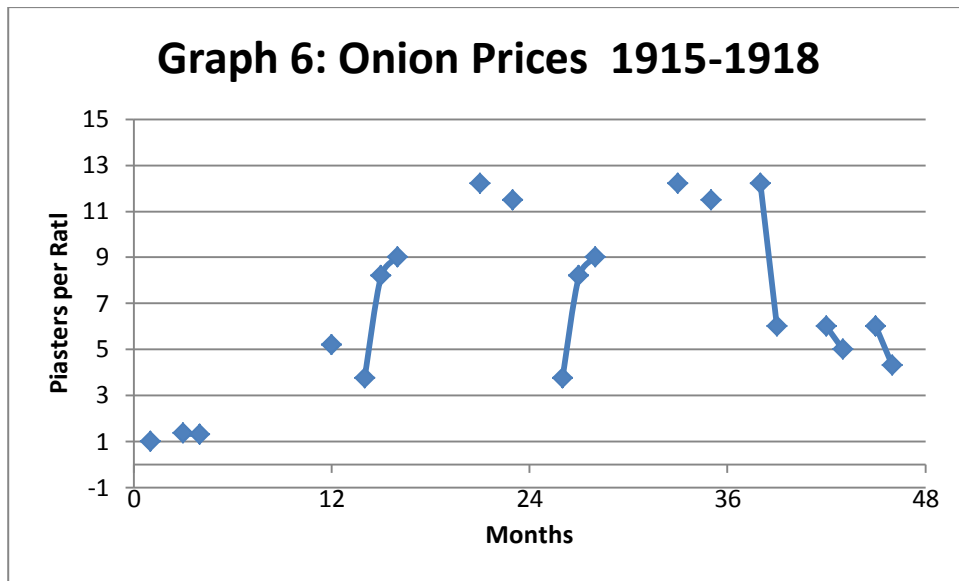
⁷¹ Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 814.

The deleterious effects of the shift in the climate cycle can be seen in the price lists for 1916. The relationship between the poor spring vegetable harvest of that year and the grain prices can be seen by comparing the cereal graphs above with the monastery's onion purchases, as shown in Graphs 4, 5 and 6 (the onion prices in this instance are taken to represent not simply onions, but the spring vegetable harvest that took place in late February and March in general).⁷² For reference, the average price of onions was about 1 piaster per ratl prior to the war. The dry spring of 1915 (prior to the locust invasion) resulted in a slight uptick in vegetable prices but the increase can be most definitely noted during the dearth of the winter of 1915, when the destruction of the grain harvest by the locusts put more demand on the limited supply of replacement foods. From December 1915 to February 1916, the price per ratl of onion declined from 5.2 piasters to 3.75 piasters (still over double the normal price) in anticipation of the spring harvest. However, after the cold and wet February that harmed the spring crops, onion prices were sent careening to 8.2 piasters in March and 9 piasters in April. These prices increased dramatically to 12.2 piasters after the disappointing grain harvest in September 1916⁷³ placed additional demand on the already weak vegetable supply. The inertia of the market held the incredibly high prices steady until March of 1917, when a rainy winter and a good harvest dropped prices back to the relatively stable, if extremely high, 6 piasters, where it hovered for around a year until a poor spring harvest and general economic malaise sent prices soaring again in March 1918.⁷⁴

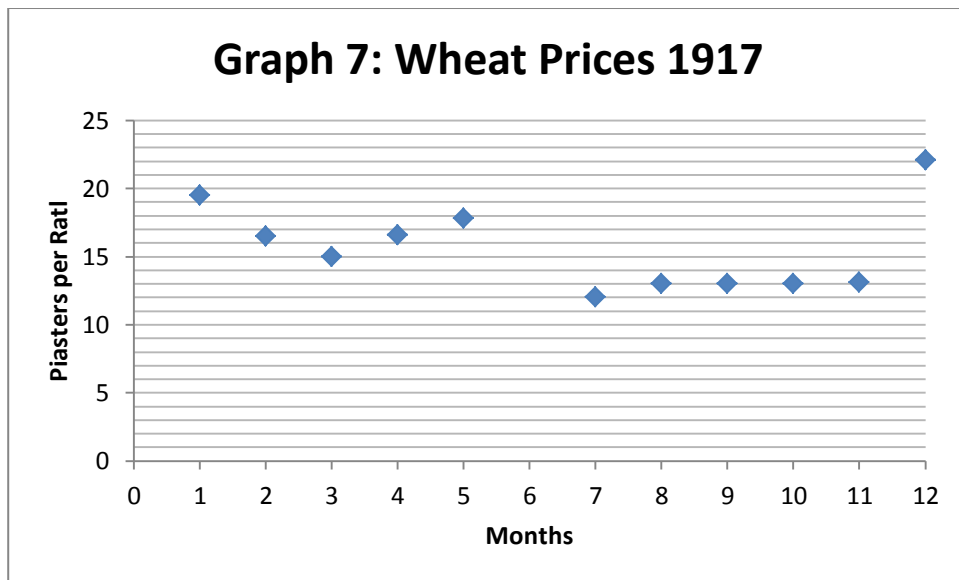
⁷² Ibid., 819.

⁷³ This was in part due to the ongoing effects of the agricultural crisis, which was possibly worsened by a particularly severe *khamsin* in the spring. This annual storm brought a wave of heat and dust to the region, which may have affected the crops.

⁷⁴ Bayard Dodge, "Report of the Abeih and Suk al-Gharb Soup Kitchens 1914-1918," 1919. Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3.



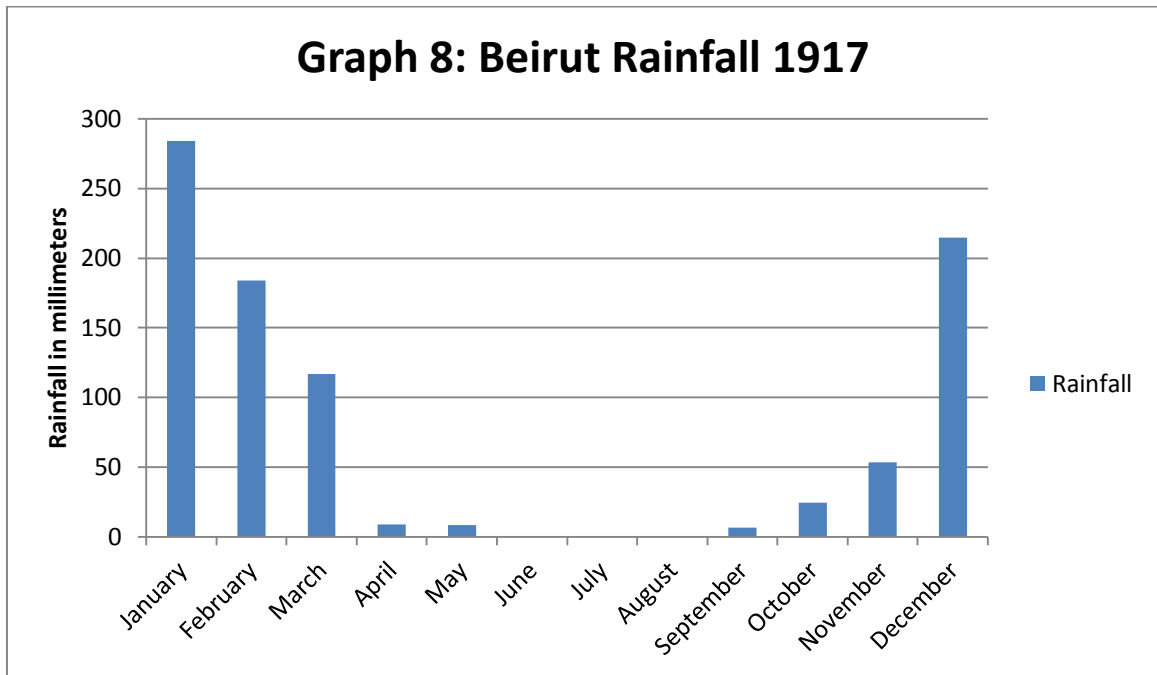
Graph 5 shows onion prices throughout the war. Note the high prices in the cold winter month of 1916 and the drop in prices in the spring of 1917 and 1918. As the famine worsened in the latter years, prices grew exceptionally unstable as vegetables were eaten in lieu of more expensive grains.⁷⁵



Graph 6 shows wheat prices in 1917. Note the drop in spring prices after the early vegetable harvest.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 819.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 814.



Graph 7 shows rainfall in 1917. This was a year of relatively normal precipitation patterns, which can be reflected in the relative regularity of the price patterns in previous graphs, (though they remained at higher levels than usual, reflecting the deepening crisis of the agricultural sector).⁷⁷

Of course, where price patterns were largely determined by climate and season, the overall cost was tied to market forces. This was evident in the year 1917, when climatic circumstances were conducive to a strong vegetable and wheat harvest (Graph 7), leading to a normal relative price curve. The evidence of a good vegetable crop appears in the decrease in prices in onions in March (Graph 5), which showed itself in a dip in the price of wheat (Graph 6). This pattern continued to show a normal seasonal curve, exhibiting the usual dip in prices due to the wheat harvest in July. However, the fact that prices overall were quite high compared to even the year 1915 alludes to the importance of viewing climatic, economic and social factors as responsive factors within the same system.

⁷⁷ Bruin, *Lee Observatory*, 12.

The “red noise” of the grain markets was in part due to the diminished production caused by the consumption of seed grain and market inertia from previous years of dearth, and the inability to counteract this by importing grain from abroad. However, during the war, the residually high cost of grain was also a reflection of the social and political developments in response to the dearth and famine that began in the years 1915-1916. These corrective (and preventive) measures had redefined the market according to the influence of the famine itself, altering normal patterns of supply and demand to keep prices artificially high. True, the rain had arrived at the right time and in sufficient amounts, but because the agricultural regions had already been harvested for recruits, because debt had diminished productivity, and because much of the seed grain had been consumed by desperate rural farmers, the diminished returns were not significant enough to decrease the prices to normal levels. In less severe famines, the high cost of grain would have precluded many from buying wheat and the lighter demand would have alleviated prices to some extent. However, since the government production and distribution control policies had funneled the grain to agents of the state and black market speculators, the demand remained artificially high. Making this worse, many of the more powerful grain producers (particularly in the Hawran) refused to accept Ottoman paper currency, which drove up the price of grain since gold was so dear at the time.⁷⁸

F. The Assessment: Was Environment Implicated in the Famine?

Famine situations, whether due to war, speculation, natural disaster or simple dearth, are at the most basic level severe social and biological reflections of a crisis to

⁷⁸ Schilcher, “The Famine of 1915-1918,” 239-241.

the economic system through which individuals and communities acquire the most basic necessities. Indeed, for all of the singular aspects of any famine, as Peter Bowbrick argues, such subsistence crises are the product of one or more of three things: a reduction in the supply of food, a rise in the demand for food, or a change in distribution patterns (i.e. through unemployment, falling wages, inflation or restrictions on the movement of food).⁷⁹ In the case of the famine in Mount Lebanon and western Syria, each of these factors played a major role in the development of the crisis from as early as November 1914 through the year 1918.

Unlike previous years of dearth, and even times of war, the famine of 1915-1918 was exceptional because it combined a variety of exogenous determining factors with inopportune climatic conditions. The coincidence of environmental and socio-political factors over the long duration of the crisis resulted in a humanitarian situation that was far worse than the famines that had struck in the preceding decades. It should be clarified that in spite of the harvest shortfalls, the problem that faced Syria in general was not the absence of food, but rather its price and the ability of the poorest members of society to acquire it. A variety of factors affected the price of grain during the wartime period, among them the additional demands of the Ottoman army, the effects of price controls and conscription, speculation and inflation and the difficulty of transporting material licitly and illicitly during the war due to poor infrastructure and the Allied blockade.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Peter Bowbrick, *A Refutation of Professor Sen's Theory of Famines*, (Oxford: Agricultural Economics Research Institute, 1988), 12.

⁸⁰ Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918;" Şevket Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 112-136.

However, the price patterns observed during the famine indicates that the markets first began to suggest a crisis in the summer of 1915 following the locust invasion and drought. Between the poor harvest, debt and conscription, agricultural regions faced economic and social crises that kept production down across the region. These crises and the beginnings of dearth in turn catalyzed a series of social and political developments that turned a dramatic market shortfall into a crisis that could not be alleviated due to presence of the Allied blockade and the inertia of the social disintegration that the famine circumstances had precipitated. With the diminished employment opportunities and lowered purchasing power of the lower and middle classes, high prices transitioned into deprivation and hunger and finally to starvation and death as the years dragged on.

This not only suggests a connection between the famine and environment, it confirms that climate and crisis, by increasing prices and contributing to long-term market instability, were decisive forces that influenced social and political patterns within the system. These in turn exacerbated the famine in the years that followed. True, the most dramatic effects of the long-term increase in prices depended mainly on market dynamics, unemployment and political action – the hand of man – but these developments were ultimately the byproduct of an agricultural crisis that was very natural in its genesis.

CHAPTER III

A TIME TO DIE: ECOLOGY, SOCIETY AND DISEASE IN A TIME OF FAMINE

“All these conditions remained with us and increased with each year of the war, while typhus, dysentery, typhoid, cholera, small pox and malignant malaria swept the country with a very besom of suffering, woe and death. At first the people literally lifted up their voices and wept, but by 1916-1917, they still more literally lay down by the thousands and died.”

- George Doolittle, Report of Sidon Station, 1916-1917¹

Historical analysis of health and disease is a notoriously imprecise affair.² There are many factors that influence both susceptibility to disease and the severity of the illness after its onset, all of which vary by pathogen and the characteristics of the individual infected by it. Famine conditions further complicate matters since the social disruption and physical displacement that it brings rupture normal ecological boundaries, by modifying the environment or social conditions or even by introducing rare or novel pathogens into relatively stable systems.³ In famine, malnourishment and

¹ George Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station 1916-1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 1.

² The debate over the nature of epidemics has continued in both Middle Eastern and European circles. For examples on this, see Lawrence Conrad, “Ta’un and Waba’: Conceptions of Plague and Pestilence in Early Islam,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* XXV, no. 3 (1982): 268-307; also Conrad, “Arabic Plague Chronologies and Treatises: Social and Historical Factors in the Formation of a Literary Genre,” *Studia Islamica* no. 54 (1981): 51-93; Sam White “Rethinking Disease in Ottoman History,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (2010): 549-567. On Europe, a selected bibliography of critical works includes: J.F. D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History* (Boston: Little & Brown for Atlantic Monthly Publications, 1935).

³ For a discussion of nonlinearity and epidemiology, see: P. Philippe, O. Mansi, “Nonlinearity in the Epidemiology of Complex Health and Disease Processes,” *Theoretical Medicine and Bioethics* 19, no.

deficient hygiene among the poorest in society leave immune systems compromised and often places individuals at greater risk of contracting diseases of filth and desperation.⁴

In this equation, ecology and environment were important determinants in the health of individuals and communities during the famine of World War I, ultimately influencing to a great degree who suffered and how during the period. The ecological context determined the possible sources of transmission and an individual or area's susceptibility to certain diseases. This had great implications for epidemic afflictions like typhus, cholera and plague, which were seen as the great antagonists in contemporary sources – however, they also changed how endemic disease affected the populations by modifying the existing ecological balance. The location, population density and terrain of a community affected not only the risk of certain types of epidemics, but also the severity and duration of the outbreaks, making certain areas more susceptible to certain diseases than others. Along with more common definitions of ecology and place, it is important to examine how the fluidity of space and the rupture of normal ecological boundaries during the war contributed to the rash of epidemics and inflammation of endemic disease over the course of the crisis.

The ecological relationship between pathogens and human society was closely linked to the ways in which humans share their environment with the microbes themselves, relevant vectors, and each other. Each aspect of this dynamic was affected to some degree by the war and the developments of the famine. The chance climatic

6 (1998): 591-607; J.S. Koopman and I.M. Longini, "The Ecological Effects of Individual Exposures and Nonlinear Disease Dynamics in Populations," *American Journal of Public Health* 84, no. 5 (1994): 836-842.

⁴ See Ronald Waldman, "Infectious Diseases in the Context of War, Civil Strife, and Social Dislocation," *The Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases* (London: Academic Press, 2007): 310; Peter Bloland, Holly A. Williams, *Malaria Control During Mass Population Movements and Natural Disasters* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2001), 17-18.

circumstances and social decay prompted by the worsening famine created conditions that actually modified the disease ecology,⁵ which increased the severity and enhanced the spread of epidemic and endemic disease from the years 1916 to 1918. Not only did this impact the degree and prevalence of suffering and mortality during the famine, it also influenced how individuals perceived their own environment and their relationships with others. The threat of a chance infection by virulent diseases like cholera and typhus not only gave the diseases themselves an aura of savage randomness, they helped to drive a wedge between the poor and others in society out of fear of the disease and those most associated with its propagation.

A. Ecology and Disease

It would be difficult to adequately explain risk factors and community health in Lebanon and the western Syrian region during the war without a serious discussion of the role of ecology as a determinant. Pathogens⁶ and the influence of the natural and human environment are central to the very notion of ecology, the web of interrelated parts that make up the system in which humans (and other living things) exist.⁷ As much as historians take for granted the unchallenged predominance of humanity in their own environmental systems, from an ecological perspective, humans are but one factor (albeit an important one) in a densely knit ecological system. Just as disease and disease ecology is a factor in the human ecological perspective, *we* are mere factors from the

⁵ I define disease ecology as such: it is the environmental conditions in which a given pathogen lives, including the body of its vector or host and the social factors that support that body in the latter sense.

⁶ Basically, anything that causes disease. Despite the implication of its nomenclature, a pathogen has no volition, nor is it a moral entity (to some extent, it can hardly be considered an entity at all).

⁷ Kenneth Mayer and H.F. Pizer, "Introduction: What Constitutes the Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases?," *The Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases* (London: Academic Press, 2007): 1.

ecological perspective of the disease – either by man’s influence on the physical environment, his modification of other factors in the ecological web, and even by *being* an environment for a parasite, bacterium or virus. Although many of the microbes with which humans interact are benign or even beneficial (such as those living in the human digestive tract), pathogens, like humans, use and modify their natural environment to suit their needs, sometimes to the detriment of their hosts.

Ecologies are reactive and responsive. In such nonlinear systems, additions, subtractions and modifications can have unpredictable and often severe consequences.⁸ Lest one imagine that changes to the system are always dire, other modifications to human ecology like housing, sewage systems and vaccination, though not without their own negative ecological consequences, have been genuinely beneficial to human society – though to be fair, such benefits which came at the expense of other competing or inimical factors like disease or parasites. Although much of the ecological and epidemiological work on this topic has focused on those bifurcations that pulled the ecological system into new and often devastating directions, it must be remembered that these alterations were made to a preexisting system and were still to a certain degree bound by its parameters. The elements that comprised the original system did not cease to function, even if the basic structure of that system had shifted. It is similarly important to note that ecology was also influenced by a number of social factors as well. Communities that occupy relatively similar ecological niches could exhibit divergent epidemiological characteristics based on differences in the economic level of the community, the type and degree of social services offered, the wealth of the inhabitants,

⁸ Sharon Collinge and Chris Ray, “Community Epidemiology,” *Community Structures and Pathogen Dynamics*, edited by Sharon Collinge and Chris Ray (New York: Oxford University press, 2006): 1.

the access to medical care, and particularly the preexisting health profile of the community.⁹ These elements are all fundamental determinants of the risk factors that affected how health and disease affected individuals and communities in Lebanon and western Syria during the famine period.

The issue is a rather complicated one given the nature of the geography and human ecology of the region. Due to differences in climate, geography and social composition of the villages, towns and cities in Mount Lebanon and coastal Syria, the individual communities existed in their own particular ecological circumstances that often differed to varying degrees from neighboring communities in nearby areas. Geographical or geological differences might affect how hospitable an area would be to disease vectors like mosquitos or conversely how accessible they were to individuals fleeing hunger and disease in their own areas. Certain town layouts might leave public fountains or even private cisterns or rivers more susceptible to water-borne diseases like cholera or dysentery. And so on.

Certainly the influence of ecology and environment on health was not lost on contemporary writers who wrote on population health.¹⁰ In the region that included Mount Lebanon and western Syria, the ecology of a community depended on various environmental and social factors. Geography and elevation was one key determinant. Differences also existed between the urban and rural communities, with additional variation occurring according to the size and social characteristics of the town. Finally,

⁹ Bruce A. Wilcox, Duane J. Gubler and H.F. Pizer, "Urbanization and the Social Ecology of Emerging Infectious Diseases," *The Social Ecology of Infectious Diseases* (London: Academic Press, 2007): 119.

¹⁰ For examples of this, see: E.W.G. Masterman, "Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and in Biblical Times: Chapter 2," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, (1918); Husni Bey, "al-umur al-sihiyya fi Jabal Lubnan" in *Lubnan: Mabahith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1988); Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut 1* (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1987).

and often most relevant to the fortunes of specific communities, ecological distinctions in the immediate environs of a community could affect an area's risk factors. The effect of these ecological factors was reflected in the diversity of experience across the region, and even within individual areas.

B. Disease and the Region

Although the famine has been justly blamed for encouraging the spread of epidemic disease, the region was hardly free from epidemic and endemic disease in the prewar period. Epidemics of cholera had struck several times throughout the 19th and early 20th century, and the plague had made frequent visits to the coastal cities, even after 1900. Smallpox had been on the decline prior to the war on account of the Ottoman vaccination campaigns,¹¹ but nevertheless flared in poor and rural areas where locals resisted the intrusion of the state, distrusted modern medical practices.¹² Small communities were susceptible since the inhabitants lacked the consistent exposure to the disease and sufficiently large population to allow the disease to become endemic. In several parts of Syria, typhus had sparked and fizzled roughly every ten years before the war, the most recent epidemic having struck in Palestine in 1913 and 1914.¹³ (The wartime epidemic was most likely aided by the return of soldiers from the Balkan front,

¹¹ Accounts of which can be found in Melanie Tanielian, "The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon," Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013); and Hikmet Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army: Disease and Death on the Battlefield*, translated by Saban Karsdas (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2008).

¹² Ira Harris, "Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission," PHS Archives RG115-19-10, Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital 1914-1963, 6.

¹³ C.H. Corbett, "Typhus Fever in Palestine, 1913-1914," *British Medical Journal* 1, no. 2838 (1915), 887-888. See also: E.W.G. Masterman, "Hygiene and Disease in Palestine, Part 2," 64.

where typhus was rampant).¹⁴ Moreover, afflictions like tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery, ocular diseases, parasitic disease and especially malaria were all common to the region from before the war, with enteric disease and malaria primarily accounting for the terrible infant and child mortality rate throughout the region.¹⁵

The increase in the frequency and severity of disease during the war should not be linked directly to the starvation of the famine. Although there is a correlation between malnourishment and the case fatality rates of many diseases, the link between famine and epidemics in general is far more complicated. Malnutrition can render an individual's immune system less responsive, leaving him a "compromised host" if stricken by opportunistic infections. On a cellular level, malnutrition can decrease cell-mediated immunity and phagocytosis, while at the same time decreasing the production of the antibodies and lysozyme, diminishing the body's immune response.¹⁶ However, since many pathogens require the same basic nutrients as their host to sustain their reproductive cycles, a starving, anemic individual provides a famine environment for many parasites as well. This effect is actually the specific function of the immune system's iron and zinc sequestration mechanisms, which capture free molecules of the two nutrients in the bloodstream once the body's immune system is triggered.¹⁷

Naturally, the causes are complicated. In the case of malaria, research has shown correlations between morbidity and mortality rates in malnourished individuals, while it

¹⁴ Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army*. This was also the interpretation of Joseph Hitti in an interview he conducted with Nicholas Ajay. See Ajay, 2: 83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 62-63;

¹⁶ John Butterly and Jack Shepherd, *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation* (Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 214-217.

¹⁷ Ann Carmichael, "Infection, Hidden Hunger and History," *Hunger and History*, edited by Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 53.

has also demonstrated latent malarial infection can be reactivated by the fresh abundance of nutrients in the host during the renourishment of a starving host.¹⁸ While malnutrition may not influence one's susceptibility to malaria or tuberculosis, these diseases are generally far more fatal when synergistic effects of starvation are added.¹⁹ Nutritional status is also somewhat negligible in reference to several types of diseases that struck the region during the famine period. Typhus, smallpox and typhoid are all so virulent that a large percentage of individuals would die from the disease regardless of whether they were adequately nourished, though effective nursing and care surely improved the chance of an infected individual surviving the bout.²⁰

This is not to suggest that widespread starvation was not in any way responsible for the severity of the epidemics that killed untold thousands during the period of the crisis, but rather that the spread of disease was more deeply rooted in the social and ecological realities created by the famine crisis. On a similar point, Ann Carmichael argues that the synergistic theory tying hunger and disease mortality neglects the subtler tie between disease and poverty, in which social and ecological factors place individuals at greater risk due to factors like their living conditions.²¹ This was evident in the ecological changes wrought by the social disruption of the famine, which altered a variety of factors that determined the health situation in the region and the risk of mortality among those infected. In these cases, environmental factors and changes in the

¹⁸ Peter Bloland and Holly Williams, "Malaria Control During Mass Population Movements," 20-21.

¹⁹ Carmichael, "Infection, Hidden Hunger and History," 65.

²⁰ See "The Relationship of Nutrition, Disease and Social Conditions: A Graphical Presentation," *Hunger and History*, edited by Robert Rotberg and Theodore Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 308.

²¹ Carmichael, "Infection, Hidden Hunger and History," 63.

human and disease ecologies favored the proliferation of disease among a larger population of susceptible, impoverished people with minimal access to medical care, resulting in an increase in morbidity and mortality.

By virtue of their location and their interaction with the local environment, some communities were more or less susceptible to certain afflictions than others. The reports of Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi that comprised *Wilayat Bayrut* drew numerous connections between the setting and local conditions of an area and its health status. For instance, the impoverished municipality of Tyre, located in a low coastal area prone to flooding from nearby rivers,²² was especially susceptible to outbreaks of malaria and enteric diseases. The wartime crowding of impoverished refugees further increased the occurrence of ocular disease and typhus, while likely stimulating the prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases due to the increase in prostitution during the famine.²³ Likewise, in their analysis of the *qadha* of 'Akkar, they differentiated the coastal regions from the mountain primarily by the former's greater susceptibility to malaria.²⁴

These observations were reflected by reports of disease in other settings. Crowded urban areas with poor sanitation were even in normal times susceptible to typical diseases of crowding and filth like tuberculosis, scabies, trachoma, dysenteries and typhoid, in addition to the nearly ubiquitous roundworm and tapeworm infections

²² At the time of their survey, 20 square kilometers of the *qadha* was under water. Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1: 189.

²³ *Ibid.*, 2: 296.

²⁴ In this entry, malaria was rendered "*al-hama al-marzaghiya*," which is a curious Arabic transliteration of the Turkish pronunciation of a Serbian word. *Ibid.*, 2: 286.

that in extreme cases could produce “alarming” symptoms.²⁵ During the famine, such enteric disease and parasites were substantial risks for malnourished individuals, who not only had to feed themselves, but their fevers and freeloading worms as well.²⁶

For many communities, access to water and the type of water that they drank had a significant impact on their health. As in the aforementioned case of Tyre, coastal towns often had the disadvantage of saline wells due to seawater contamination.²⁷ On the other hand, towns that derived much of their drinking water from rivers were often at risk for a variety of sickness as a result of contamination upstream or from the town itself. The author of the health section of Isma’il Haqqi Bey’s *Mabahith*, Husni Bey, observed that plant, animal and human contamination of the river systems frequently resulted in outbreaks of dysentery, typhoid and paratyphoid²⁸ – observations that were echoed by Bahjat and Tamimi, who blamed many of the health problems in Sidon on the pollution of the river that provided the town’s water supply, which had been contaminated from dumping both upstream and within the town (whose residents emptied their waste directly into the stream).²⁹ Several municipalities attempted to address this problem by constructing public fountains,³⁰ but evidence suggests that these did not necessarily improve health. In Sidon, people were hesitant to use the public

²⁵ E.W.G. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and in Biblical Times: Chapter 3,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly*, (1918): 61-67.

²⁶ Peter Svedberg, *Poverty and Undernutrition: Theory, Measurement and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 201-202.

²⁷ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1: 289.

²⁸ Husni Bey, “al-umur al-sihiyya,” 2: 264.

²⁹ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1: 302.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1:302.

water supply,³¹ a skepticism that was not without cause. The 1911 cholera epidemic in Tripoli was spurred on by the public fountains that served as reservoirs for the cholera microbes.³² Wells, though often safer, were also subject to contamination in agricultural areas or after flooding and often contributed to the spread of dysentery or typhoid.³³ Private cisterns, though probably the source of water least likely to contribute to infectious enteric disease,³⁴ were a boon to local mosquito populations – insects which reproduced in May and grew more active in the fall months with the return of cooler weather, resulting in malarial outbreaks.³⁵

C. Meteorology and Malaria: A Case Study of Climate and Disease Ecology

Climatic circumstances also played a major role in determining the human and disease ecologies that influenced the health status of the region, perhaps most devastatingly in the case of malaria. Although typhus was the most dreaded disease during the wartime period, the parasite that had the greatest social impact on the experience of the famine period across the region was undoubtedly malaria. In 1918, Dr. E. W. G. Masterman described the disease as “the most characteristic and important” of all diseases occurring in Palestine, and by all accounts and figures, it was the disease that had the most dramatic effect on the overall health of the population of Lebanon and

³¹ Ibid., 1:302.

³² Ira Harris, “Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission,” RG115-19-10 Tripoli – Kennedy Hospital Correspondence 1914-1950, 9.

³³ Husni Bey, “al-umur al-sihiyya,” 2: 265.

³⁴ This was not always true, since subterranean urban cisterns could become contaminated with fecal matter and waste during the winter rains. E.W.G. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and Biblical Times, Chapter 2,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1918), 58.

³⁵ Husni Bey, “al-umur al-sihiyya,” 2: 265.

coastal Syria during the time of the famine, even if it did not gain notoriety as a great killer like the better publicized pathogens, typhus and cholera.³⁶

In coastal regions where conditions were particularly conducive to the spread of the mosquito and the reproduction of the parasite, the disease was prolific. Hikmet Ozdemir's estimate that 75% of the Ottoman population suffered from the infection during the war is highly exaggerated³⁷ – if the parasite was that prevalent among the population, rates would exhibit marked fluctuations since previously exposed individuals would bear resistance to new infections.³⁸ Nevertheless, the numbers available suggest that it was certainly the most common affliction in the region and would have had decisive effects on the welfare of a population struggling with malnourishment and displacement. A study conducted by Masterman on school children during a peak point in the malarial season determined that 27-30% of students in Jerusalem tested positive for the parasite, a percentage reflected in a similar study (26.7%) conducted on 7,771 individuals from the population at large.³⁹

Fewer solid statistics exist for the *wilaya* of Beirut, though the devastating impact of malaria has been noted in the towns of Sidon and Tyre⁴⁰ as well as in Jabal 'Amil, where the movement of troops brought the malignant *Plasmodium falciparum* strain into the region from Palestine, where it was endemic. In 'Akkar, the disease was

³⁶ Malarial cases also had terrible impacts on the Ottoman and British armies in Palestine and Syria, as documented in Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army*, 100-102, and Eran Dolev, *Allenby's Military Medicine: Life and Death in World War I Palestine* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007).

³⁷ Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army*, 100.

³⁸ This does not exclude individuals testing positive for the parasite but being asymptomatic due to acquired resistance or latency.

³⁹ Masterman, "Hygiene and Disease, Chapter 2," 62.

⁴⁰ See Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1:196. See also George Curtis Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria: A Book of Personal Experiences* (1920), 86.

prevalent in the plains and foothills, but declined as elevation rose in the higher mountain regions. Bahjat and Tamimi recorded that 70-80 individuals were infected in the capital town of Halba itself and 5-6,000 of the 42,363 living in the entire *qadha*,⁴¹ or roughly 12-14% of the population. However, since these figures included individuals who were not physically present at the time of the war, these rates could conceivably be adjusted upwards to 15-22% given the same number of infected individuals in a reduced population.⁴² Even in Mount Lebanon, Husni Bey described malaria as being the most prevalent disease in the region, where it affected the coastal cities like Jbeil, Jounieh, Batrun, Jiyeh, Damour and the Beiruti suburbs of the coastal Matn like Bourj Hammoud, Dikwaneh and Antilias most dreadfully, but also occurred frequently in the larger towns of the mountain, such as in Bsharri, Ehden, Jazzine, Zgharta and Hammana and Zahle, located on the Bardawni River in the foothills of the Biqa' Valley.⁴³

It was also the affliction that provides the best insight into the impact of ecological factors on the epidemiology of malaria in the famine period. As with plague and typhus, the malaria parasite was transferred from person to person via an arthropod vector – in this case the *Anopheles* mosquito. The disease tended to localize in areas that had water sources that were conducive to the breeding of mosquitos (either naturally or in artificial reservoirs) as well as a population of infected individuals or infected mosquitos.⁴⁴ Because both the mosquito and the parasite were dependent on

⁴¹ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 2: 286.

⁴² Accounting for a population that was 25% smaller, the figures would range from 15.7% to 18.88%. If the rate was adjusted down by a third (as was the typical estimate across the region, though it was likely not always correct), the percentages stood at between 17.88% and 21.4% ill with malaria.

⁴³ Husni Bey, "al-umur al-sihiyya," 2: 268.

⁴⁴ William Horsfall, *Medical Entomology: Arthropods and Human Disease* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1962), 341.

exogenous factors like moisture and heat, outbreaks followed specific geographical and seasonal patterns that coincided with those climatic conditions that were suitable for both the vector and the sexual reproduction of the parasite within the insect.⁴⁵ In Mount Lebanon and Syria, the malarial season began in the fall around October, when temperatures began to decline enough to permit mosquito movement and parasite reproduction.⁴⁶ This lasted until roughly December, when frigid winter temperatures and precipitation sent the mosquitos into a state of relative dormancy, often within structures like barns, cisterns or houses that would provide shelter from the cold and rain.⁴⁷

Geographically, the zones most impacted by malaria were those located in the coastal or plains regions in close proximity to open water sources and impoverished populations. Tyre, situated near rivers, the sea and a flood zone, was terribly afflicted.⁴⁸ In the town of Alma located in southern Jabal ‘Amil, George Doolittle (perhaps hyperbolically) observed that *every* inhabitant was afflicted by malaria in his report on the year 1916-1917.⁴⁹ Sidon suffered, as did Tripoli and Beirut. According to Husni Bey, the most dramatically affected areas were the larger population centers near the coast, notably Bourj Hammoud, Antelias, and Bourj al-Barajneh in the Matn, Damour in

⁴⁵ This varied by variety of the parasite. The “tropical” or malignant variety, *Plasmodium Falciparum* was a “summer” infection that required a relatively high temperature to reproduce. E. W. G. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and Biblical Times, Chapter 2: The Climate and Water Supply in Relation to Health and Disease,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1918): 63.

⁴⁶ See. I.J. Kliger, “The Movements of Anopheles at Various Seasons of the Year with Special Reference to Infected Mosquitos,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 26, no. 1 (1932): 75.

⁴⁷ I.J. Kliger, “Notes on the Hibernation of Anopheles Mosquitos in Palestine,” *Bulletin of Entomological Research* 14, no. 4 (April, 1924): 404.

⁴⁸ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1: 296.

⁴⁹ Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station 1916-1917,” 8.

the Chouf, Zahle, Jounieh in the Kisrawan, and the towns of Jbeil and Batrun from the *qadha*' of Batrun. Bourj Hammoud was particularly susceptible due to its inopportune location along the Beirut River, its proximity to the coast, and its large population of poor Armenian refugees who had been settled in the area as a result of the massacres and subsequent ethnic cleansing of Anatolia. In spite of a shorter parasitic breeding season due to the colder temperatures, malaria was also present in the middle and mountainous regions, primarily in larger towns with populations where cisterns, fountains and wells provided suitable habitats for the mosquito larvae. The most affected towns in these areas were the ones with human populations large enough to sustain a population of the parasite, notably Zgharta, Ihdin, Bsharri, Ghazir, 'Amioun, Hammana and Jazzine.⁵⁰ Large towns were at particular risk during the famine since they were magnets for refugees, though smaller towns would have been less able to cope with the effects of a large scale epidemic if large percentages of the population fell ill at once.

D. Climate, Ecology and the Malaria Crisis of 1917-1919

The progression of the famine saw a rise in malarial cases, culminating in what the League of Nations retrospectively recognized as a crisis spanning the years 1917-1919. Though a number of causes have been speculated for this, the available climatic data suggests that the roots of the crisis were not due to medical deficiencies, but rather the shifts in climate and the disease ecology during the famine that left large numbers of vulnerable (or increasingly infected) individuals exposed to a greater number of infected mosquitos – precisely the conditions that are most suitable for the eruption of a malaria

⁵⁰ Husni Bey, "al-umur al-sihiyya," 2: 269.

epidemic.⁵¹ As with the development of the market crisis described in the previous section, the rise in malaria during the famine coincided with a convergence of social and ecological factors that synergistically fed the crisis as it progressed.

Long-standing speculation that the lack of medicine or access to treatment during the war led to an increase in malaria is largely unfounded. Bayard Dodge (among others) has pointed to this as one of the factors leading to the expansion of malaria in Syria.⁵² The logic of this theory is based on the fact that wartime restrictions on the importation of anti-malarials like quinine and Epsom salts (the latter of which was not altogether effective anyway) prevented the treatment of new malaria cases. In this argument, if one did not arrest the growth of the existing pool of infected individuals, then there would be more chance for the vectors to become infected and to spread the illness. However, research on malaria in Palestine suggests that the quinine did not actually eradicate the malaria, but merely sent the parasites into a latent state – upon cessation of the treatment, the malaria returned. Moreover, those whose symptoms were “masked” by the treatment were still considered viable carriers of the disease. Certainly the lack of treatment options increased mortality from the disease,⁵³ particularly among those infected with the *P. falciparum* strain, but quinine, in the end, seems to have been a better suppressant than a prophylactic.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Horsfall, *Medical Entomology*, 344-345.

⁵² Bayard Dodge, “Report of the Abeih and Suk al-Gharb Soup Kitchens 1914-1918,” 1919. Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3.

⁵³ Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 100.

⁵⁴ I.J. Kliger, “Quinine Prophylaxis and Latent Malaria Infection,” *Transactions of the Royal Society of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene* 17, no. 4 (1923): 262. The British Army’s research on the effectiveness of quinine as a prophylactic concurred with Kliger’s assessment. Dolev, *Allenby’s Military Medicine*, 136.

Deficiencies in the preexisting medical infrastructure and the cultural aversion to modern medicine also cast doubts on the theory that malaria was a result of diminished access to medical care. Even where care was available, the most vulnerable poor and rural populations exhibited tremendous skepticism towards modern medicine, preferring local herbal treatments like *al-hashisha al-qantariyun* (Latin name *Centaurium erythrae*, or Red Centaury)⁵⁵ and folk treatments by “quacks,” whose recommendations were frequently misguided⁵⁶ and whose treatments were either ineffective or sometimes even as dangerous as the disease itself.⁵⁷ Because there were herbal antimalarial treatments available, quinine would not have been the first choice for the poor or more traditional members of society, therefore a lack of the medicine would only have affected the wealthy or those who received treatment from official or American medical professionals.⁵⁸ Likewise, for many, access to medical care was already limited, especially in poor rural areas. Although the Ottomans had embarked on an expanded health campaign in the mountain as late as 1916, including the sporadically

⁵⁵ This plant has traditionally been used to treat stomach ailments as well as an antipyretic (fever reducer). While current medical studies cannot vouch for its effectiveness, its reputation and long history suggests that it has at least some effect on the two most profound symptoms of malaria – vomiting /diarrhea and fever. See: Committee on Herbal Medicinal Products, “Assessment Report on *Centaurium erythrae* RAFN S. L. Including *C. Majus* (H. et L.), Zeltner, and *C. Suffruticosum* (Griseb.) Ronn., Herba, for the Development of a Community Herbal Monograph,” European Medicines Agency, Evaluation of Medicines for Human Use. (London: March 2009), 12-14. Accessed online at http://www.ema.europa.eu/docs/en_GB/document_library/Herbal_-_HMPC_assessment_report/2009/12/WC500018163.pdf.

⁵⁶ The most popular defense against malaria was the planting of eucalyptus trees, the smell of which was alleged to repel mosquitos. A doctor in Palestine, Cropper, noted that this strategy was actually counterproductive since the money would have been far better spent on hydraulic works that would have actually reduced the spread of the disease. J. Cropper, “Mosquitos and Malarial Fever in Palestine,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1902): 306.

⁵⁷ Ira Harris, “Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission,” RG-115-19-10 Tripoli – Kennedy Hospital Correspondence 1914-1950, 6,9. See also Shakir al-Khuri, *Majama’ al-masarat* (Beirut: matb’a al-ijtihad, 1908), 282, 908. Nada Sehnaoui, *L’Occidentalisation de la vie quotidienne à Beyrouth* (Beirut: Editions Dar al-Nahar, 2002), 66-75.

⁵⁸ Husni Bey, “al-umur al-sihiyya,” 2: 269.

effective smallpox vaccination campaign,⁵⁹ for most in the country, access to modern health care was restricted to local clinics and pharmacies, which were outnumbered by folk practitioners. Even if one had desired to travel to a major town for medical care, for many living in sickly rural areas, the distance would have been prohibitive if the patient was not suffering from a debilitating fever.⁶⁰ Ultimately, medical treatment did nothing to mitigate the greatest risk factors for the spread of malaria – the juxtaposition of infected vectors and vulnerable, poor populations.

This last point indicates that the roots of the crisis must have been ecological and environmental, not medical. The social developments of the famine created additional risk factors for malaria, as increased poverty and displacement modified the disease ecology of the region – providing the fuel to transform an endemic disease into an epidemic crisis. Social geography and human ecology were key factors in this as well. Concentrated populations in poor living conditions placed susceptible individuals in close proximity to infected individuals – who, if bitten, would ensure the perpetuation of the parasite in the mosquito population, thereby increasing the chance of infection for those not already affected. Many refugees were homeless or living in substandard housing, leaving them particularly vulnerable to mosquito attack. Moreover, since many of these individuals came from mountainous areas with little exposure to one or all of the three varieties of malaria present⁶¹ they would be at greater risk of a severe case than

⁵⁹ Bahjat and Tamimi reported that the incidence of smallpox in ‘Akkar was zero in 1332 due to the vaccination of 60,000 individuals in the region. Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 2: 287. In contrast, Husni Bey reported a high incidence of the disease in the *qadha*’ of the Matn, (see “Jadwal al-amradh al-sariya fi liwa’ Jabal Lubnan ‘itibaran min awal mart li ghayat kanun al-awwal sanat 333” in Husni Bey, *al-umur al-sihiyya*”) very likely due to the presence of a large number of Armenian refugees in Burj Hammoud, who had been stricken with the virus throughout their displacement to Syria.

⁶⁰ Khalil Arzuni, *Tarikh Shuhur al-ijtima’i, 1900-2000*, (Dar al-insaniya, 2001), 264.

⁶¹ The contemporary distinctions were “tertian” malaria, in which fever recurred on every third day, “quartian,” in which fever attacked every fourth day, and “tropical,” or malignant malaria, which was

someone who had lived in the area all his life.⁶² This risk also increased since refugees tend to congregate in areas with access to water, which put them in close range of the mosquito's breeding grounds.⁶³

The flight of refugees and travel between the coast and the mountain created temporary shifts in disease ecology, allowing it to expand to areas where it was not naturally endemic. The population circulation between malarial and non-malarial zones or between zones where different parasites were more prevalent likely worsened the impact of malaria by introducing new varieties of the parasite into populations that were not accustomed to it, including the dreaded newcomer, *P. falciparum*.⁶⁴ Husni Bey attributed the elevated presence of malaria in the mountainous regions to the infection of individuals traveling into endemic zones, who on their return transferred the parasites to the local mosquito populations, allowing it to spread in the mountain.⁶⁵ Since trade and the purchase of staple food items from the coast or the Syrian interior necessitated such travel, even relatively obscure or sheltered villages could be subject to occasional seasonal outbreaks.

Climate also played a far greater role in the rise in malaria during the famine than has been generally considered. Appropriately for a disease whose epidemiology

the name given to the *P. falciparum*, which is the most fatal variety. On this, see E. W. G. Masterman, "Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and Biblical Times, Chapter 2: The Climate and Water Supply in Relation to Health and Disease," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 50/2 (1918): 62-63.

⁶² Peter Bloland, Holly A. Williams, *Malaria Control during Mass Population Movements and Natural Disasters* (Washington: The National Academies Press, 2001), 4, 14, 17.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

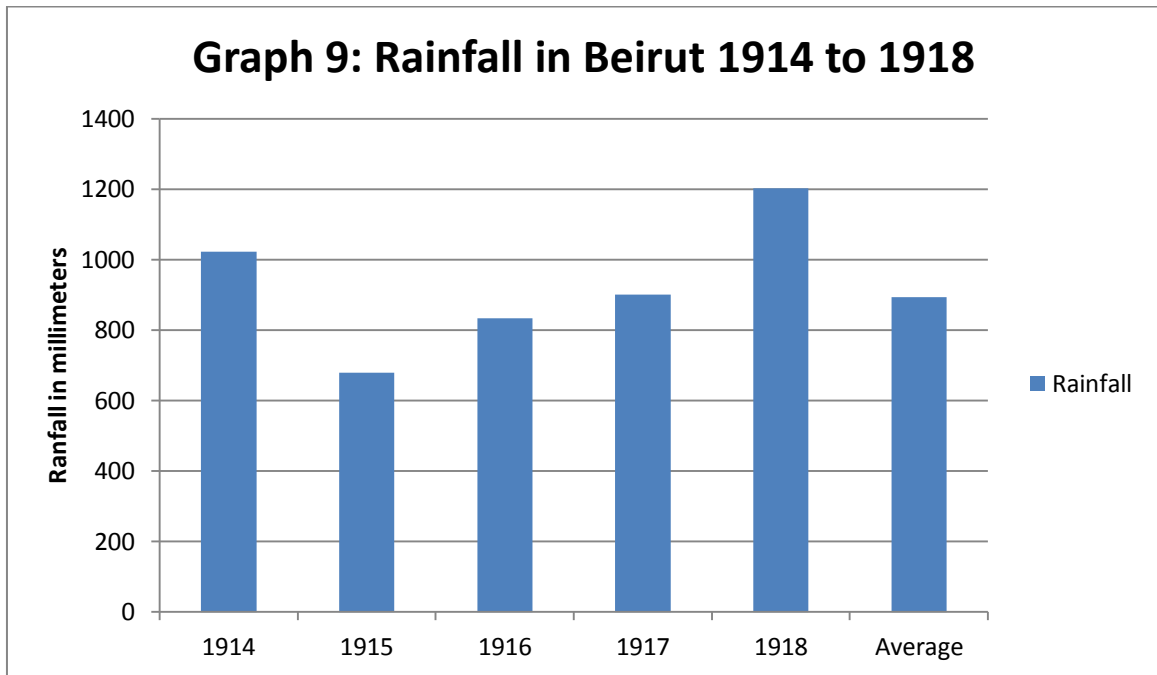
⁶⁵ Husni Bey, "al-umur al-sihiyya," 2: 269.

has been dubbed “medical meteorology,”⁶⁶ the sharp increase in malaria during the latter stages of the famine actually corresponded with a shift in the climatic cycle that stimulated the population of the malaria vector, the *Anopheles* mosquito. This connection was first drawn in a brief 1945 article by Helmut de Terra, who identified causal links between rainfall periodicity in the Syrian region and the outbreak of malaria.⁶⁷ Typical regional rainfall cycles led to an exceptionally wet winter once in a roughly ten to twelve year phase, the arrival of which was presaged by two dry winter seasons – which is exactly what occurred during the period of the war. After a relatively dry 1913 (799.2 mm in Beirut) and a very rainy 1914 (its 1021.9 mm total was skewed by heavy November rains), the region endured two dry years in 1915 (679.2 mm) and 1916 (833.8 mm) before it began rising again in 1917 (901.3 mm), peaking in the rainy year of 1918 (1202.9 mm).⁶⁸ This pattern is significant for two reasons. First, de Terra notes that the rapid, high volume of water that rushed through the riverbeds during the heavy rains (particularly after dry phases, as seen in the late winter and spring of 1916-1917 and 1917-1918) modified the terrain of watershed areas, expanding lakes and ponds and altering streambeds to create standing pools. This is particularly relevant for the second point, since the especially wet springs of 1916, 1917 and 1918 contributed to the high humidity and full water table to support mosquitos and their larvae.

⁶⁶ Frank Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria: Italy, 1900-1962* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 13.

⁶⁷ Helmut de Terra, “Rainfall Periodicity in Relation to Agriculture and Malaria in the Near East,” *Science* 101/2634 (1945): 630-631.

⁶⁸The statistics from Beirut are used since they are the only ones available for the period with any regularity and can be corresponded to averages from other areas in the region. See Figure: All figures taken from the Lee Observatory of the Syrian Protestant College, recorded in Franz Bruin, *Lee Observatory, The American University of Beirut Meteorological Summary 1876-1967*, (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1967), 12. On the relation of Beirut to other microclimates in the region, see: Charles Combier, “La Climatologie de la Syrie et du Liban,” *Revue de Géographie de Physic* 6, no. 4 (1933), 329.



Graph 8 shows rainfall patterns conducive to malarial conditions from 1916 to 1918.⁶⁹

As temperature and rainfall are both key aspects of the reproductive cycles of the malarial parasite and the mosquito host (respectively), it is likely that the foundations of the malarial crisis that was officially deemed to have begun in the year 1917 actually began with the extension of the rainy season in 1916 into the warmer month of April (mean daily temperature 18.5 degrees Celsius). The longer rainy season increased the standing water that was necessary for mosquito breeding, which took place during May and June.⁷⁰ A wetter spring encouraged the expansion of the mosquito population, which would then explode in the fall months (around October) when the temperatures again reached levels that encouraged mosquito proliferation.⁷¹ The larger population of mosquitos at these stages corresponded with the reproductive cycle of the

⁶⁹ Bruin, *Lee Observatory*, 12.

⁷⁰ See Kliger, "The Movements of Anopheles," 75.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

malarial parasites as well - in Kenyan mosquitos, reproduction of parasites of the colloquially termed “tertian” malaria (*Plasmodium vivax*) and quartian malaria (*Plasmodium malariae*)⁷² accelerated after roughly 18 degrees Celsius.⁷³ (In contrast, the sexual activity of the potentially deadly *Plasmodium falciparum* malaria parasite only begins to increase at 21 degrees C, which would have given it a shorter effective season.)⁷⁴

Although malaria was generally not in itself fatal unless the particular strain was the virulent *P. falciparum* “malignant” variety, it nevertheless could have dramatic effects on an individual as a secondary affliction during time of famine. During acute attacks, the recurrent high fevers and anemia reduced individuals to a state of apathetic lethargy, which would have impeded the afflicted individual’s ability to work or to find food.⁷⁵ George Doolittle described an instance wherein a boy came alone to ring the church bell during one of his village visits because the rest of his family was too sick from malaria to come themselves, likely also affecting their ability to care for each other.⁷⁶ Just as devastating, the vomiting and diarrhea that were common symptoms of the infection would have contributed greatly to the state of undernourishment while literally wasting the precious (and expensive) food that the victim had managed to

⁷² E.W.G. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease in Palestine, Chapter 3,” 62-63.

⁷³ J. Blanford, S. Blanford, R.G. Crane, M. Mann, K. Paaijmans, K. Schreiber, M. Thomas, “Implications of Temperature Variation for Malaria Parasite Development across Africa,” *Scientific Reports* 3/1300 (2013): 1-2.

⁷⁴ B.H. Noden, M.D. Kent, J.C. Beier, “The Impact of Variations in Temperature on Early *Plasmodium falciparum* Development in *Anopheles stephensi*,” *Parasitology* 111 pt. 5 (1995): 539-540.

⁷⁵ For an approachable discussion of the progress and symptoms of Malaria, see Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria*, 13-14. For more technical descriptions, see Bloland and Williams, *Malaria Control*; Horsfal, *Medical Entomology*, 337-339.

⁷⁶ George Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916,” 2.

consume. Infections of *P. falciparum* were far more violent, capable of producing often profound neurological effects, kidney failure, cardiovascular issues, jaundice and at times even death. Affected individuals displayed an ashen or yellowed complexion, a distended abdomen from their enlarged spleen (the “ague cake”), edema⁷⁷ and an absent state of listlessness.⁷⁸ Contemporary descriptions of children with distended bellies⁷⁹ could have been in reference to kwashiorkor – a condition caused by protein deficiencies⁸⁰ – or the swelling and edema from malaria. The effects of the disease were particularly deadly for infants and young children who had no prior exposure to the parasite, which decreased in virulence upon each subsequent infection as the body’s immune system developed disease-specific immune responses to the invader.⁸¹

It is impossible to know how much malaria contributed to mortality during the period since, unlike more obvious diseases like typhus or smallpox, its symptoms were not dramatic or horrifying, and was deadliest in conjunction with severe malnutrition and secondary infection. However, its impact cannot be underestimated. Masterman estimated that in Palestine, the disease was directly and indirectly responsible for more deaths among children and young adults than any other,⁸² an estimation that was likely not farfetched in the *wilaya* of Beirut and at least the coastal regions of Mount Lebanon and the Biqā’.

⁷⁷ Edema is the development of swelling as a result of the collection of fluid.

⁷⁸ Snowden, *The Conquest of Malaria*, 13-14. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease, Chapter 2,” 63.

⁷⁹ See Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, Trans. by Tarif Khalidi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 68.

⁸⁰ See Butterly and Shepherd, *Hunger*, 166.

⁸¹ William Horsfal, *Medical Entomology*, 340.

⁸² Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease, Chapter 2,” 63.

E. Ecological Disruption and the Spread of Disease during the Famine

The fluidity of space in a time of mass population movements altered or added new factors to the ecology of the region, altering the usual context of the relationship between humans and their pathogens. As Tanielian and Ozdemir have shown, the large-scale movement of humanity during the wartime period played havoc with the human and disease ecologies of the Near Eastern region in general.⁸³ These changes were chiefly brought about by the worsening social conditions across the region as the famine progressed, suggesting the important, if not obvious conclusion that social changes could actually play a causal role in the development of new ecological realities. As famine worsened and poverty increased, displacement, need, filth and crowding amplified the risk of a variety of dangerous diseases. Many refugees were forced to live in substandard housing, where they lived on poor food and unsafe water. In addition to the ways in which this contributed to the malarial crisis, this state of affairs also led to the spike in the incidence of diseases like typhus, scabies and trachoma, pulmonary afflictions like tuberculosis and pneumonia, and enteric diseases like typhoid, dysentery and the dreaded cholera, which were particularly devastating to young children and those suffering from long-term semistarvation. In proliferation, these diseases were the reapers that were responsible for the great mortality of the famine crisis.⁸⁴

⁸³Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 76; Ozdemir, *The Ottoman Army*, 146.

⁸⁴ Jack Shepherd notes that it is actually quite difficult to die of physical starvation – normal biological processes shift to emergency modes that conserve energy and transfer the body's energy production from glycogenesis to a process that utilizes the body's own protein stores. One generally dies of secondary infection or epidemic disease before the body itself shuts down. See Butterly and Shepherd, *Hunger*, 95.

Typhus is one of the best case studies for this phenomenon since it was relatively well tracked during the famine due to its fearful reputation and widespread impact on poor populations who were unable to fight the spread of lice due to the high price of soap.⁸⁵ Because of the tremendous mortality rates of the disease and its fearful unpredictability, the sporadic epidemics of typhus during the war have been extensively covered by contemporaries and historians alike, though the results of this analysis have been decidedly mixed. To a large extent, this is the fault of the source material, which has generally drastically overestimated the figures, making the few official statistics that are available seem disingenuous or dismissive.⁸⁶ The former set of sources estimated the impacts of disease from speculative eyewitness accounts from individuals who derived their information largely by hearsay and rumor. Historians have frequently returned to the work of Father Antoine Yammine, whose proposed death toll of 70,000 individuals in Beirut and Lebanon during the spring 1916 epidemic of typhus has been frequently cited without considering the validity of the estimate.⁸⁷ With a case fatality rate of 12-30% in reported cases,⁸⁸ a death toll of this magnitude would require at *minimum* 233,333 individuals to have been infected in a two month period, or roughly one half of

⁸⁵ Tanielian explores the subject of soap availability rather extensively. See Tanielian, “The War of Famine.”

⁸⁶ Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University, (1973), 1: 416.

⁸⁷ To Yammine’s credit, these statistics have been erroneously reported as representing Lebanon *alone* in a number of sources. See: Antoine Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère* (Cairo : Imprimerie Hindi, 1922), 48. For mistaken figures, see: Jacques Nantet, *Histoire du Liban* (Paris : les éditions de minuit, 1963), 233.

⁸⁸ The figure of 30% was estimated by Dr. Joseph Hitti. However, mortality statistics taken from Husni Bey’s “al-umur al-sihiyya” put the rate at 20.1% across Mount Lebanon – this may be an underestimation due to undercounting, and may not indicate the initial severity of the disease, since the virulence of epidemics generally diminishes over time.

the population (reasonably estimated).⁸⁹ There is no indication in official sources that a holocaust of this degree took place, nor does it seem epidemiologically feasible. A good indication of how exaggerated this estimate might be appears in Bahjat and Tamimi's report on the poor, refugee laden town of Tyre, which had all of the risk factors in place for a major outbreak. Although the town first encountered the epidemic in July, 1916 there was no mass die off. Overall, the 1916 summer epidemic was credited with killing 100 individuals (infecting roughly 300) out of a population that was 5-6,000 – or 5-6% of the population. Similarly, mortality statistics for Dayr al-Qamar do not suggest a large scale catastrophic epidemic. Because of its size and prominence as a market town, Dayr al-Qamar would have drawn refugees to the area from nearby communities, placing it at especially high risk of epidemic outbreaks during the period. However, the annual burials recorded by Nicholas Ajay for the church of Sayyidat al-Talla in the town suggest that the effects were less acute and more indicative of elevated rates from the general effects of disease and poverty in famine circumstances. Between 1913 and 1915, the church buried an average of 27 parishioners per year (including a mere 35 for 1915) – these numbers rose to 171 in 1916, to 177 in 1917, and 196 in 1918.⁹⁰ The sharp increase in mortality in 1916 shows the delayed impact of a poor harvest from 1915, but there was no dramatic spike in the years 1916 or 1917 to indicate that the epidemic that took place during those years was primarily responsible for the increase in

⁸⁹This is if the case fatality rate (CFR) was 30%. If the CFR was a mere 20% (the more accurate figure), the epidemic would have required 350,000 people to have been infected to produced the estimated figures. The population of Beirut has been estimated at 150,000 and the population of Mount Lebanon at 414,800 (see Salim Bilan, "al-nufus fi Lubnan," *Lubnan: Mabahith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara al-Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1993), 2: 262. The latter figure was likely smaller if one accounts for the massive migration that took place prior to the war.

⁹⁰ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 1:432.

deaths. This is corroborated by the fact that the highest death toll was in 1918, the year in which the severity of typhus had reportedly waned.

Reports of the disease were undoubtedly influenced by its terrible reputation. Susan Moeller has argued that the manner in which diseases are depicted in the media correlates with their severity, novelty, and the apparent risk that the sickness represents to otherwise safe populations.⁹¹ It is apparent that fear of the disease was undoubtedly enflamed by its relatively new appearance on the scene in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, its savage nature, the relatively high mortality rate among those infected, and most importantly its deadly impact on those members of society whose risk during the famine was otherwise low. Indeed, typhus and cholera were the two diseases that were most discussed in famine literature, most likely since they were the diseases that were most dreaded by the non-starving populations who left written accounts of the period.

For the Americans, this belief was encouraged by the deaths among the missionary community during the war. The wife of W.S. Nelson, station chief of Tripoli, died of cholera mere hours after its onset in July, 1916.⁹² In 1917, Harriet LaGrange (who was herself afflicted by the disease) reported that typhus had killed some of the most influential Muslims in Tripoli.⁹³ Although transmission risk could be reduced by certain hygienic practices and upon onset, and although it was possible to treat the diarrhea using opiates⁹⁴ (or locally using pomegranate pith) the apparently

⁹¹ Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 62.

⁹² Arthur Fowler, "Tripoli Station Report 1915-1916," 6.

⁹³ Harriet LaGrange, "Tripoli Girl's School Report 1916-1917," PHS Archives RG-115-19-8 Tripoli Girls' School 1885-1964, 3.

⁹⁴ John Wortabet, "Cessation of Cholera in Northern Syria," *The Lancet* 137, no. 3532 (May 9, 1891): 1036.

random risk of transmission by a chance encounter with an infected louse or a sip from the wrong fountain encouraged the perception that all of society, wealthy and starving, were at some level of risk – even if it was undoubtedly much greater for the latter group. Reports of lice clinging to flies in search of new human hosts⁹⁵ should indicate that eyewitness accounts must be treated with a great degree of skepticism and balanced by multidisciplinary critical source analysis that takes into consideration the epidemiology of the region, the etiology of disease, and ecological factors, which were far better indicators of the severity of the epidemic.

Although his work has taken some criticism for its apparently mild assessment of the typhus epidemic (specifically from 1917), Husni Bey's more conservative estimates of the morbidity and mortality seen during the typhus epidemics would imply a more believable scenario than the fearful speculations of the contemporary narrative accounts. Tanielian correctly observes that the official figures undoubtedly underestimate the incidence of the disease since it would be impossible to determine the cause of death of each individual in the mountain due to the widespread displacement and poverty and the confounding factors of starvation and secondary infections.⁹⁶ Due to the distrust of state officials, many of the sick were likely never seen by the state. Similar skepticism about modern medical practices among many of the poorer or rural inhabitants would have diminished the chances of sick individuals from seeking medical attention, even if the arduous journey would have permitted it.

In spite of the criticism that the official reports on the epidemic have received, Husni Bey's graphic representation of reported typhus cases and deaths during the

⁹⁵ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," File AA:2.3.3, Box 1, File 2: Diary from 1917, 43.

⁹⁶ Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 89.

truncated Ottoman year of 1333 remain the best indicators of the epidemiology and impact of typhus during the war.⁹⁷ In one of these, Husni Bey lists, by *qadha'*, the morbidity and mortality figures from select contagious and infectious diseases that were reported for the year, which can be extrapolated according to the urban and geographical features of each region.⁹⁸ The second sheet contained charts showing annual variations in typhus morbidity and mortality recorded for the region of Mount Lebanon in the ten month year of 1333 (1917). Even with incomplete information, the patterns that emerge from the figures are indicative of the degree to which human ecology and environment influenced health and risk during the period.

The charts demonstrate the rather obvious fact that, unlike malaria, typhus was an epidemic disease, not a seasonal one. The disease has gained a reputation as a winter affliction,⁹⁹ when bulky clothing and the tendency of people to crowd indoors for warmth encouraged hospitable homeostatic temperature ranges and hid the lice and their nits.¹⁰⁰ However, the figures from 1917 demonstrate that temperature was not a decisive factor in the incidence of the disease. True, the epidemic was severe in the earlier

⁹⁷ The Ottomans transitioned Rumi calendars in 1917, effectively jumping from February (Shbat) 1332 to March (Mart) 1333.

⁹⁸ Tanielian ventured that Husni Bey engaged in self-censorship to preserve the reputation of the state's health services in Lebanon. Melanie Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 105. However, in Husni Bey's defense, he does note the impact of typhus in his graph of causes of death, which ranked as the fourth highest on his list. As Ira Harris commented from Tripoli's Kennedy Memorial Hospital in 1911, villagers were already not predisposed to come to clinics, meaning the numbers provided are not absolute figures, but possibly more useful as an indication of rates and proportions in given populations. See Ira Harris, "Medical Report for 1911, Syria Mission," 6. Husni Bey, "Grafik yahtawi 'ala miqdar al-wafayat fi liwa Jabal Lubnan min ibtida' mart 1333 li ghayat kanun al-awwal wa muqayasatuha bi ba'dhiha bi suwra musattaha," from "al-umur al-sihyia fi Jabal Lubnan."

⁹⁹ John F. D. Shrewsbury, *A History of Bubonic Plague in the British Isles* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

¹⁰⁰ Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History* (Boston: Little Brown & Co. for the Atlantic Monthly Press, 1935), 178.

months of the year,¹⁰¹ but typhus continued to maintain a strong presence through the month of June.¹⁰² This may have been due to the migratory nature of the epidemic, since the warmer months would have been conducive to population movements among those individuals seeking work and food – the poorer populations that would have been most susceptible to infection. It is worth noting that the incidence of typhus plummeted in the month of July.

The regional distribution of cases provides detailed evidence suggesting that shifts in human ecology were factors in the incidence of epidemic disease during the war. The incidence of typhus was closely tied to population density and poverty. The mountainous *qadha*’ of Kisrawan suffered relatively severe typhus outbreaks, but many of these were likely on account of the coastal cities of Jbeil and Jounieh, which drew refugees from the surrounding areas during the famine. The combined poverty, refugees, and large population centers contributed to a high reported incidence of typhus, which amounted to 73.2% of the total cases (it should be noted that the following percentages were not of diseases inclusive, but of those charted – the most prevalent ailment, malaria, was not listed). In terms of sheer numbers, the Matn had by far the greatest number of infections reported, which corresponded to the large population that inhabited the coastal plain near Beirut and the foothills of the mountains, but which was likely heavily influenced by the inclusion of the large number of Armenian refugees, who suffered terribly from both typhus and smallpox on their

¹⁰¹ Although January and February were omitted from the charts, the high number of infections in March 1917 suggests that the epidemic had begun earlier in the winter.

¹⁰² See chart entitled “Jadwal asabat wa wafayat al-hama al-namashiya al-yawmiya fi liwa’ Jabal Lubnan ‘itibaran min awwal mart li ghayat kanun al-awwal 333,” in Husni Bey, “al-umur al-sihiyya.”

journey to Syria.¹⁰³ Of the 1,132 total cases of infectious disease recorded in the Matn, a full 990 of these were due to typhus, reaching 80% of the total. In the *qadha* of Zahle, typhus comprised 70.5% of the total reported cases for the year.

These high-incidence *qadha*'s were linked by the fact that they had high rates of poverty and large populations of refugees that had either migrated or fled to the larger towns and cities over the course of the famine – whose arrival increased the risk of epidemic in their primary points of convergence. Indeed, in the case of typhus, one's risk was closely linked to one's level of exposure to the disease (or recovery from it, since it conferred future resistance). This is more tangibly evidenced by the tremendous mortality among doctors in the period. In 1916, typhus killed Ira Harris of the Kennedy Memorial Hospital in Tripoli,¹⁰⁴ struck several medical students (including Joseph Hitti), and killed Dr. Kaiserman of Beirut, Dr. Alam al-Din and Dr. Iskander Zeine of Zahle. In addition, it was the primary cause of death among the dozens of conscripted Syrian doctors who died on the battlefield.¹⁰⁵ The large number of deaths and infections from the affliction can be explained by the greater exposure of medical professionals and relief workers to infected individuals – and their lice.

In contrast, the more isolated regions of Batrun and Jazzine, with their primarily mountainous populations and small population centers resulted in lower incidence rates – or at least fewer reports. In the *qadha* of Batrun, which included the small coastal town of Batrun and a large population in the mountains (total estimated population

¹⁰³ The influence of the Armenians on the statistical totals was seen in the high rates of smallpox infection, which afflicted many on their exodus from Anatolia to Syria.

¹⁰⁴ Arthur Fowler, "Tripoli Station Report 1915-1916," PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 3.

¹⁰⁵ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 4.

83,220), including the towns of Bsharri and Ihdn, the 215 cases of typhus comprised roughly 52% of the reported infections. Unlike Jounieh and Tripoli, which drew large numbers of refugees, the town of Batrun was unable to retain its own population (which fell from 5,000 to 2,000 over the course of the war).¹⁰⁶ Despite the increase in poverty due to the famine, because the town did not face refugee crowding and possessed only a small pool of potential hosts typhus was evidently not as severe as in Kisrawan or the Matn. This could also be attributed to the fact that the majority of the population of the *qadha'* was located in the Qadisha Valley and the more remote stretches of Tannourine. Its craggy terrain and geographical isolation provided physical barriers to extensive travel (compared to the more accessible Chouf and Matn)¹⁰⁷ and the lighter population density of the villages made them ill-suited for epidemics or the migration between villages. This was likely a similar mitigating factor for the small *qadha'* of Jazzine (population 24,593), which had fewer large towns and did not draw refugees like the coastal areas. The district reported 90 typhus cases, which represented 57% of the 158 total. Typhus also made up 88% (354 of 399) of the reported fevers in the *qadha'* of the Chouf – the absolute figures may have been high, but since the geographical area and population of the district was large (101,938), the incidence rate was actually quite low compared to areas like the coastal Matn and Kisrawan. In the *qadha's* of the Chouf, Batrun and Jazzine, the relatively small size of the towns and the dispersed populations prevented the disease from acquiring the necessary reservoir of susceptible individuals

¹⁰⁶ Faruq Hablas, “Hadith al-maja’a fi safar barlik bayn al-watha’iq al-rasmiyya wa al-dhakira al-sha’biyya,” *Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula*, ed. Antoine al-Qassis (Beirut: Manshurat al-jami’a al-lubnaniyya, 2011), 1: 195.

¹⁰⁷ For an analysis of the road systems in Mount Lebanon, see Sami Bey, “Tarikh ahwal al-turuqat fi Jabal Lubnan,” *Lubnan: Mabahith ‘ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1993), 2: 219-234.

or made them poor collection points for refugees carrying infected lice. Since the small villages in the regions were more likely to generate refugees to neighboring cities (notably Tripoli and Sidon) than to draw them, the areas faced fewer of the risks associated with crowding and displacement than towns like Zahle and the coastal towns of the Matn.¹⁰⁸

F. Conclusion: An Ecological Crisis?

One cannot ignore the importance of ecology and climate any more than one can ignore the social and political roots of the crisis – the two were inextricably linked in both cause and effect, and in the case of disease, the effects could themselves become causes of future epidemic outbreaks. Climate and environmental disaster were demonstrably important factors in the development of the subsistence crisis from 1915 to 1917, which in turn produced the social dislocation and poverty that stimulated the spread of disease. Shortages and high demand led to dramatically elevated prices at a time when irregular weather hampered an agricultural sector that had been decimated by conscription and poverty in the early years of the war. Government intervention in the form of the Provisional Law of Agricultural Service in 1916 and the production and distribution controls that had been implemented¹⁰⁹ did little at best, and at worst dealt blows to an already crippled production base. The result was an unstable market and high prices that were further stimulated by artificial demand, a currency crisis and

¹⁰⁸ Refugees were drawn to the larger local towns like ‘Amiyun and Jazzine, but in smaller numbers than in the major cities. For information on the former, see Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi ‘ahd Al-‘Uthman* (Dar al-Nahar, 1991).

¹⁰⁹ Ahmed Emin Yalman, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 126-132.

speculation. The high prices in turn led to a crisis of entitlement for many of the poor, or those who had been driven into poverty by the circumstances of the war.

Although typhus and malaria were the two case studies used in this chapter, the shift in social and ecological conditions had a catalytic impact on a variety of infectious and contagious diseases during the period of the war. The climatic shift and social dislocation that resulted from the agricultural crisis in turn modified the disease ecologies of the region. Since epidemic disease was the primary cause of death during the famine, the alteration of social and ecological conditions compounded the risk of those living in conditions of poverty, with often deadly consequences. Crowded, dirty conditions that encouraged the spread of typhus also encouraged the spread of blinding eye diseases like ophthalmia and trachoma as well as tuberculosis, which was one of the most feared (and at the time universally fatal) of the diseases in the region.¹¹⁰ The breakdown in sanitation, poor living conditions of the refugees and the consumption of unhealthful, abnormal or even dangerous foods as a means of survival increased the incidence of normal enteric disease like (dysenteries), stomach ailments and food poisoning,¹¹¹ while also promoting the spread of more terrifying epidemic diseases like typhoid and cholera. Since many of the poor were already host to various parasites like malaria and intestinal worms, the effect of these afflictions could have been magnified; in conjunction with starvation, the risk of death rose as well – along with the fear of contracting disease from those most susceptible

¹¹⁰ On contemporary Lebanese perceptions of tuberculosis, see Robert Khuri, *La médecine au Liban de Phénicie jusqu'à nos jours* (Beirut: Les Editions ABCD 1988), 208-209.

¹¹¹ This was a standard problem in famines in the region. See: Ira Harris, "Medical Report of the Tripoli Station – Syria Mission: for 1907," RG115-19-10 Tripoli – Kennedy Hospital Correspondence 1914-1950, 1.

CHAPTER IV

FROM EVERYDAY ADAPTATIONS TO ACTS OF DESPERATION: FAMINE SURVIVAL STRATEGIES

A persistent failing of famine literature of all regions and genres is the portrayal of *famine* as the active participant in the crisis, rather than the people who lived through it. This is generally not due to callousness on the part of the writer – a famine is simply easy to anthropomorphize since the conditions that arise during famines are so inimical to human survival that suffering and death seem to proceed from it directly. In part, this is also a shorthand means of representing the complexities of famine that are so difficult to render in simple descriptive terms. A title like *Famine that Kills*¹ is certainly more evocative than *Famine, in Which People Die*, even though it is less apt a description of what happens in a famine situation. Mortality is the dark standard by which famines are typically measured, but a focus on death skews the focus of inquiry to the extreme worst cases of the crisis at the final, irreparable end of their experience. The majority of the population does not die in even the most severe of famines, but even those individuals and families who were not in desperate straits worked, adapted and often struggled to meet their needs against often terrible odds. This chapter seeks to understand this aspect of the experience of the period.

Although the classical school of thought to which historians have generally subscribed assumed that death by starvation and mortality were necessary components

¹ Alexander de Waal, *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

of famine, interpretations of famine as an economic and social phenomenon regard mortality and starvations as consequences of famine, rather than integral defining aspects of it. The traditional focus by population historians places undue emphasis on mortality, which ultimately privileges a phase which accounts for only a fraction of the experience of the famine for a specific set of individuals. The human body is actually quite resistant to death by starvation, even if this resilience is accompanied by its own torturous form of suffering.² Starvation does not immediately occur, but is rather a condition that develops over time as individuals and families are increasingly unable to afford sufficient amounts of basic necessities and slowly decline from a normal status (usually already impoverished) to a state of semi-starvation, where they can live for months, or even years without dying unless disease intervenes.³ Indeed, the majority of deaths during famines are due to epidemic disease and secondary infections among vulnerable populations, which were common but not necessary corollaries of famine *per se*, and which primarily occurred due to the widespread social breakdowns that were common results of famine crises.⁴

In the case of the famine in Lebanon and western Syria during World War I, the issue of mortality is complicated by how little can be decisively proven about it. The wide variance in death tolls should not suggest a range, but rather the absolute unreliability of contemporary statistics and the sheer difficulty in estimating totals on the ground – let alone from abroad (where some of the statistics originated). Initial

² John R. Butterly and Jack Shepherd, *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2010), 33.

³ *Ibid.*, 57-58.

⁴ Andrew Appleby, "Epidemics and Famine in the Little Ice Age," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 10, no. 4 (Spring 1980): 654. John D. Post, "Nutritional Status and Mortality in Eighteenth-Century Europe," in *Hunger and History: Food Shortage, Poverty and Deprivation*, ed. Lucille Newman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 267.

estimates offered by *L'Asie Française* put the regional death toll at 180,000.⁵ Philip Hitti estimated a death toll of 100,000 of 450,000 initial inhabitants.⁶ In 1921, Butrus Khuwayri gave the estimate of 170,000 dead.⁷ *Lisan al-Hal* estimated that over 40,000 died in Beirut, 20,000 Beirutis and 20,000 Lebanese refugees, plus another 150,000 in the mountain.⁸ Shakib Arslan⁹ gave the death toll of 200,000 individuals in Lebanon.¹⁰ German sources used by Schilcher cite 500,000 dead in greater Syria, a figure which has come to be accepted among the community of scholars of World War I in the Middle East.¹¹

Beyond the problem of the sheer variability of the totals, such numbers should be regarded with suspicion because those who made the estimates had little more than a shaky understanding of the population of the region in the first place. Official reports on Lebanon and the *wilaya* of Beirut frequently made reference to the fact that the number of those physically present in the area was skewed dramatically by the vast number of individuals (and their estimated families) who had moved overseas in the preceding decades but who remained official residents due to peculiarities of the census system.

⁵ *L'Asie Française*, no. 199, 1922.

⁶ Philip Hitti, *Lebanon in History*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan & Co, 1967), 486.

⁷ Butrus al-Khuwayri, *al-rihla al-Suriya fi al-harb al-'umumiyya: akhtar wa ahwar wa 'aja'ib* (Cairo: al-maktab al-'arab, 1921), 91.

⁸ *Lisan al-Hal*, August 30, 1918, no. 7223, 2.

⁹ It should be noted that Arslan has been maligned as a famine denier in certain circles on account of a few dismissive quotes. See: Axel Havemann, "The Impact of the First World War on Lebanon's History and Memory: The Case of Shakib Arslan (1869-1946)," in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006).

¹⁰ Najib al-Ba'ini, *dhakriyat al-Amir Shakib Arslan* (Beirut: Dar Nawfal, 2001), 43.

¹¹ Linda Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria," in *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective: Essays in Honor of Albert Hourani*, ed. John Spagnolo (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992), 229.

Whereas official estimates of Lebanon's population stood at between 350,000 and 414,800¹² individuals, analysis in Isma'il Haqqi Bey's commissioned study of Mount Lebanon noted that a third of the mountain (or roughly 120,000 people) who were counted in the official rolls were estimated to be living overseas.¹³

The relatively dense population and small size of the region of inquiry suggests that because it was an area particularly susceptible to famine, a long term famine with price increases that far outstripped those in previous years could eventually lead to extremely high mortality over time. Given the small geographical area and the severe confluence of compounding factors that exacerbated conditions during the famine, population losses of more than the 5 to 10% normally seen in severe famines could be quite believable in certain areas.¹⁴ Data collected regarding the population of towns in the *qadha'* of Batrun in 1921 suggest that a population loss of between 20% and 30% due to mortality (and more due to migration) was not impossible, nor even uncommon in parts of Mount Lebanon.¹⁵ However, such numbers do not project well across the population. Indeed, mortality rates could vary significantly from village to village

¹² The 1913-1914 census figures, as provided in Engin Akarli, *The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861-1920* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1993), 105-106. Although these figures are also listed in Haqqi Bey's compendium, several of the writers questioned these figures and even offered alternate estimates to account for population loss due to migration and overestimation. See the next footnote for more.

¹³ This estimate has to be questioned as well, but it is one that was repeated by Bahjat and Tamimi in their report on the *wilaya* of Beirut: Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi, *Wilayat Beirut* 2 volumes (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1987). See also: Salim Baylan, "al-nufus fi Lubnan," in *Lubnan: Mabathith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara al-Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1993), 2: 262; and Jalal Bey, "al-ahwal al-zira'iya," in *Lubnan: Mabathith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara al-Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1993), 2: 98.

¹⁴ See Sen, "The Ingredients of Famine Analysis: Availability and Entitlements," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 96, no. 3 (1981): 441, 447; O Grada, *Famine*, 21.

¹⁵ John Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun fi al-harb al-'alamiyya al-ula: al-jarad, al-ghala', al-maja'a, al-wafayat," in *Lubnan fi al-harb al-'alamiyya al-ula* 2, edited by Antoine Qassis (Beirut: Mansurat al-jami'a al-lubnaniyya, 2011), 2: 858-859.

depending on a variety of factors, like access to food, local support systems or a lack of epidemic disease. In the end, one cannot know if the terrible figures in the western Kisrawan and Batrun were similar to those of the Metn, one can doubt that they were so devastating in the Chouf, and one can be sure that they were less so in the major cities – even if the horrors of the famine were more visibly on display. This is not to diminish the tragedy of the calamity, but rather to suggest that death tolls are perhaps the least reliable instruments of analysis available. Even if the statistics were accurate, they are poor measures of suffering and offer little explication of the broader patterns of life in the time period.

Defining famine by mortality rates and price patterns may be taxonomically useful, but it is not altogether illuminating for historians seeking to understand the experience of famine on the ground. Although only the poorest of society generally die in famines, the high prices and social disintegration that characterize severe famine was something that inevitably influenced the lives of each individual living in the afflicted region.¹⁶ In their struggle to endure the crisis, individuals were able to mitigate their risk or enhance their chances of survival by altering their behaviors and employing survival strategies. Although this chapter will examine the most desperate attempts to survive (which were often doomed to fail) that have been commonly discussed in famine literature, it will also consider the ways in which those who were less susceptible to the worst effects of starvation and poverty coped with the famine crisis to ensure that they survived the uncertain and dark years of 1915-1918. By reorienting the perspective of inquiry from the famine as an actor to those who lived it, it is possible to reclaim the nuance of life in the period as experienced by a broader range of the population, not

¹⁶ Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 13-15.

simply those who suffered and died. The adaptations and coping strategies they employed in response to the declining social and economic conditions around them provide an indication of the active nature of the famine experience. As conditions changed, so too did the means by which individuals, families and communities sought to ensure their survival. However, even in this struggle to survive or at least mitigate the effects of famine on one's daily life, one's choices and even one's ability to effect change in one's own circumstances were to a significant degree determined by the limits and vagaries of the famine situation.

A. Survival, Death and Dumb Luck: Theorizing Experience and Risk During Famine

The need to accommodate the variety of experience in the famine should be immediately apparent from the social diversity of the region. The area of inquiry for this dissertation is comprised of communities set in widely divergent locations, each of which offered different challenges and advantages based on their physical situation, elevation, exposure, soil, climate, access to water, agricultural profile, population, geographical size and economy. Prior to the war, these physical features, combined with economic, cultural and historical factors, established the character of each community and its inhabitants. Moreover, they determined the assets and risks that would in many ways define the ways in which the crisis affected them. These were of particular importance given the time-sensitive nature of experience and survival in famine. Those living in poverty had a limited cushion when prices rose, placing them at greater risk of starvation over the course of a long-term famine like the one that occurred in Lebanon and western Syria during World War I. However, even members of the middle and

upper classes could acquire new risk factors if their incomes or savings could not keep pace with the rise in prices – meaning one could easily move from a safe social echelon to one that placed them at much greater risk over a short period of time.

Because the famine was rooted in an economic crisis, it was not merely a problem for the poor, who faced real suffering and death, but it was an experience that was to a certain extent shared across social and geographical boundaries. If a theoretical framework of the famine is to be formulated, it must account for this diversity, as well as the fact that famine is a social experience that is not merely felt by the bottom rungs of the population who actually starve and die, but by those whose savings were whittled away by increasingly onerous food prices, those who sold possessions and property, or even those who profited from the misery of others. While one individual was dying in the streets, another was struggling to feed his family, another was defending his meager holdings from government predations or petty theft, another was fleeing his village to find work to support his family, another was dying of typhus from a chance encounter with a beggar, another was cloistered in his home to escape the prying eyes and outstretched hands of indigent refugees, another was trying to maintain the profitability of his small store in a time of high costs and price controls, another was profiting from speculation and usury, and so on.

This situation was predicted by Pitrim Sorokin in his “the law of the diversification and polarization of the effects of calamity.”¹⁷ Elegant in its simplicity and scope, his theory proposed that even in the most morbid of crises, the effects were not shared equally across society, but rather varied according to biological and psychosocial factors. Sorokin’s argument assumed that a person’s experience of crises

¹⁷ Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co, 1946), 14.

like famine, pestilence and war depended on preexisting risk factors, his means and the developments precipitated by the crisis itself. As informative as it is to look at the macroeconomic causes of the famine, it is also necessary to theoretically interpret the causal factors that led to the diversity of experience in the famine period. It is almost taken for granted that the rich become richer and the poor become poorer during famine, but exactly what this means is not always immediately apparent, nor is it so universally correct to be considered a truism. An excellent example of this was given in an oral interview conducted with Hayat Mahmud. Her maternal grandfather, Shahin Ghassayni, was a member of the administrative council in Mount Lebanon and was politically prominent in his town of Ba'qlin; in contrast, her paternal grandfather, Jamul Mahmud, was a muleteer, smuggler and *shaykh shabab* of the town of Baruk – a position that offered local influence but little official glory. Whereas Shahin's family was subject to deprivation and hunger during the famine period, Jamul's less prestigious profession allowed him to acquire food and to sell it to others in the community, a position that not only saved his family from starvation, but brought him a moderate degree of prosperity in the process.¹⁸

It is therefore instructive to examine not only the overall causes of famine in the country, but to account for why a famine that touched all corners of society could produce so many diverse, if not outright divergent sorts of experiences. This calculation involved various factors of causality and the specific risk factors that a community or individual carried, balanced by the mitigating factors that shielded them from risk. In conjunction these determined how an individual or community was affected in his or its place. A rather basic representation of this could be expressed as such:

¹⁸ Cases drawn from an interview conducted with Hayat Mahmud on January 24, 2014.

(Preexisting Risk Factors + Developed Risk Factors + Catalysts)¹⁹ – (Mitigating Factors + Coping Strategies) → A Specific Experience of the Famine Period.

A few caveats: This equation is useful as a retrospective analytical tool since catalysts and developed risk factors are not predictable. Despite the symbols used to simplify it, this model is not intended to be mathematical (since the relative significance of the factors could vary significantly), but to be demonstrative of the sorts of diverse determinants that affected survival in crisis. To a certain extent, universal determinants like the increase in food prices and currency inflation can be generalized over a region or a community, but since in many instances these problems were neutralized by mitigating factors or the lack of preexisting risk factors, they cannot be universally considered risky for everyone. In some cases, high seasonal prices were a catalyzing factor that dramatically increased an individual's risk of death, whereas for others a high cost of living might only have secondary effects if they could comfortably afford food even at its peak price (through the increase in poverty among their neighbors, for instance), or even be beneficial if they were the ones to sell the food or speculate on its prices.

Naturally, when catalyzing factors were severe, as was the case during an epidemic, mitigating factors and preexisting risk factors can be somewhat inconsequential. Even if one is not at a high risk in famine, the chance encounter with a sick individual could rapidly change one's fortunes for the worse. Conversely, when preexisting risk factors were minimal, when few new ones developed throughout the famine, and when negative catalyzing factors were not sufficient to overcome mitigating

¹⁹ Some factors like epidemic disease can be catalysts or developed risk factors depending on the case.

factors (such as economic and social stability), then a person would be likely to only suffer from his or her proximity to the misery of others – if not stricken by disease or poor luck. Although this formula is ostensibly a way of determining the physical and economic experience of famine, it could also be used to explain those intangible effects of the famine that developed in response to its horrors, such as the emotional impacts of an extended period spent in close proximity to suffering.

The following are applications of this analytical model to actual cases.²⁰ Three individuals were selected from among those members of society that would logically face a low risk of suffering during the famine period – notably an American doctor, a Shi’ite Shaykh and Imam from Jabal ‘Amil, and the daughter of one of Beriut’s most prominent political families. Each illustrate a slightly different experience of famine and demonstrate how risk and mitigating factors cancel or supersede each other and the unpredictable effects that catalytic events and developments can have on one’s experience.

1. Ira Harris of the Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital

Preexisting Risk Factors: *profession* (doctor), *location* (the city of Tripoli)

Developed Risk Factors: *increased food prices* → *increased poverty, starvation and refugees in Tripoli, typhus and cholera epidemics, increased contact with epidemic disease, diminished access to medical supplies*

Catalyst: *infection* (typhus, contracted from a patient)

²⁰ This same analysis could be applied to larger subjects, like villages, towns, cities and regions, though its analytical value would diminish as the object of the focus increased in size and complexity since the influencing factors would have to grow more general.

Mitigating Factors: *personal economic stability, access to food, social support network, access to medical care*

Coping Strategies: *none*

Result: *death from typhus in 1916*

2. Muhsin al-Amin, Shi'ite Shaykh and Imam from Chakra, Jabal 'Amil

Preexisting Risk Factors: *location (the small village of Chakra), identity (imam from an officially marginalized religious group)*

Developed Risk Factors: *increased food prices, decreased economic status due to loss of income and short sale of assets, increased local poverty, decrease in community size due to flight, epidemic disease, need to travel to purchase food*

Catalyst: *flight (prior to departure for Damascus, Amin sold his possessions and grain at a low price, returned and could only buy them at a much higher rate)*

Mitigating Factors: *community status, possession of livestock, ability to purchase alternate forms of food at elevated prices*

Coping Strategies: *dedication of labor to animal husbandry*

Result: *survival, experienced deprivation but little personal suffering*

3. Anbara Salam al-Khalidi

Preexisting Risk Factors: *none*

Developed Risk Factors: *increase in epidemic disease and refugees in Beirut, compromised political standing of her father, Salim 'Ali Salam, offer to assist charitable shelters in 1917*

Catalyst: *none*

Mitigating Factors: *high social status, limited contact with poor prior to 1917, access to medical care, access to food, access to wealth*

Coping Strategies: *assisting poor, associated with others of her class (emotional coping strategies)*

Result: *survived and never suffered more than secondary effects of the famine.*

As this demonstrates, there was variability in the experience of the famine even among the upper echelons of society. However, such interpretations could be reasonably extended to a wide variety of cases to determine why individuals, areas, communities or families experienced the famine period differently.

B. Sustenance and Survival in a Time of Need

The miserable suffering of the poor remains the concept most closely associated with the famine period. However, the problem of survival, perseverance and even maintaining access to food was not restricted to those who starved and died in the street. Over time survival became a persistent problem for a broad range of the population, compelling many to make difficult decisions that risked mortgaging their family's future to pay for the needs of the present. People coped with these needs differently based on their location, their means and their abilities to acquire food. Through their adaptations, many were able to survive or at least mitigate the suffering that they and their loved ones faced – though in spite of their adaptations, many did not.

Coping strategies are an intrinsic part of life in famine, both as a means of survival and to simply persevere as economic conditions increasingly encroach on facets of one's daily life. John Butterly and Jack Shepherd observe that such strategies

are so common that it is even possible to chart them as functions of time and the possibility that the effects can be reversed.²¹ The first steps taken involve consuming household food and seeking assistance from friends and family. As the situation becomes more desperate, individuals begin by selling animals, household goods and assets and land. After these resources are exhausted, the family unit itself faces disintegration as the head of the household (usually male, but not always during the Syrian famine since many of the men were abroad, conscripted or dead) migrates to different regions in search of aid or work. As the household itself breaks down, individuals engage in abnormal and otherwise reprehensible actions like begging, theft and prostitution. In the final stage, individuals are subject to increased risk of disease – at this point death was often close on their heels.²² Each of these coping mechanisms were employed during the famine in Lebanon and western Syria from 1915-1918. Depending on one's prewar status and the assets that they held, individuals proceeded through these stages at different rates. Most did not reach the final, most desperate levels.

Risk was to a large degree dependent upon one's occupation and the economic crisis that developed after the start of the war. The wartime economic depression in the *wilaya* of Beirut and Mount Lebanon rapidly set in following the Allied blockade of the coast, which had a dramatic and far reaching effect on the economy of the region. The cessation of sea trade and the lack of a domestic market were devastating for wage laborers in the mountain and in the cities – perhaps more so in Lebanon since the mountain economies were less diverse and the prices for imported goods generally

²¹ Butterly and Shepherd, *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation*, 124-125.

²² Butterly and Shepherd, *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation*, 124-125.

higher than in urban centers. Merchants whose trade was cut often had the resources to redirect their efforts to domestic lending and speculation (in many cases making huge sums),²³ meaning that the hardest immediate blow fell on members of the tertiary sector who worked in the ports as well as those communities in the mountain that relied upon the export of their silk cocoons for both income and to maintain their workforces.

Apart from a few rather obvious conclusions that can be drawn from the circumstances, it is actually somewhat difficult to generalize about the effect that the war and the famine had on labor across Lebanon and western Syria (beyond the fact that it was a negative one) since the regional economy was actually somewhat diverse. Even in Mount Lebanon, towns separated by a few kilometers might rely on entirely different sources of income. Bhamdoun, for instance, had an economy based heavily on the sale of its fruit and grapes, cash crops that yielded significant profit at specific seasons.²⁴ Down the mountain towards Beirut, the foothills of the Matn were dependent on the growth of mulberry trees to feed the Lebanese silk industry. However, to further complicate this perspective, many areas that focused on silk production also engaged in other forms of farming, including cereal cultivation.²⁵ Likewise, though much of the research on the impacts of the blockade has highlighted Beirut and Mount Lebanon, the effects of the crisis were felt up and down the coast, quite painfully in areas with high rates of urban and rural poverty, like in Tyre, Tripoli and 'Akkar.²⁶ Trade usually

²³ Edward Nickoley, "Historic Diary," (1917). Edward Nickoley Collection, 1873-1937. ARCHIVE AA 2:3.3. Box 1, File 2. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 32.

²⁴ On the economy of Bhamdoun, see Kamal Salibi, *Bhamdoun: Historical Portrait of a Lebanese Mountain Village*, (Oxford: Center for Lebanese Studies, 1997), 6.

²⁵ Maher Zakhia al-Mir, *Batha fi al-tarikh al-hadith wa al-mu'asir* (Lebanon, 2003), 33-46.

²⁶ Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut* (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1987), 1: 289.

employed many in the coastal cities and even in towns that served as agricultural markets in the interior like Nabatieh and Zahle. However, the depression that set in affected both unskilled laborers and artisans alike. Cobblers, tailors, masons and other professionals largely languished without work since there was less demand for their services when there was no money to pay for it.²⁷

The labor market was nominally better in the cities, if only in contrast with the economic sterility of the mountain. Even after the blockade shut down the merchant economy in Beirut, the large population of an estimated 150,000 individuals provided more opportunities than smaller communities in the mountain that had been dependent upon exports, remittances and tourism for their survival. Of Lebanon's total estimated annual GDP of 220 million piasters, 20 million came from the produce and sale of foodstuffs, 20 million came from hotels and summer tourism, 10 million came from manufactured goods, silk and silk related industries contributed 80 million. Factoring in the remittances, those coming from abroad totaled 120 million piasters, (whereas remittances to America stood at 30 million). The latter adjusted from the total, 41% of income came from cash sent into the country from abroad, 11% from tourism and 36% from silk, leaving 88 % of the *normal* annual economic inflows effectively neutralized by the blockade.²⁸ It should be clear that the information presented above is more of a framing device than a firm indicator of the actual value of the economy. For one, these numbers were derived from prewar figures, and due to the blockade and the economic impacts of the famine, the wartime economy was not in any way normal. Second, the

²⁷ George Curtis Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria: A Book of Personal Experiences* (unpublished, 1920), 83-85.

²⁸ Jalal Bey, "Nathara fi halat Jabal Lubnan al-iqtisadiya," in *Lubnan: Mabahith 'ilmiyya wa ijtimaiyya*, ed. by Antun Bishara Qayqanu (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1988), 2: 101-102.

data does not include numbers on the income from labor and the internal and informal trade of the mountain such as in the local shops and markets, money exchanged for work by tradesmen, land deals, etc.

The impact on individual families varied as well. The rise in unemployment tied to the wartime collapse of the silk industry had a tremendous effect on the economy of Mount Lebanon. Though many of the laborers employed in the most menial of factory jobs were actually women who were contracted seasonally at minimal wages, (even before the war), their contributions were still nominal supplements to household income.²⁹ The cessation of trade and the reduction of silk production would have been more damaging for those who rented their property as sharecroppers, and who would have had no access to loans necessary to purchase silkworm eggs or pay rent.³⁰ As such, these figures are not an adequate indication of the actual flow of money through the mountain, but can be considered a means of understanding the nature of external incomes before the war, and the disruptive effects of the blockade on local economies.

Taking the aforementioned data at face value, Ajay calculated that the per capita income of the mountain was a mere 628 piasters,³¹ which, given the cost of food by early 1918 would have purchased grain for a few weeks. According to the statistics (and assuming a 350,000 person population), this was technically correct. However, in practical terms the income of even the poorest members of society was significantly higher. The seasonal pay for unskilled agricultural workers in Mount Lebanon 1914 was

²⁹ Roger Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy, 1800-1914* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 158. Melanie Tanielian, "The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon," Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013), 51.

³⁰ Owen, *The Middle East*, 159.

³¹ Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The Wartime Years" Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 1: 293.

840 piasters.³² On a yearly basis, Bahjat and Tamimi observed that the poor Muslim agricultural laborers who made up the bottom rung of society in the impoverished region of ‘Akkar averaged 7,000 to 8,000 piasters in income – the wealthier Greek Orthodox community averaged 15,000 piasters per year.³³ The salary of a teacher at the American Mission school in Dayr al-Qamar was noted to be \$342, or roughly 9,500 piasters per year.³⁴ Yalman’s statistics on earnings in Istanbul during the war support this observation, as he noted that prior to the war a porter’s salary was 36 lira per year, or 3,888 piasters. Government employees could earn over 120 lira annually, or 12,960 piasters.³⁵

Of course, the effect of the blockade was also felt heavily in the Beirut labor market. Since its economy was based primarily around its thriving port, its closure effectively eliminated a wide range and large number of jobs in related industries, from finance to wholesale to the ubiquitous porters and dockworkers. In Beirut, an unskilled laborer earned between 8 and 10 piasters per day, which (if he did not supplement this by engaging in illicit activities)³⁶ left little leeway in the prewar years and even less chance to build up savings.³⁷ Those who relied on wages and salaries to survive were hardest pressed by the cessation of trade. Although the salaries of government

³² Abdallah Sa’id, “Tatawwur harakat al-as’ar wa al-ujur,” in *Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula* ed. by Antoine al-Qassis (Beirut : Manshurat al-jami’a al-lubnaniyya, 2011), 1: 412.

³³ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 2: 276-277.

³⁴ Calculated at normal exchange rates of roughly \$4.5 to the Lira and at the prewar exchange rate of 124 piasters to the lira – though this often actually calculated to 124:1. Paul Erdman, “Letter from Paul Erdman to Charles Dana, May 2, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917.

³⁵ Ahmed Emin Yalman, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 151-153.

³⁶ On the compelling lives of the porters, see Michael Johnson, *Class and Client in Beirut: The Sunni Muslim Community and the Lebanese State, 1840-1985* (London: Ithaca Press, 1986).

³⁷ Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 120.

employees were adjusted in 1916 in response to the increase in the cost of living, because salaries were fixed and paid in paper currency, many public servants were driven into poverty, desperation and often corruption by the economic crisis. According to Yalman's postwar observations of conditions in Istanbul, the relatively miniscule bonuses and salary increases did little to compensate for the dramatic rise in the cost of living. By 1917, a monthly salary would be gone in the first week to pay for rent and food.³⁸ In Beirut, the situation was similar. Yusuf al-Hakim observed that the effect of depreciated currency that was paid to government employees was tremendous, driving the value of their salaries into the ground before they even attempted to purchase food.³⁹

A similar problem faced the employees of the American Mission schools and parishes across the region. Because many of the workers were employed at fixed salaries and were paid through the schools rather than the Mission headquarters itself, many employees were in desperate straits even as they themselves were often employed distributing charity to others in need in their own community. The currency crisis exacerbated the crisis among the salaried employees of the mission. In 1916, George Doolittle wrote, "during this year of exorbitant war-prices the income of missionaries and Syrians alike possesses hardly a seventh of its former purchasing power."⁴⁰ This situation deteriorated as the famine progressed and prices rose even higher. Paul Erdman wrote that a teacher's salary would be hardly enough to purchase the 15 rats of

³⁸ Yalman, *Turkey in the War*, 152-153.

³⁹ Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi 'ahd Al-'uthman* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1991), 255.

⁴⁰ George Doolittle, "Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35.

wheat that he was charged with distributing to the poor in May, 1917.⁴¹ On May 22, 1917, George Doolittle of the Sidon Station wrote a letter to beg the Treasurer, Charles Dana,⁴² to address the situation:

“Now they [the employees] are really in greater need and some of them in distress that many of the lower classes who have come into the lists for aid, and these employees, if anybody, should be kept from famine and distress... This is a job for the Good Samaritan, not for the bank accountant or the lawyer.”⁴³

Because the individual schools were deemed responsible for the pay of their employees, closures and shortfalls meant that some did not always receive their salaries. The school at Suq al-Gharb paid its teachers in two installments, one at the start of the year and another at the end, the second of which was not fully paid in 1916, after which school was closed in 1917 and 1918 and rededicated as a soup kitchen that was run by Scherer and Bayard Dodge of the Syrian Protestant College.⁴⁴

Uncertainties about the abilities of the Mission to cover its own expenditures had made the organization’s finances somewhat precarious until late 1917. This contributed to a growing tendency of the Mission stations to contract with local merchants and notables in order to obtain credit to continue their operations during the famine, and a

⁴¹ Paul Erdman, “Letter from Paul Erdman to Charles Dana, May 2, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917.

⁴² Dana was treasurer of the American Press and conduit of relief money from America to the Mission sites across the region from the Mission office in Beirut.

⁴³ George Doolittle, “Letter from George Doolittle to Charles Dana, May 22, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

⁴⁴ William Fredinger, “School Report: Lebanon School for Boys – 1915-1916,” RG-115-18-2 Suk-ul-Gharb Lebanon School for Boys Reports 1909-1927, 2.

number of stations (notably Tripoli⁴⁵ and Sidon) began debt-spending to make up for shortfalls. These loans were not insubstantial. In another letter to Dana on November 8, 1917, Doolittle reported that the Sidon Station was carrying a debt of 4,000 liras on the books (or \$14-16,000).⁴⁶

The high prices increased the profitability of commodity sales and lending, making some individuals quite wealthy. The cessation of sea trade forced merchants and shop owners to adopt coping strategies to compensate for the economic disruptions – some of which had far reaching consequences for the residents of the city and countryside. Those who had sufficient capital to invest often redirected their efforts, either by offering loans at exorbitant rates to those who needed immediate cash or speculating on the price of commodities and currency.⁴⁷ Because many of these merchants were tied either to the wholesale acquisition of grain for the city or the sale of such commodities at the resale level, they often had disproportionate and arbitrary control over the cost of goods at the consumer level. Rumors of potential shortfalls that might drive up future costs resulted in prices that could increase dramatically over the course of a single day.⁴⁸ Government attempts to stabilize prices at reasonable levels did little to alleviate the situation, since merchants responded to price controls by pulling valuable merchandise off of the shelves and selling it for market price under the table.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ W.S. Nelson, “Letter # 170 from W.S. Nelson to Charles Dana, November 20, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

⁴⁶ George Doolittle, “Letter from George Doolittle to Charles Dana, November 8, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

⁴⁷ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 32.

⁴⁸ Howard Bliss, “Letter, November 27, 1916.” In “Correspondence on Food Supplies, 24 July 1916-1917, November 1918.” Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. Archive AA:2.3.2 Box 16 File 7, 3.

⁴⁹ Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan*, 251.

Attempts to mete out punishment for speculation prompted outrage among the shopkeepers, a response that Nickoley described as like that of, “the very naughty boy who at any time deserves a whipping because of some transgression but whose indignation is roused by the fact that he is punished for some act which he just happened not to commit.”⁵⁰ Though much of the derision that those speculators who “trafficked upon the ignorance and the credulity of the common people”⁵¹ have received in the source material over the years has been warranted, the high retail prices were also reflective of the high initial cost of goods and the impact of currency inflation, which was incorporated into the shelf price of the products. Many merchants were fair and reasonable during the period, but most were understandably unwilling to absorb the high initial cost of their wares to sacrifice themselves for the common good – a sentiment that was shared by many in society at the time.

Their Lebanese counterparts, the importers and muleteers, were also better placed to weather the storms of the famine because of their connections to wholesale markets and suppliers and their ability to operate outside of the law. The Ottoman requisitioning of vast numbers of pack animals in the mountain and the high cost of fodder (normally barley) made the transportation of grain and other goods into Mount Lebanon in quantity difficult, particularly for those who had to travel great distances to the Hawran to acquire it. Those muleteers who had been able to retain their animals in spite of Ottoman requisitioning and the occasional confiscations conducted at checkpoints found demand for smuggling, which permitted them to be a lifeline to their towns and to make a great amount of money in the process. In an interview, Hayat

⁵⁰ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 32.

⁵¹ Ibid., 36.

Mahmud noted that during the famine, her grandfather Jamul Mahmud used to lead teams of 15 to 20 men and animals on a secret path leading from his village in Baruk over the cedars, through the Biqa' and into the Hawran to purchase wheat to sell in the town. Mahmud's trafficking prevented his family from suffering starvation during the war, and even allowed him to acquire enough money to purchase land.⁵²

The Allied blockade was not the only factor in the labor situation in the region. Outside of the administrative district of Mount Lebanon, conscription of the male population of working age effectively stripped many communities of their working force, a situation which was especially problematic in agricultural areas that depended on the presence of a large population of workers at key points of the crop cycle. In 'Akkar, Bahjat and Tamimi noted that they could not find more than 20 or 30 young Muslim men in the entire town of Halba due to the exceptionally thorough efforts of the military recruiters.⁵³ One missionary hyperbolically estimated that conscription had reduced the percent of fields planted across the empire to 10-15% of the usual area.⁵⁴ Even after the shock of the locust invasion and dry year of 1915 faded, grain yields across the empire continued to drop between 1914 and 1918 until they eventually reached a mere 62% of their 1914 levels in the summer of 1918.⁵⁵

By 1916 the need for labor in agricultural regions was such that the Ottoman government had launched a campaign to compensate for the lost male workers by

⁵² Interview with Hayat Mahmud, January 24, 2014.

⁵³ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut 2*, 276.

⁵⁴ James Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930) An Interpretation* (New York: MacMillan Co. 1930), 372.

⁵⁵ Şevket Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," in *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 120.

retraining and employing women in the fields.⁵⁶ This addressed a social issue as well. Deprived of their families' breadwinner by conscription, flight or death, many women were forced to work for what little they could get in the fields, in factories, selling goods, or in desperate cases, panhandling or engaging in prostitution. Since these areas were already at high risk of famine because of the endemic poverty of many of the inhabitants, one must consider the effects of conscription and unemployment to have been debilitating. Even with this policy as a stopgap measure, agricultural production was severely depressed in 1917 in spite of the fact that climatic conditions were more estimated that conscription had reduced the percent of fields planted across the empire to 10-15% of the usual area.⁵⁷ Even after the shock of the locust invasion and dry year of 1915 faded, grain yields across the empire continued to drop between 1914 and 1918 until they eventually reached a mere 62% of their 1914 levels in the summer of 1918.⁵⁸

The effect of the blockade and conscription had a curious, mirroring effect on agricultural labor in Mount Lebanon as compared to areas in the Biqa', Jabal 'Amil and 'Akkar. In those areas that were more directly affected by job loss from the blockade, the collapse of the silk industry and the port, the job market was flush with unemployed, largely unskilled laborers. In Mount Lebanon, this resulted in a reduction in wages, initially on an absolute scale, but later in terms of purchasing power as the cost of living continued to rise. Agricultural historian Abdallah Sa'id has shown that the pay for field work varied according to the skill level and specialization of the work, as well as the

⁵⁶ Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 128-130; Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 93.

⁵⁷ James Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930) An Interpretation* (New York: MacMillan Co. 1930), 372.

⁵⁸ Şevket Pamuk, "The Ottoman Economy in World War I," in *The Economics of World War I*, ed. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 120.

phase of the season in which it was conducted.⁵⁹ Those who were basic laborers involved in menial tasks were generally paid at a significantly lower rate than the *fallaha* class. Sa'id's chart of 1914 wages lists the high *fallaha* rate at an average of 33.35 piasters per day, ranging down to a mere 6 piasters for unskilled workers. The latter amount corresponds closely to the base pay for an agricultural laborer in Mount Lebanon in 1910 (6-7 piasters) noted by Issawi.⁶⁰ This varied by crop. Wages for olive workers, for example, ranged from 11 piasters per diem to 4 for the relatively unskilled workers.⁶¹

Both Sa'id and Nakhul have collected wage data for agricultural labor during the period of the war, from which some trends can be discerned. The amount paid to workers from 1914-1918 varied in absolute terms, but adjusted for inflation was dramatically lower at the end of the famine than in 1914. The direct impact of the war drove down the absolute value of wages in both 1915 and 1916. Because prices were higher (making agriculture inherently more profitable), this was likely due to an overabundance of labor and the general desperation of unskilled workers. In Nakhul's data, wages for both common agricultural laborers and harvesters (who commanded a slightly higher wage in his chart) declined to roughly 4 piasters in 1916 and 1917, while common laborers commanded between 3 and 4 piasters. Pay for women was significantly less in agricultural work, earning workers between 1 and 1.2 piasters per day for their labor, with one recorded instance of wages that reached 3 piasters for olive

⁵⁹ Sa'id, "Tatawwur harakat al-as'ar," 397.

⁶⁰ Charles Issawi, *The Fertile Crescent, 1800-1914: A Documentary Economic History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 90.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 412.

harvesting (which seems to have been the prewar rate).⁶² Sa'id found similar trends, in from 1915-1916. In 1915, the pay for the *fallaha* decreased from 33.35 piasters to 22.66, increasing slightly in 1916 to an average of 25 piasters per day. The *fallaha*'s wages began to increase slightly in 1917 to an average of 31.5 piasters and again in 1918 until they exceeded those paid in 1914 at 40 piasters per day. Sa'id also found that wages for unskilled labor actually remained stable at 6 piasters per day from 1914 to 1915, increasing to 6.5 p in 1916, 7.5 in 1917 and finally to 9.5 in 1918. However, with the sharp increase in the cost of living and the plummeting value of the Ottoman lira, this nominal raise masks the fact that purchasing power of this income had actually decreased severely due to the high cost of food and inflation of the currency.

The archive of the Hamlin Sanatorium during the period provides several examples indicating that the desperation of unskilled laborers subjected them to exploitation during the period. In a letter written in July, 1916, nurse Affeffi Saba' asked the hospital's treasurer Anna Jessup to approve her employment of a local woman, whom she had hired to perform menial tasks and prepare the burghul for the residents of the Sanatorium. Clearly eager for any job she could get, the woman was willing to work for simply a portion of the food that she was preparing.⁶³ Perhaps a more egregious example was the Sanatorium's project to extend the road leading to the hospital – a task for which 5 lira had been approved, ostensibly as a "relief" project. Given the tenuous nature of the Sanatorium's funding after Mission Treasurer Charles Dana declared the consumptive residents a poor investment, a degree of parsimony could be expected. However, for a relief project, the limited amount provided to the

⁶² Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 821.

⁶³ Affeffi Saba', "Letter to Anna Jessup Regarding a Servant, July 8, 1916." PHS Archives RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27.

workers is somewhat incongruous, particularly when Saba' sympathetically described the laborers as "pitiful to behold."⁶⁴ In a letter to Jessup on September 18, 1916 suggesting that another week of work and 150 piasters would be needed, Saba' reiterated her discontent with the wages paid, writing, "does it not seem little to pay for six workers together 150 piasters per week?"⁶⁵ At this scale, the workers were each earning a mere 2.4 piasters per day at a time when the Sanatorium was paying between 17 and 19 piasters per ratl of wheat for its own uses.⁶⁶

Certainly the cost of living varied over the course of the war as prices increased and currency inflated. In part, this has been blamed on speculation, but Yalman has also attributed the plummeting value of the lira to the collapsing confidence in paper money (what little existed in any case), the growing concern that the Ottomans had chosen the wrong side of the war and the excessive amount of money that was circulating without opportunity to leave via foreign exchanges.⁶⁷ Şevket Pamuk has argued the more technical explanation that the (albeit limited) presence of the more valuable metal coin at a time when the state was printing a large volume of paper money meant that the former began circulating against the latter, eventually almost decimating the value of the paper notes against the safer metal coins.⁶⁸ In the first year the note was in circulation from July of 1915 to July of 1916, the value of the lira declined from 100

⁶⁴ Affeffi Saba', "Letter to Anna Jessup August 25, 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27.

⁶⁵ Affeffi Saba', "Letter to Anna Jessup, September 18, 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27.

⁶⁶ Affeffi Saba', "Letter to Anna Jessup September 1, 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27.

⁶⁷ Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 145.

⁶⁸ Şevket Pamuk, *A Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 223.

paper piasters to 1 gold lira to 121:1. After mid-1916, the value fell rapidly, reaching 183:1 in December 1916, 381:1 in July 1917, and finally to a low of 536:1 (18% of face value) in September of 1918.⁶⁹ The effect of this can be seen in the cost of the commodities paid, which ran to shocking heights over the course of the war – highest figure for wheat discovered was reported by Wadih Bustani in Dayr al-Qamar for March 24, 1918, at 300 piasters (paper) per ratl, or 90 in coin.⁷⁰

Although the early years of the famine were hardly comparable to the terrible situation that developed from 1916 to 1918, as early as 1915, the fear of not having food or not being able to acquire it in the future became an acute reality for many among the poorest classes. In 1915, the unilateral decision by the Damascene Municipal Council to forbid grain shipments to Palestine, Lebanon and Beirut prompted the first of many flour crises in the mountain and the city.⁷¹ To worsen an already bad situation, officials attempted to manage the social and political fallout of flour shortages by fixing prices and restricting the movement of grain, which did little apart from driving food from the shelves into the informal market where prices fluctuated wildly due to whim, rumor or sheer avarice.⁷² What food was made available through government distribution or in stores became increasingly adulterated with inferior and occasionally hazardous materials – pulses, sand, wood and worse. Cutting the food with such filler diminished its nutritional value, in the worst cases causing sickness and even death.⁷³

⁶⁹Yalman, *Turkey in the World War*, 144.

⁷⁰ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2: 328.

⁷¹ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-'alamiyya*, Translated by Fu'ad Midani (Beirut: 1933), 59-61.

⁷² Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 32. Hakim, *Bayrut wa Luban*, 252.

⁷³ Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 49, 58-60.

The importance of bread and wheat to the inhabitants of the region made the high cost of grains particularly poignant.⁷⁴ Need forced many to modify not only their lifestyles, but the foundation of their diet as well. Hayat Mahmud noted that her aunt used to be proud of the fact that she was among those who ate white bread during the famine, suggesting the quality of food itself became a social marker.⁷⁵

With all of the attention paid to prices and unemployment, there is still some question about what these figures actually meant for those trying to make ends meet in a time of high prices and limited income. One hint at the basic cost of living comes from the relief work of the American Mission. As part of their aid work in Mount Lebanon certain families were eligible to receive cash handouts in order to supplement their income, amounting to \$1.50 per week.⁷⁶ At the time, the value of the dollar against the pound was roughly 3.5:1 which would have put the weekly stipend at roughly 43 piasters per week, or 2,228 piasters per year.⁷⁷ Given the tightness of the Mission's coffers, this payment was undoubtedly calculated to cover a family's bare subsistence, or to serve as an income supplement instead of the family's sole means of sustenance.

Living in the cities conferred certain advantages over life in Mount Lebanon or in rural areas. According to contemporary observations in May of 1917, the cost of grain in Tripoli and Sidon (which were the market towns for their respective

⁷⁴ John Gulick, *Social Structure and Culture Change in a Lebanese Village* (New York: Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., 1955), 40.

⁷⁵ Interview with Hayat Mahmud, January 24, 2014.

⁷⁶ Byerly, Report of Sidon Station 1917-1918.

⁷⁷ This is calculated at the official Ottoman exchange rate of 100 piasters to a pound that was used by the Mission, though with inflation, the value was significantly less since it was generally paid in paper.

hinterlands) was less than half the price paid in Mount Lebanon,⁷⁸ to some extent since much of the grain was channeled in via smuggling routes and sold on the black market due to the Ottoman importation restrictions and official corruption.⁷⁹ However, as noted in Chapter 1, the restriction on grain movement in the mountain was not the only reason for the high cost of goods – those in Jabal ‘Amil and ‘Akkar paid extraordinarily high prices for their food, and often had to travel to market towns to purchase it.

C. Coping

To compensate for the high prices and scarcity, individuals and families relied upon a variety of coping mechanisms to survive. For most, this meant acquiring money to pay for necessities – a problem which increased as the price of commodities rose over time and certain occupations were obliterated by the cessation of overseas trade due to the Allied blockade. Those who had savings from work or remittances were at less risk than those who lived hand to mouth, but because the famine stretched three times the length of normal periods of dearth, and because prices became hyper-inflated, many families eventually exhausted their cash reserves and resorted to alternate measures to support themselves.

Desperation came, in some instances, to trump sentimentality. Andre Latron observed that among the Syrian population, gold jewelry had dual functions: its utility as an ornament, and an investment that could be purchased and reserved in anticipation of hard times. If people needed money, they would often sell jewelry, or in desperate

⁷⁸ Paul Erdman, “Letter from Paul Erdman to Charles Dana, May 2, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917.

⁷⁹ Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 1: 371.

instance, for the value of the gold.⁸⁰ However, such desperate acts did not stop at luxury items. As need grew, individuals were more willing to sell basic household items and even land to survive. In extreme cases they even stripped their houses of shutters, tiles, windows and doors in order to prolong their lives. In his account of the period, George Doolittle wrote, “that empty, roofless windowless, doorless house, with the solitary grave in the yard, is emblematic of the terrible conditions that prevailed in Khiyam (sic) and in Syria during the war years.”⁸¹ The short sale of possessions was not a viable long-term solution for those in need, but rather a desperate act reflecting the desperation of the times.

As the famine grew more severe and individuals became anxious to acquire money to purchase necessary food items, the value of moveable items plummeted in what rapidly became a buyer’s market. This is perhaps best indicated in the account provided in Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza’s memoir, which paid special attention to the plight of the middle classes. As the inflation of the Ottoman banknotes effectively reduced the purchasing power of wage earners to a fraction of its former value, middle class families sold their furniture, heirlooms and household items, literally in piles. Darwaza claimed that speculators and merchants from Damascus and Aleppo came to Beirut to capitalize on the misery of the residents, purchasing at low prices and bringing the pieces back to the interior of Syria to sell at a profit.⁸² Even land lost its value as desperation glutted the market. Darwaza observed that homes that were worth 1,000

⁸⁰ Andre Latron, *La vie rurale en Syrie et au Liban* (Beirut : L’Institut Français de Damas, 1936), 45.

⁸¹ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 96.

⁸² Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza, *Mudhakkirat Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza: Sajjal hafil bi masarat al-haraka al-‘arabiyya wa al-qadhiya al-filastiniyya khilal qarn min al-zaman: 1305-1404 (1887-1984)* 1 (Beirut: Dar al-gharb al-islami, 1993), 288

gold lira sold for 2,000 or 3,000 in paper notes, which according to Darwaza was worth 100 lira or less due to inflation. As prices fell, the rich purchased homes and either rented them to the former inhabitants or expelled them into the streets.⁸³ Such observations were reiterated by Latron, who recorded tales of those who, in desperation, had bartered their land for grain – the value of which was not noted in the contract itself.⁸⁴

The inability to acquire sufficient food was devastating for the poorest members of society – the agricultural works, wage laborers, refugees and the families who had lost their breadwinner to emigration, conscription or death. Driven to extreme lengths by terrible exigency, many of these individuals resorted to desperate acts to sustain their own lives and those of their loved ones.⁸⁵ Their inability to meet their daily nutritional requirements sent untold numbers into a state of deprivation and long-term semistarvation –in many cases leading to death.⁸⁶

The implications of this economic situation grew more and more severe as one climbed lower on the economic ladder. For the poorest families living without income, the prices were so incredible as to be nearly meaningless. George Doolittle encountered one woman in the village of Khiam in Jabal ‘Amil who told him “I have five persons in

⁸³ Darwaza’s math is suspect here, but the point remains valid. Ibid., 288.

⁸⁴ Latron, *La vie rurale*, 46.

⁸⁵ Additional discussion of this can be found in A. Tylor Brand, “Years of Horror: The American Experience of the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria,” in *Southern Horrors: Northern Visions of the Mediterranean World*, edited by Gilbert Bonifas and Martine Monacelli, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013): 179; Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 58-63; and beautifully in Najwa al-Qattan, “Eating Grass in WWI Syria: Animals and Identity in the Discourses of the Famine,” presented at Middle East Studies Association annual conference, New Orleans, October 11, 2013.

⁸⁶ Long-term semistarvation is a condition wherein the body is undernourished for an extended period of time, often resulting in the wasted, bony appearance of marasmus. Although the physical appearance of individuals suffering from marasmus or kwashiorkor (long-term protein deficiency) is visually horrifying, individuals can persist in this state for an extended period of time. Butterly and Shepherd, *Hunger: The Biology and Politics of Starvation*, 57-58, 95.

my house, with no income whatsoever. So what difference does it make to me whether a bushel of barley is one dollar or a dollar and forty cents!”⁸⁷ In famine foods are frequently eaten merely to fill the stomach to provide the illusion of satiety or even of nutrition.⁸⁸ In order to survive, the destitute and refugees combed the trash heaps for potato and citrus peels, cactus pads, scraps of bone and gristle, melon rinds, rotten food and other nominally edible materials.⁸⁹ Enterprising individuals removed every bit of meat and marrow that could be extracted from the bones, which some individuals then ground into a powder and boiled to extract what nutrients they could.⁹⁰ In place of oranges,⁹¹ cheaper lemons became a “staple food.”⁹²

Many of these extreme measures were little more than a way of approximating food, and in some cases even diminished the nutritional value or safety of what could actually be consumed. Tragically, some of the preparations described in the sources would have actually removed all of the useful nutritional value from some of the more delicate items, like lemon juice.⁹³ In their desperation to fill their stomachs, many

⁸⁷ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 96.

⁸⁸ Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity*, 17-21.

⁸⁹ Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, *A'tham harb fi al-tarikh* (Beirut: al-matb'a al-'ilmiyya, 1927), 68; Hassan Muhammad Sa'ad, *Jabal 'Amil bayn al-atrak wa al-faransiyyin 1914-1920* (Beirut: Dar al-kitab, 1980), 47.

⁹⁰ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with George Ashqar” in Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2:78.

⁹¹ Orange prices had actually fallen due to the loss of an export market for major producers like Sidon and Jaffa. Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Dr. Nabih Shab” in Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 54.

⁹² Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 32.

⁹³ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Shehadi Salim Mu'allim” in Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 397.

inadvertently made themselves ill.⁹⁴ To satisfy the pains of hunger, individuals ate not only the usual types of herbs, but even inedible grasses.⁹⁵ Ira Harris noted that children were particularly susceptible to the adulteration of flour and a diet more reliant on herbs and vegetables.⁹⁶ The use of corn as a famine food was frequently cited as a cause of digestive issues. Worst was when refuse and carrion from the fields, markets and the roads were repurposed as food, which could have devastating or even fatal consequences.⁹⁷

Although such desperate measures taken by desperate people have received much attention in the sources, but not everyone found themselves rooting through trash heaps or picking grains of barley from animal dung. However, even for those of intermediate means who were not starving, the dearth and high prices of the famine period prompted a creative shift in their diet patterns. Many chose to either consume less of the most expensive foods or to replace them with more economical “famine foods.” The inaccessibility of wheat due to cost or scarcity led to creative reinterpretations of familiar foods. Grains and seeds that were traditionally used as fodder, like corn and millet, replaced more expensive grains like wheat and rice in the human diet. Cheap millet grains were cooked like rice, mixed with *kibbe* or boiled with

⁹⁴ This was a common occurrence in even the mild famines that had occurred in the prior decades. Ira Harris, “Medical Work – Tripoli Station – Syrian Mission – 1902,” RG-115-19-16, Tripoli – medical reports 1895-1914,1.

⁹⁵ Ibrahim Khalil ‘Awad, *Min ‘ahd al-mutasarrifiyya ila ‘ahd al-istiqlal: mudhakkirat* (Beirut: Matb’at Hayak wa Karam, 1981), 44.

⁹⁶ Ira Harris, “Medical Report of the Tripoli Station – Syria Mission: for 1907,” RG-115-19-16, Tripoli – medical reports 1895-1914, 1.

⁹⁷ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,”4; Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 114.

milk.⁹⁸ In Sidon, Doolittle observed that *turmus*, the dense, membranous seed of the lupine plant became a “staple,” sold on the streets by vendors by the cupful.⁹⁹ When supplies of barley and even millet were low, Muhsin al-Amin wrote that his family softened the bitter *hilbeh* (*halba*, or fenugreek) seeds and boiled them with wild herbs, salt and oil, or alternately experimented with flours made from acorns and vetch, which his son found to be inedible.¹⁰⁰ A particularly interesting example concerns the propagation of the thin *saj*-style bread in the western Biqa’ villages of Chtaoura and Zahle – a variety that was largely unknown in the area before 1915. According to Riyashi, *saj* was introduced when refugees fleeing poverty in the mountain brought the preparation technique to the town. Baking this thin bread on the *tannur* rather than in an oven reduced the amount of the scarce and expensive charcoal needed for baking (much of which had been redirected to the railroad), and enabled families to produce a large number of loaves while using little flour.¹⁰¹

The seasonality of crops meant that diets varied over the course of the year depending on price and availability. Staggered harvest times helped many to sustain themselves with cheap, freshly harvested legumes and pulses while they waited for the July harvest to lower the cost of staple grains. In his diary, Amin commented that the *ful* (fava bean) harvest in the mid-summer was a relief for the population before the arrival of the wheat, lentils, barley and fruits that came in the late summer months.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiite du Gabal 'Amil, tiré de: lesnotables chiites* (Damascus: Institut Français de Damas, 1998), 166.

⁹⁹ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 84.

¹⁰⁰ Amin, *Autobiographie*, 167.

¹⁰¹ Lisa Wadia' Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle al-'am, 4000 Q.M. – 1986M: wa nukhba min 'alamiha al-wataniyin fi matla' al-qarn al-'ishrin*, (Beirut: Dar Ishtar, 1986), 157.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 168.

The arrival of seasonally cheap foods triggered purchases on a larger scale in preparation for the *muna*, the annual practice of preserving the harvest for use through the winter months when food was far more expensive or even inaccessible. In normal times, individuals would acquire legumes, grains, fruits, vegetables, meat and dairy products and extend their shelf life by drying, salting or preserving them in oil, thereby arresting the process of decomposition and allowing their use in the more expensive winter period.¹⁰³ During the early years of the famine, the remaining stores of preserved food may have allowed many to stave off hunger or at least starvation for a time, but the high cost of food, restrictions on transportation in Lebanon and the economic depression prevented many from acquiring amounts necessary to sustain themselves over the course of the bitterly cold winters of the famine years. For many, the costs made it difficult to purchase enough food to sustain their family for a week, let alone a season.

Those who were fortunate enough to own land on which to grow their own food were better able to lay aside reserves for later use. However, even this was hardly a guarantee that the food would be sufficient for their needs, especially given the risk of theft that increased as desperation grew. In the town of Zahle, resources had to be dedicated to guarding the crops to ensure that they were not stolen by hungry soldiers or the starving refugees who had flooded into the city from the nearby mountain communities.¹⁰⁴ On a smaller scale, Ibrahim Khalil ‘Awad wrote of his grandfather preserving his figs in oil prior to their ripening to save them from theft.¹⁰⁵ In extreme

¹⁰³ Aida Kanafani-Zahar, *Mune: La conservation alimentaire traditionnelle au Liban*, (Paris: Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1994), 1-5.

¹⁰⁴ Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*, 174.

¹⁰⁵ ‘Awad, *Min ‘ahd al-mutasarifiya*, 33-37.

situations, grain could be harvested green and roasted in order to deter theft or to prevent soldiers from confiscating it at time of harvest.

In addition to the food that was harvested and purchased, many supplemented their diets with wild herbs and roots. In normal circumstances, such herbs did not significantly contribute to the daily caloric intake of the residents of the region, but rather provided relief from the limited diets of the winter months when they sprouted in the countryside during the early months of the year. When prepared, wild herbs like *hindbeh*, *khubbayze*, parsley, various *za'tars* and mint (among others) provided significant amounts of iron, zinc and key vitamins that were necessary dietary elements lacking in the preserved foods that people generally ate for several months over the winter. In addition to their alimentary value, herbs were regarded as medically significant – a particularly valuable trait at a time when medical care and pharmaceuticals were in short supply. A number of the herbs were reputed to have curative powers for ailments ranging from stomach problems to inflammation to a vermicide against stomach parasites,¹⁰⁶ though it should be noted that the effectiveness of these herbs has been less conclusively established than their reputations.

As famine foods, such edible wild herbs and plants compensated somewhat for the limited intake of grain carbohydrates and reduce protein loss that is characteristic of marasmus.¹⁰⁷ However, there were sharp limits on the extent which these plants could support an individual, let alone a population. For one, the plants were seasonal. The annual appearance of edible herbs began in February and only extended to varying

¹⁰⁶Cynthia Chaker Farhat, “Analysis of Indigenous Nutritional Knowledge, Cultural Importance and Nutritional Content of Wild Edible Plants,” MA Thesis, The American University of Beirut (2006), see table 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12.

degrees until July.¹⁰⁸ Although the plants could be preserved in order to extend their shelf-life, (as in the case of dried za'tar, a mix of dried thyme, sumac, salt and sesame), the process often stripped many of the nutritional benefits from the herbs. Moreover, in extremely poor areas, the demand for herbs could actually completely exhaust its supply. George Doolittle described the inhabitants of the poor Christian town of 'Alma in Jabal 'Amil as "devitalized" by a diet that was overly dependent upon herbs, and observed that once the poor had learned which plants were edible, one could "walk for hours and not find a bit of green vegetation suitable to eat, it had all been plucked up to satisfy the hunger pangs of the villagers."¹⁰⁹

In the cramped, stony confines of towns and cities, growing food on a significant scale was not a possibility, which meant that acquiring food meant obtaining enough money to purchase it at market rates. This was a problem on the coast and in the countryside alike. Even in the market town of Zahle, whose vicinity produced 1 million *mudd*¹¹⁰ of wheat annually around the time of World War I, (which was largely consumed locally), merchants still imported 300,000 additional *mudd* to meet local needs in 1912.¹¹¹ In the green heights of Mount Lebanon, home gardens in the villages were able to provide little more than seasonal supplements to family diets and to augment the food saved in the *muna*. The vegetables and roots that were grown in individual house gardens were useful, but were limited in their effectiveness by the size of the plot (particularly in towns) and by the seasonality of their production. Anis

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 62-63.

¹⁰⁹ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 103.

¹¹⁰ A *mudd* is a volume measure that is the rough equivalent of 18 liters. For a thorough analysis of weights and measures, see Charles Issawi *The Fertile Crescent, 1800-1914: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 478-479.

¹¹¹ Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*, 149, 174.

Farayha mentioned that his family increased the cultivation of potatoes, onions and beans in their garden for fear of the effects of the importation restrictions in the mountain, but this alone was not enough to sustain his family once prices began to rise.¹¹²

Although this problem was most apparent in the cities, even those living in agricultural areas could encounter difficulties actually acquiring the produce of their own region. Shaykh Muhsin al-Amin of the village of Chakra in Jabal ‘Amil had to travel roughly 40 km *through* farming communities to the market town of Nabatieh (or even to distant Sidon) to purchase millet at 32 piasters per bushel to feed his immediate and extended family.¹¹³ The widespread poverty of the rural regions diminished purchasing power and made agricultural areas funnels of cereals, with only the major towns serving as markets for regional consumptions. This was seen in Jabal ‘Amil¹¹⁴ and ‘Akkar,¹¹⁵ but also even in the Biqa’, where the town of Zahle (with its 15 functioning mills) was a major market for grains and seasonal vegetable harvests.¹¹⁶

In rural areas, the mitigating factors that provided the best chance of survival were land ownership and the possession of animals. Even if the food produced on such land was insufficient to feed a family without buying additional amounts to supplement it, this was still a cushion that allowed many to stave off hunger, delay starvation or

¹¹² Anis Farayha, *Qabl an ansa ... tatimmat “isma’ ya Ridha !”* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1989), 45-46.

¹¹³ Amin, *Autobiographie*, 167.

¹¹⁴ Sulayman Dhahir, *Jabal ‘Amil fi al-harb al-kawniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-matbu’at al-sharqiyya, 1986), 44.

¹¹⁵ Bahjat and Tamimi. *Wilayat Bayrut*, 2: 276. See also Michael Gilson, *Lords of the Lebanese Marches: Violence and Narrative in an Arab Society* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996), 148-150.

¹¹⁶ Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*, 155.

even prosper if the land was sufficiently productive. Unlike household goods and jewelry, which could be sold in times of great need but which ceased to provide any benefit once the cash acquired was gone, arable agricultural land and animals could feed their owners or provide them with valuable food items to sell for cash, allowing them to purchase those items they could not grow themselves. In an interview for this dissertation, Soumar Dakdouk mentioned that her grandmother's family was well-off during the war since they owned large amounts of agricultural land in the Gharb region and goats and sheep which provided milk that they could take to sell for cash in Beirut.¹¹⁷ The case of Muhsin al-Amin confirms this point. His sheep, cows, goats, mare and donkey were the instruments of his family's salvation after he made the unfortunate decision to sell his grain at a low price and move to Damascus in the early years of the war. Upon his return to his village of Chakra, Amin "threw himself" into pastoralism, the products of his animals enabling him to provide for himself and his kin until the end of the war.¹¹⁸

The autobiography of Ibrahim Khalil 'Awad provided an interesting indication of the limits and benefits of private agriculture. 'Awad, a mere child of 9 at the time of the famine, wrote that his grandfather's fears of dearth and high prices prompted him to plant his property extensively with wheat and barley in addition to supplemental legumes and vegetables – a decision which prevented him from having to purchase grain at high market prices.¹¹⁹ However, 'Awad's example also indicates that land alone was often not enough to survive if the need was too great. Although he prepared for

¹¹⁷ Interview conducted with Soumar Dakdouk on October 13, 2013.

¹¹⁸ Amin, *Autobiographie*, 164.

¹¹⁹ 'Awad, *Min 'ahd al-mutasarrifiyya*, 33-35.

famine strategically and thoughtfully, his grandfather nevertheless found his family starving in 1916, reduced to eating grasses and thin *saj* bread with laban and mint in order to meet their barest of needs.¹²⁰

For those who did not actually own the land they farmed, the situation was more complex. In many areas, cultivation was dependent upon the complicated relationships between the landlords and tenants.¹²¹ Traditional rural landlord-tenant relationships were highly uneven and often exploitive – the peasants were often relegated to the status of sharecroppers in a *de facto* state of servitude to their landlords. In tenure arrangements in the vicinity of Sidon, Tripoli and Tyre, the landlord had rights to 1/6 of the produce of the land¹²² and frequently took advantage of their position as the local intermediary with the authorities to spread the tax burden disproportionately across the poorer members of the community.¹²³ Because of this arrangement and the loans that small-scale cultivators frequently took against their harvest to provide money throughout the year, the agricultural crisis and conscription in 1915 was a terrible blow to the small rural farmers. In the town of Hasbaya, those who were unable to pay the debts that they had incurred were thrown into prison and had their possessions confiscated.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Ibid., 44.

¹²¹ Owen, *The Middle East in the World Economy*, 254-260; Latron, *La vie rurale*.

¹²² Latron, *La vie rurale*, 46, 50, 55.

¹²³ George Doolittle, "Report of Sidon Station 1916-1917," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 5-6.

¹²⁴ Ghalib Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya, imaratan wa turathan wa maqamat hatta nihayat al-harb al-kawniyya al-thaniyya* (Sidon: al-matb'a al-'asriyya, 1997), 117.

D. Survival and Place

As migration, death and flight depopulated small towns in the mountains, social life became increasingly disrupted, the economy deteriorated, and acquiring the basic necessities became almost impossible. In his account of the war in his memoir, *Qabl an Ansa*, Anis Farayha observed that those who did not own land left the town of Ra's al-Matn for the coastal cities early in the war to seek work.¹²⁵ With fewer people and less money, small shops and markets became unviable. As a rule, larger population centers were better equipped due to the market pull of the larger populations. Their greater purchasing power allowed them to secure commodities and labor at better prices than surrounding communities. The local histories of small mountain and coastal villages unanimously agree that the worsening conditions in the famine precipitated large-scale flight as people poured into the cities seeking work or food.¹²⁶

For those whose livelihoods had been dramatically reduced by the high cost of living or the lack of employment, flight to the cities was regarded as a plausible means of surviving the crisis. Although it is generally viewed as signal of desperate need, migration was actually a survival strategy that was employed by tens of thousands of individuals and their families throughout the famine period. However, since such a move from one's support network was generally the product of extreme need, it was often an unsuccessful one. As early as 1915, those lacking land or animals to sustain them began migrating to the cities in search of jobs and food. Departures and death led

¹²⁵ Farayha, *Qabl an ansa*, 42.

¹²⁶ Awad, *Min 'ahd al-mutasarrifiyya*; Father Marun Hayak, '*Ayn 'Alaq bayn al-qarn al-sabi' wa al-qarn al-hadi wa al-'ishrin*' (Beirut: Mia Press, 2005); Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*; Saliqa, *Tarikh Hasbaya*; Farayha, *Qabl an ansa*.

to depopulation and social degradation that increased the levels of risk of diseases of poverty and crowding in host cities. This process slowly bled smaller villages while transforming destination zones into havens for both homeless refugees and epidemic disease.¹²⁷

Although a common trope of the famine was the extinction of whole rural villages, the likelihood that this occurred on a large scale is highly improbable. The best statistical indication of this is provided by John Nakhul in his population analysis of towns in the *qadha'* of Batrun after the famine. In it, Nakhul takes into account both deaths and migrations in the population shift during the period. Although the mortality data does not necessarily support firm generalizations, it is apparent that some towns endured the war better than others. Larger towns like Batrun (population of 5,750), Bsh'ali (909) and Hardin (1170) experienced relatively limited mortality compared to other towns in the vicinity (although they were still strikingly high) – 20% of their populations of Batrun and Bsh'ali died in the famine whereas Hardin lost 19%. Higher mortality rates were more common in smaller towns (of 200 or less inhabitants), though the experience of certain outliers like Douma (which lost a mere 13% of its population of 156) and Shabtin (which lost 63% of its initial population of 1035) indicates that a town's viability during the famine depended on a variety of factors including its pre-crisis population.¹²⁸

In larger cities, migration had altogether different effects. Populations swelled as people migrated to larger population centers, increasing the risk of diseases of crowding and filth and causing an increased demand on the infrastructure and the population. The

¹²⁷ See Chapter 2.

¹²⁸ Nakhul, "Bilad al-Batrun," 2: 858-859.

economic centers of the region like Zahle, Tripoli, Beirut and Sidon were convergence points for refugees and migrants from the crisis in the mountain. In Tripoli, the prewar statistics put the population at 30,000 individuals in 1912, with another estimate in 1914 placing 27,000 in the city and the Mina, as well as an additional 2,500 nonregistered residents (totaling 29,500). In 1919, a survey of the city and the Mina estimated its population at 32,000 residents, an increase of roughly 2,000-2,500.¹²⁹ Unemployment and homelessness created new sets of social problems and exposed the population at large to a dramatic increase in suffering among the poorest members of society. Out of the 6,000-7,500 people living in the already typically impoverished and unhealthy town of Tyre, the survey by Bahjat and Tamimi estimated that nearly half of the population (2,700 individuals) was unemployed, in part due to the presence of large numbers of refugees in the town.¹³⁰ Zahle also experienced an influx of refugees during the war seeking to exploit the town's labor market and its access to food.¹³¹ Certainly during the crisis it was somewhat hospitable compared to the crumbling economies of the smaller towns of the Kisrawan, which by all accounts suffered terribly during the crisis. Even so, migration by no means ensured employment, and even if one did find work it did not ensure that one's family would survive.¹³²

The influx of both wealthy and poor refugees prompted dramatic changes to social life in the major towns and cities. Not all of those who moved to the cities were impoverished, and those who moved in anticipation of famine in rural regions began to

¹²⁹ Statistics compiled by John Gulick, *Tripoli, A Modern Arab City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), 31.

¹³⁰ Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1, 196.

¹³¹ Lisa Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*, 144.

¹³² See Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 70.

put additional positive pressure on the markets of the major points of relocation, which negatively impacted both preexisting residents and the new arrivals. Preexisting poverty in the cities made some areas, like Tyre and Tripoli ill-equipped to handle the increase in starving refugees. Doolittle described the situation in Tripoli as “well nigh unbelievable.”¹³³ Rents increased as a result of increased pressure on the housing market in areas accepting a large volume of migrants.¹³⁴ Those who had been driven to sell their belongings and their land at increasingly lower prices were evicted in order to accommodate new tenants at higher rents. The high cost of living mitigated what gains the refugees had hoped to make by coming to the city – as Muhammad ‘Izzat Darwaza wrote, the poor “fled from hunger to hunger.”¹³⁵ As in the case of other famines,¹³⁶ men moving to the cities to find work often left their families in their home villages, where many died – even in the rare case that the men survived and found sufficient work. As Chapter 2 indicates, the poverty and crowding of the cities provided particularly fertile grounds for both epidemic and endemic diseases that were responsible for most of the deaths in the famine.

In spite of the high number of deaths, terrible poverty and epidemic diseases that ravaged the poor populations in the city, there were some tangible benefits to being in a larger city during the famine. More people meant that there were more mouths to feed, but a larger population usually also implied a larger and more diverse economy, a certain amount of capital and the ability to command commodities due to its large

¹³³ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 87.

¹³⁴ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 35.

¹³⁵ Darwaza, *Mudhakkirat*, 288.

¹³⁶ See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), 102.

demand for food and other necessities.¹³⁷ This, in conjunction with the better rates of exchange for Ottoman lira in the larger cities, meant that necessities were usually easier to acquire and cheaper. Larger populations also had recourse to a greater number of social institutions to provide support during crisis, and particularly in the case of the major cities, had a relatively functional administration to deal with issues of hygiene, social welfare and the basic functions that enabled daily life to continue in crisis.¹³⁸ For those who needed the assistance, cities, particularly the primate city of Beirut, had the capital available to provide loans. However, as the demand for cash and the desperation of those needing credit increased, these frequently took on a usurious character.¹³⁹

To a certain extent, larger towns were also better able to provide for those in need simply because their municipalities were more organized and generally better funded. Although municipalities reduced many social services to more economically plausible levels during the period of the war as a result of reduced tax incomes, there is evidence that some municipalities prioritized certain projects that they viewed as vital to the success of the community. Bahjat and Tamimi reported that between 1914 and 1915, the yearly revenues of the town of Sidon declined from 191,000 to 151,700 piasters.¹⁴⁰ As a result, the town pared down its services to a minimum, focusing on education, hygiene and health while also attempting to ensure that civil servants were paid a living

¹³⁷ Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 161.

¹³⁸ As the capital of the *wilayah* and the economic engine of the region, Beirut is the example *par excellence*, but Bahjat and Tamimi provide excellent detail about the administration of coastal cities like Tyre and Sidon during the crisis in *Wilayat Bayrut*.

¹³⁹ On lending, see Antoine Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère* (Cairo: Imprimerie Emin Hindie, 1922), 37; Edward Nickoley, "Historic Diary," Edward Nickoley File AA:2.3.3, Box 1, File 2: Diary from 1917, 32-36.

¹⁴⁰ The city of Sidon pared down its services to education, hygiene and health. Bahjat and Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut*, 1: 306.

wage. Curiously, in spite of the increase in needy individuals, the municipality decreased the services offered to the poor (which stood at 15,500 piasters in 1915-1916), noting that it had cut its charitable programs, curiously associating them with the less exigent indulgences of ceremonies and contributions to the notables.¹⁴¹ The political differences in the different municipalities and regions had a similarly demonstrable impact on the lived experiences of its inhabitants. Municipalities dealt with the flood of humanity in a variety of manners. Tripoli, which experienced a dramatic rise in the number of refugees entering the city over the course of the famine, incarcerated and expelled the homeless from the city to deter begging.¹⁴² In retrospectives on the famine, the victims of starvation and disease were unquestionably the tragic protagonists of the crisis. However, at the time of the crisis, the poor who flooded the cities, piteously grasped at the legs of passers-by and lay morbidly along the roadsides generated an entirely different response from others in society. Over time, even the most sympathetic contemporaries of the famine could be moved to regard the suffering of the poorest in society with revulsion, fear and loathing.¹⁴³

E. Support Networks and Survival in the War

When individuals and families had exhausted their capacity to support themselves, many sought the recourse of those support networks that were available to them during the war. In spite of the social dissolution that the famine produced, for the most part these were the same pillars of society on which pre-war life and local charity

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 306.

¹⁴² NA, "Tripoli Station Report 1917-1918," PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 4. Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*,

¹⁴³ See Chapters 5 and 6.

had been founded. The pillars of family, community and church were supplemented by the actions of non-governmental organizations and eventually the state itself when the degree of suffering had reached calamitous levels. In spite of the social disintegration and even dissolution of familial obligations that were used as literary devices in contemporary sources,¹⁴⁴ family and community remained the basic and most important support networks for those in need.¹⁴⁵

Although the state contributed to institutions in need from 1915 onwards, to a large degree, relief work was the realm of the private sector until 1917. Aziz Bey's account of the war provides ample evidence that Jamal Pasha was aware of the developing humanitarian crisis in 1915 and took official steps to support those in need. However, rather than instituting an expensive centralized relief response, he instead supported community organizations that were traditionally responsible for care for their own populations.¹⁴⁶ This was regarded by many in the population as criminally neglectful, but in historical precedent, localities and religious communities were largely responsible for their own social welfare in times of crisis. Local churches and preexisting charitable organizations were somewhat better equipped to handle aid programs than the overextended state bureaucracy.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ See Chapter 6.

¹⁴⁵ Tanielian observed that the famine prompted a rupture in cultural family obligations. Although cases of familial breakdown undoubtedly occurred (and are mentioned specifically in sources), there is reason to suspect that this, as with other examples of the demoralization of the poor, was overstated. Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 63-64. This will be covered further in Chapter 6.

¹⁴⁶ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-'alamiyya*, translated by Fu'ad Midani (Beirut: 1933), 61.

¹⁴⁷ Tanielian indicates that religious support networks were lifelines for thousands among the Greek Catholics, Greek Orthodox and Maronites in the country during the war. Tanielian, "The War of Famine." This has been further confirmed Nakhul's study of Batrun in "Bilad al-Batrun," as well as Mir, *Batha*, 69-70. See also Amy Singer, "Soup and Sadaqa: Charity in Islamic Societies," *Historical Research* 79, no. 205 (2006). Ya'aron Ayalon has made similar observations on an earlier time period in his exploration of how Jewish communities in Aleppo and Damascus responded to crisis. Ya'aron

As early as the spring of 1915, neediness and unemployment had prompted the local Red Cross chapter to begin offering monetary handouts and organizing work through the Employment Committee, which operated out of West Hall at the Syrian Protestant College.¹⁴⁸ After Beirut's Wali, 'Azmi Bey, forbade relief work in the city in August 1915, the state engaged in top-down public works projects, including the demolition and reconstruction of the Beirut suqs, conversion of the Ottoman barracks and the reconstruction of the highway in Sidon. Local leaders like Alfred Sursuq also used their influence with the Ottoman authorities to promote construction projects to provide employment and distribute patronage to alleviate some of the need in the community – including the construction of a modern horse track near the pine forest to the south of the city.¹⁴⁹ Official relief projects were set up in 1917 to aid a number of the poor women and children of the city at the behest of Jamal Pasha, 'Azmi Bey and head of the Beirut Municipality, 'Umar Da'uq. Such programs were valuable as a way of saving individuals, but did little to stem the tide of poverty and famine that had become calamitous by the time the plan was implemented.¹⁵⁰

By necessity, non-governmental organizations, charitable groups like the Red Cross and Red Crescent, missionaries and churches became a *de facto* support network for thousands. The immense cost of this effort put an immense strain on the mechanisms of charity, in many cases limiting the scope or the effectiveness of the programs due to

Ayalon, "Plagues, Famines, Earthquakes: The Jews of Ottoman Syria and Natural Disasters," Ph.D. diss., Princeton University (2009).

¹⁴⁸ A. Tylor Brand, "That They May Have Life: The Practice and Practicality of the Syrian Protestant College's Humanitarian Relief Projects in Beirut and Lebanon during the Famine of World War I," (forthcoming, 2014).

¹⁴⁹ Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 183.

¹⁵⁰ Brand, "That They May Have Life." Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 183-186.

the vast demand for their services. Financing was certainly a major technicality for any group attempting to provide services of any scale during the period, a fact which mitigated against the creation of large charitable programs by private individuals during the period. The cost of running an operation amid the galloping cost of food and fuel during the war was substantial. Arthur Dray's *mat'am* in Brummana required \$180,000 to function for 30 months, or the equivalent of \$2.5-3 million dollars in 2013.¹⁵¹ The bill for two years of work in the much more limited Abeih and Suq al-Gharb operations totaled \$27,500. The personal risk that locals undertook without access to remittances or normal income was great. George Doolittle told the story of one man who loaned out most of the 8,000 lira that he had prior to the war, leaving him starving with "a safe full of promissory notes."¹⁵² The very real threat of poverty and starvation for even the middle classes reduced the charitable impulse across society. Father Bulus 'Aqil wrote, "nobody gives because nobody has."¹⁵³ That this was a problem that extended across society is evidenced by Tanielian's discovery that donations to both the Sunni and Greek Orthodox charities in Beirut decreased over the course of the war.¹⁵⁴ Members of the Syrian Protestant College and the Beirut Chapter of the American Red Cross conducted relief work in Beirut until 'Azmi Bey's prohibition in August of 1915, after which they coordinated their activities with the Ottoman Red Crescent and the

¹⁵¹ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 229.

¹⁵² Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 114.

¹⁵³ Bulus 'Aqil, "Letter of Father 'Aqil to Allied Agent, October 3, 1916," Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 180.

¹⁵⁴ Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 186.

Mutasarrif, 'Ali Munif Bey, until America's entry into the war made the collaboration politically unviable.¹⁵⁵

Given the difficulties in raising money within the Ottoman Empire, it is not surprising that the most extensive program in operation during the war was the remittance smuggling operation that brought money from *outside* of the country. Begun in 1915, the program was coordinated by the American Press in conjunction with Standard Oil and the American Presbyterian Mission in New York to provide a means for Syrians who wished to transmit money from New York to the Ottoman Empire through the American Press after Ottoman banking restrictions and the blockade cut the normal channels for such aid. Checks would arrive in New York with instructions for their dispersal,¹⁵⁶ where they were cashed and used to purchase Ottoman lira at exchange rates that varied from \$4.6:1 to 2.78:1 by the end of the war. The remaining funds would be funneled through Standard Oil, which had firmly entrenched business interests in the Ottoman Empire and Egypt. Using Standard Oil accounts in Istanbul, money would be credited to the American Mission in Beirut through a variety of official Ottoman institutions, which included the Ottoman Postal Service, the Tobacco Regié, the Ottoman Bank, the Banc Agricole, the Public Debt Administration and the Ipanassian brothers (among others),¹⁵⁷ after which it would distribute cash to its

¹⁵⁵ For the most detailed accounts of American relief activities, see Brand, "That They May Have Life;" Tanielian, "The War of Famine," 135-168.

¹⁵⁶ At times these were rendered indecipherable by the local accent of the Syrian-Americans and the poor transliteration skills of the American clerks, meaning many checks never arrived. Doolittle wrote, "Margaret al dekar is not a Syrian maiden, but a hamlet named Mezraat ed Dhahr, while Anna Sour is intended for Qana, Tyre." George Doolittle, "Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916," 4-5.

¹⁵⁷ Oscar Gunkel, "Letter #113 from Oscar Gunkel (Standard Oil) to Charles Dana, January 6, 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917; Oscar Gunkel, "Letter #120 from Oscar Gunkel (Standard Oil) to Charles Dana, January 20, 1916." PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

regional stations in Tripoli, Zahle, Suq al-Gharb and Sidon for collection or dispersal. Requests from the treasurer of the Press, Charles Dana were conducted clandestinely, relying on code systems that could have come straight from Ottoman spy pulp – paper money was dubbed “dibs kharrub” (carob molasses) and gold became “Lyle’s Golden Syrup.”¹⁵⁸ The system occupied much of the Mission’s efforts until the financial channel was cut in mid-1917, at which point American aid was combined into the American Relief Committee, which funded workshops and soup kitchens and instituted a loan program to aid those seeking immediate financial assistance, providing \$89,372.66 to 403 people in 82 towns in 1918.¹⁵⁹

The Americans have assumed much of the credit for this relief work, and although they went to great lengths, to disperse the aid, it should be remembered that the remittances themselves were not American donations, but rather a redirection of the normal familial social support system that had been a load-bearing pillar of Syrian society even before the war. The foundation of the community in small towns was what anthropologist John Gulick described as a kinship organization – he notes that this was not an abstraction, that the social life of the village was actually organized along familial lines.¹⁶⁰ Afif Tannous observed that the local proverb “he who has no backing has no backbone” indicates the very literal association of kin and social support.¹⁶¹ This

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵⁹ Paul Erdman, “The Press Report for the Year 1918,” 1918, PHS Archives RG-115-2-1 American Press Annual Reports 1918-30; see also: “Relief Work and Loans to Syrians during the War,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917, 4-6.

¹⁶⁰ John Gulick, “Conservatism and Change in a Lebanese Village,” *Middle East Journal* 8:3 (1954): 303.

¹⁶¹ Afif Tannous, “Group Behavior in the Village Community of Lebanon,” *American Journal of Sociology* 48, no. 2 (1942): 233.

meant that family, kin and the extended kinship of the village itself were the first levels of support in times of crisis, and sometimes the last.

Ibrahim ‘Awad’s memoir provides evidence of the complexity that familial and community relations could take during the period. ‘Awad’s father had migrated abroad in 1914 in search of greater economic opportunity abroad, leaving his family with a gold ring and the promise of remittances that would support them. The Ottoman declaration of war in 1914 severed his connection with his family, leaving the family in an economically untenable situation with three children to support and no income. ‘Awad’s immediate family traveled to his grandfather’s home in Bharsaf, where they lived with his grandfather, aunt and her family on his plot of land. ‘Awad worked on the farm and ran errands for his family in order to earn his keep, but it is apparent that the sacrifice that his grandfather had made in taking them on actually reduced his own chances of survival during the famine. And indeed, by 1916, in spite of the food that he had grown on the property, the family was destitute.¹⁶²

Although bonds were tightest in one’s immediate family, community was also a vital part of the support networks on which many depended during the famine. Like the actions of the Sursuq and Beyhum patriarchs in Beirut¹⁶³ the grain traders of the town that had been instrumental in establishing its prominence in the past secured the *hente* (durum wheat favored for local bread, distinct from soft *qamh* wheat) needed by citizens of the city and the refugees as well.¹⁶⁴ Even the relatively well-provisioned American community relied upon its extended networks to seek out grain for personal or relief

¹⁶² See ‘Awad, *Min ‘ahd al-mutasarrifiyya*, 31-45.

¹⁶³ Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 1: 359; Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 107-108.

¹⁶⁴ Riyashi, *Tarikh Zahle*, 174.

use. During 1915, George Doolittle wrote: “The missionary homes have also been purchasing and forwarding agencies for all kinds of provisions sent by donkeys, camels, carts, carriages and public stages to the Americans in Beirut, where the supply of food stuffs has been most tryingly inadequate, owing to government regulations and mismanagement.”¹⁶⁵

To some extent, members of the community initially sought to ensure the ‘Awad family’s interests. In the early months of the crisis, Ibrahim was sent to the butcher to purchase meat in exchange for the ring that his father had left them – the butcher refused to take the ring and gave him meat, which his father paid for on his return after the war. The community ties that guided even this uneven social relationship certainly varied (and were critiqued as being in short supply in Beirut in particular), but they were evident in other recollections of the war as well.¹⁶⁶

Family and community did not merely provide, they often worked together to ensure the safety of their members. In a story told by his relative, ‘Ali, Mahmud Khalil Saab recorded that a merchant from Dayr al-Qamar informed his relatives about cheap grain for sale in a nearby town, in spite of the fact that revealing this secret might limit the amount of profit that he could gain from the sale of his goods.¹⁶⁷ Support networks could also provide logistical support as well. The route taken by Hayat Mahmud’s grandfather took his band of smugglers over the cedars of Baruk through a small village in the foothills of the Biqa’, called Da’na, which was comprised entirely of extended

¹⁶⁵ Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916,” 1.

¹⁶⁶ Notably, in Nicola Ziadeh’s personal account of the famine from Damascus. See Nicola Ziadeh, “A First Person Account of the First World War in Greater Syria,” in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, ed. Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006), 265-277.

¹⁶⁷ Mahmud Khalil Sa’ab, *Stories and Scenes from Mount Lebanon*, translated by Tammam Abushakra (London: Saqi Books, 2004), 337-338.

family that had migrated into the area from Baruk, forming a “satellite” town that maintained its social and familial ties to its mother village and served as a resting point for residents of Baruk on their way to the Hawran.¹⁶⁸

F. The Immoral Economy: Illicit Dealings and Survival

When legitimate means of support failed, or opportunity presented itself, some individuals resorted to smuggling, theft, and even banditry. Desperation and the inability to adequately police society resulted in an increase in property crime during the period of the famine, although curiously the degree to which this occurred appears to have been less than what many expected. Maqdisi noted with some surprise that the poor would often be writhing within an arm’s reach of food and yet not be compelled to steal it out of humiliation,¹⁶⁹ though fear of being arrested and interred in the military prison in ‘Aley may certainly have been a deterrent as well.¹⁷⁰ Curiously, theft from desperation was not always frowned upon, and was even viewed with some sympathy by some in society. Sa’ab wrote the story of a man who was caught by his shaykh stealing grain during the famine. Instead of punishing him or reporting him to the authorities, the old man assisted the thief with the sack of grain out of sympathy for his family’s plight, then instructed him to not tell of his generosity.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Interview with Hayat Mahmud, January 24, 2014.

¹⁶⁹ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 70.

¹⁷⁰ Nickoley reported that “a girl of eighteen is marched off to Ba’bda, four hours walk, to prison because in her depression and desperation she snatched a scrap of bread from another person.” Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 17.

¹⁷¹ There is a folksiness to the narrative that makes it somewhat suspicious. Sa’ab, *Stories and Scenes*, 223.

There is some statistical evidence that crime increased over the course of the famine, supporting the anecdotal accounts. Faruq Hablas found that in Tripoli, the number of felonies rose from 144 in 1914 to 160 in 1915, and slightly again in 1916 to 166 – misdemeanors (like property crime) rose at a slightly higher rate from 832 to 920 and then to 937.¹⁷² As conditions declined and state power ebbed, the years 1917 and 1918 saw a rise in banditry across the countryside. Stories of robbery and murder along the roads increased in 1918 in particular as the deterioration of and finally departure of the Ottoman army left a power vacuum in the region.¹⁷³ In certain cases, the soldiers, often ragged and starving, *were* the bandits.¹⁷⁴

Although smuggling technically falls under the scope of this subsection, many of those who smuggled food did so as a means of supporting their families or their communities. The inherent risk of smuggling increased the price of the trafficked food when it was sold in the villages, but it is interesting to note that the mountain smugglers were not regarded with the same social stigma as were the speculators and merchants of the town. This favorable interpretation in part reflected the fact that even normal individuals engaged in smuggling as a means of survival during the period.¹⁷⁵ The character of the smuggler appears in numerous memoirs and recollections of the period, more often than not in laudatory terms. To some extent, this may have been because they were seen less as parasites seeking to exploit their own people, but rather as

¹⁷² Faruq Hablas, “Hadith al-maja’a fi safar barlik bayn al-watha’iq al-rasmiyya wa al-dhakira al-sha’biyya,” in *Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula* 1 (2011): 209.

¹⁷³ Halidé. Edib. *Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (New York: The Century Co. 1926), 462. “Report of Tripoli Station, 1918-1919,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919.

¹⁷⁴ “Report of Tripoli Station, 1918-1919,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919.

¹⁷⁵ Afif Tannous, *Village Roots and Beyond* (Lebanon: Dar Nelson, 2004).

intrepid villains cast in the mold of Robin Hood, whose aim was to deceive the hated Turks to supply their own people.

The regard for the character of the smuggler was evident in two interviews conducted for this dissertation. Hayat Mahmud commented that her grandfather Jamul Mahmud was *shaykh shabab* of Baruk (making him a village leader) as well as a muleteer and smuggler. His social standing gave him prominence, which was reflected in the support he had in his smuggling expeditions to the Hawran, and likely in the epic quality of some of the stories about him. Mahmud noted that during the war, snow was so high that the mules could not climb up through the path to the cedars as usual and the convoy was forced to take the main road that ran through Dhahr al-Baydar and past the Ottoman checkpoint. Mahmud waited until dark and crept up to the guard shack, where all of the soldiers were huddled for warmth around the fire. He cautiously inserted his walking staff through the handles of the swinging doors and then signaled for the procession to move ahead – had the Ottomans heard anything, they would have been at least temporarily locked in.¹⁷⁶

The high regard for the crafty smuggler was also evident in Soumar Dakdouk's description of her own great grandparents' efforts to transport goods from their village of 'Aramoun to sell in Beirut during the famine. Though her family were prominent landowners in the Gharb region, her great-grandfather had discovered that by dressing in shabby clothes, traveling with children and bringing milk rather than laban or cheese on trips to Beirut, he was able to avoid many of the risks that this normally entailed. Seeing what they thought were poor refugees, the soldiers paid them and their cargo less

¹⁷⁶ Interview with Hayat Mahmud, January 24, 2014.

heed, and would refrain from confiscating the milk since it had a limited shelf life.¹⁷⁷ As a result of this clever deception, Dakdouk's family was able to prosper while others around them starved.

G. Conclusion

Surviving the famine was certainly not a guarantee for anyone living in the country during the period. Disease, poor decision making, misfortune and misdeeds could dramatically transform one's risk profile over a very short period of time. Nevertheless, death and suffering in the famine period were neither random nor universal. Survival strategies and coping techniques were employed by individuals from all walks of life and regions in the country as a way of alleviating the pressure that high prices had placed on their financial and social situation. While some of these were strategic ways to limit future risk by preparing in advance, some, like flight, were acts of desperation that very often simply shifted the scene of misery from one place to another.

These coping mechanisms and the memoirs and stories that detail them add texture to our understanding of the experience of the famine. The poorest in society may have suffered, but that was not all they did. Throughout their experience of the famine they actively engaged their environment and sought to mitigate their risks by modifying their behaviors, diets or ecology. This "active experience" also led individuals to change their outlook on life and society in general over the course of the famine. Out of necessity, some individuals were even driven to reinvent their own social norms and reconsider what means were really available to them as they struggled to survive while

¹⁷⁷ Interview Soumar Dakdouk, October 13, 2013.

those around them perished. In the face of such evidence, the veneer passivity with which the victims of the famine have been portrayed by wealthier (mostly American) observers begins to crack. Not all survived, but even those who died did not lie down without a struggle.

CHAPTER V

SUFFERING, EMOTIONAL SURVIVAL AND PERSEVERENCE IN THE FAMINE PERIOD

The social and physical transformations that took place over the course of the famine permeated the lived experience of everyone within it in some way or another. For both the impoverished members of society who starved in the streets and those who merely watched the worst effects of the crisis from the margins, the need to sustain their emotional health amid the depressing and often morbid environment of the crisis was an ongoing problem. In response to the unwanted intrusions of suffering and death into their daily realities, individuals and groups took measures to counteract the effects of emotional trauma, uncertainty, depression and hopelessness. Although such internal responses to the crisis are often less obvious in the sources, they were at the heart of the personal lived experience of the famine. Everyone who was touched by the calamity had to logistically and emotionally cope with the physical and emotional challenges that were the inevitable byproduct of the tragic and trying conditions of the crisis.

Because many of these adaptations had social consequences, for the most part historians have regarded such behavioral changes on a societal level. However, many of the social developments noted in the sources were either derivative of or indicative of change taking places on the individual levels as well. To capture this phenomenon, this chapter explores how individuals emotionally responded to the shifting circumstances on the ground from 1915-1918, how they were affected by the morose atmosphere of the crisis, and how they adapted to the situation in order to preserve their own emotional

health. The cognitive responses to famine situations and the means by which individuals sought to cope are indicative of the ways that the famine shaped the lived experience of the period. This psychological approach to historical sources reveals the complexity of the personal experience of the famine and the diverse ways in which individuals responded to it, while also offering deeper explanations for the social trends that are indicated in the sources.

Clearly, the examples provided in this chapter are not exhaustive. One must take what the sources provide. However, they are windows on aspects of daily life and the lived experience of the famine that are often neglected in the sources. Not only do these scenes and situations expand the historical understanding of the complexity of daily life in the time of crisis, they provide an opportunity for situational analysis to help explain why the famine developed in the manner that it did, as well as to explain the reasons for individual and collective behaviors that are observed in the sources. Indeed, such behaviors were hardly passive products of a terrible crisis, they often served an important function for those individuals who adopted them – whether the individuals were aware of this or not.

A. Cognitive Responses to Crisis: Emotional Suffering and Survival in the Famine

“All news and conditions most depressing – even the beautiful, blue, utterly useless sea.”

- Mary Dale, 1916¹

¹ Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The Wartime Years,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 1: 424.

In a very fundamental sense the mind's response to the crisis was the central focal point of individual lived experience. Recent psychological studies on suffering and coping can potentially offer insight into the nature of the reports that contemporaries of the famine had made in their diaries, letters and memoirs, as well as the changes in attitudes and behaviors that took place over the course of the famine.² In part, these behaviors mimic coping measures observed by theorist James Amirkhan, who in his studies of human responses to stress equated the basic coping responses to "fight or flight" instincts and to mankind's biological evolution as a social creature.³

In famine, coping responses were evident in the modified behaviors adopted by the starving and the secure alike as they attempted to ensure their own physical or emotional survival in the famine. This could take many forms and could correspond to a wide variety of behaviors, including increased religiosity,⁴ closer association with family, aversion to suffering or those struggling from the crisis, and even an impulse to offer assistance to those in an attempt to exercise even a minimal amount of control over an overwhelming situation.⁵ Such a theory does not assume that all behaviors in the famine were the result of some psychological pathology, but rather that many of the

² Charles Figley, "Compassion Fatigue as Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview," *Compassion Fatigue: Coping with Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder in Those Who Treat the Traumatized*, no. 23 (London: Brunner Routledge, 1995): 5.

³ James Amirkhan, "A Factor Analytically Derived Measure of Coping: The Coping Strategy Indicator," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 59, no. 5 (1990): 1067.

⁴ Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, *The Social Psychology of Religion* (Oxford: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975); Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2001), 4.

⁵ James Amirkhan identified three of the most common categories of coping strategy were problem solving (actively working to mitigate the crisis, either successfully or symbolically), avoidance (attempting to wall oneself off from the emotional threat), and help-seeking (seeking companionship and guidance from others or a group). Amirkhan, "The Coping Strategy Indicator": 1073.

observable behaviors may have had functional aspects that helped the individual emotionally as they endured the stresses of the crisis.

In his monumental sociological work on society in crisis, *Man and Society in Calamity*, Pitrim Sorokin observed that during famine, cognitive processes become increasingly “monopolized” by the calamity, leading individuals to frame their experience in terms of the crisis, to the exclusion of unrelated issues.⁶ For those suffering the effects of poverty and long term semi-starvation, this might manifest itself in an obsession with finding food or the minutia of its discovery or preparation. In the case of Lebanon and its adjacent regions during the famine, these sorts of behaviors were evident in the reports of individuals who kept their eyes fixed obsessively to the ground in search of a single kernel of grain, who assiduously picked through animal feces or garbage to extract whatever edible matter they could (even if the effort to find it may have expended more calories than they replenished) or who meticulously rubbed the bitter skin from citrus fruits to preserve every precious morsel of its white pith.⁷ Importantly, Sorokin also indicates that this obsession was not solely restricted to those acutely suffering in the famine, but extended throughout society in its similar dominance of social interactions and social discourse.⁸ Much like the starving individuals who obsessed about their physical preservation, Sorokin observed that the interests of the individuals who witness famine firsthand become increasingly focused

⁶ Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 28.

⁷ Though not calorically significant, the pith itself actually contains a large amount of ascorbic acid (Vitamin C), which is instrumental in warding off the deficiency disease, scurvy, which was prevalent during the famine.

⁸ Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity*, 30.

on the crisis and its specifics in a manner which increased over time and as the famine intensified.⁹

In a heavily censored environment like the one which prevailed in Ottoman Syria during the war, public discourse was to a large degree reduced to social communication between individuals. The stifling of the public sphere by the central authorities through censorship and political repression made the local obsession with news of the war and conditions in the region remarkably disorderly. Boredom and the declining situation prompted an almost morbid desire for news, especially if it was terrible. Because gossip and speculation served to both fill the time and to satisfy their need for news on the situation around them, accounts were prone to exaggeration, distortion and fabrication. Hyperbole was encouraged by the informal path of news transmission. In the absence of reliable official reports on the situation to satisfy public curiosity, the primary sources of information were oral and often embellished by speculation, rumor and hearsay. Anis Farayha's autobiographical account of the wartime years sketch an image of the means of news transmission in many villages, portraying a group of men sitting outside Na'um Farayha's bookstore intently gossiping about what information reached them.¹⁰ As the war dragged on and censorship tightened, the *only* news that reached many in Mount Lebanon came word of mouth, with all the risk of editorialization, loss in transmission, fabrication and misrepresentation that such forms of communication entailed.¹¹ Some of the information came with a reference to its source to enhance its credibility – though

⁹ Ibid., 33.

¹⁰ Anis Farayha, *Qabl an ansa ... tatimmat "isma' ya Ridha !"* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1989), 42-43.

¹¹ Ajay, "Interview with Salwa Salibi," in "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2, 91.

citation of a secondhand source was hardly valid proof. One writer who reported that Jamal Pasha was considering killing all of the camels that he had requisitioned due to an insufficient fodder supply emphasized that the information came on the authority of a well-placed colleague in the administration.¹²

Given the sorts of information that were reported as facts by observers, it is impossible to assume the truth of any rumor written about the period from within. The unreliable nature of information at the time was often apparent, even to people on the ground. In her 1916-1917 report on the Tripoli Girl's School, Harriet LaGrange wrote "wild rumors filled the air, none authentic."¹³ Edward Nickoley reported on the local news reports in his diary as a matter of curiosity, but was critical enough to doubt their authenticity given the wartime climate. On February 9, 1917 he wrote: "these are the days when we can believe only one fourth of what we hear (and we are often in doubt as to which particular fourth) one half of what we see, and three-fourths of what we ourselves say."¹⁴

In the claustrophobic wartime environment, even the most absurd of fabrications could find enough credulous ears to circulate if the report was compelling enough. In her book on the war, *Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, Margaret McGilvary earnestly passed on the appalling rumor that a woman who left her children playing in

¹² Howard Bliss, "Letter, November 23, 1916," Correspondence on Food Supplies, 24 July 1916-1917, November 1918. Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. Archive AA:2.3.2 Box 16 File 7.

¹³ Harriet LaGrange, "Tripoli Girl's School Report 1916-1917," PHS Archives RG-115-19-8 Tripoli Girls' School 1885-1964, 2.

¹⁴ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 3.

the fields returned to find their corpses stripped to the bone by swarms of locusts.¹⁵ On February 12, 1917 alone Nickoley noted the following rumors:¹⁶

1. Conscription was intended to eliminate the Arab male population and, along with Turkish schooling, was part of a grand plan to Turkify the region to nullify its independent tendencies.
2. Jamal Pasha had intentionally refrained from aiding the mountain.
3. Mount Lebanon was to be annexed by Damascus and Tripoli, ending the independent status of the Mutesarrifate.
4. Either 50 or 70 percent of the population of Mount Lebanon had starved to death.

Though the conspiratorial nature of the information suggested that much of it could not be believed, Nickoley observed that the fact that many people had witnessed such terrible things in their own daily lives lent credence to even the most unbelievable of claims.¹⁷

The credibility of such rumors also encouraged the production of *topos* and social memes¹⁸ in the sources. These socially transmitted amalgamations of fact and fiction were readily digested by the writers and the population at large since such rumors were in concordance with those preexisting beliefs that the writers held about

¹⁵ Locusts are herbivores. McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 180.

¹⁶ All from Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 7-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 17.

¹⁸ Not to be confused with the new trend of internet memes. A meme is a piece of information, message, story, etc., that is replicated through social transmission, spreading through the population like a trait through a gene pool (accumulating slight variations, i.e. mutations, along the way). Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192-201.

the situation or explained the terrible things that afflicted the country. This allowed individuals to construct a rational foundation for the world that corresponded with their beliefs when no clear information existed to prove or disprove it. The contemporary portrayals of the Ottoman regional leaders in sources from Lebanon, Jabal ‘Amil and coastal Syria are especially interesting. Several sources have reported a meeting between Jamal and community members, in which he replied to their requests for aid with the horrific maxim that “there is no famine until the mother eats her son.”¹⁹ This same account has appeared in a wide range of sources, each with slight to major variations. It has been attributed to Jamal Pasha and ‘Azmi Bey, sometimes in the local dialect, sometimes in more formal Arabic, all with the intent of demonstrating the callous regard in which the Turkish leaders held the suffering poor. A similar incident was said to have occurred on Enver Pasha and Jamal Pasha’s journey from Zahle to Damascus. When confronted by townspeople between Saadnayal and Barr Elias, one source claimed that guards either threw moldy bread at the townsfolk, whereas others insist that the townsfolk threw bread at them.²⁰

The famine’s prominence in the social consciousness of the population of Mount Lebanon and coastal Syria fluctuated with its severity and with the population’s capacity to tolerate suffering on such a grand scale. Even if the tragedy of the situation was to a certain degree normalized by the ongoing exposure to the crisis and the shift in attitudes towards both suffering itself and those who suffered, the constant reminders of

¹⁹ Among these, ‘Ali Maruwwa, *Jubba’*, *madhiha wa hadharuha: al-qariya al-lubnaniyya wa al-janna al-dha’i’a alleti ‘utlaq minha al-fikr al-‘amili washa’ fi Lubnan wa al-aqtar al-sharqiyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Andalus, 1967), 434; Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-‘alamiyya al-ula*, translated by Fu’ad Midani (Beirut: 1933).

²⁰ Antoine Yammine reports the latter, noting that the man who threw bread added : “*voila, Turcs... voila l’état ou vous nous avez réduits!*” Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère*, 39. See also the interview with Ra’ef Abi Lama’a included in the appendix of Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 2:25.

the famine were not therapeutic. Diary entries by Mary Dale and Edward Nickoley suggest that satisfying their thirst for information actually increased the growing sense of despondent hopelessness that permeated the claustrophobic atmosphere of the famine. Though they did not actually suffer from the starvation of the famine, the social experience of the crisis nevertheless influenced their personal experience of it. Even in the absence of functional mass media, the interpersonal oral information networks became the transmitters of information that bound society together and allowed individuals from across the region to experience and share in the real, hypothetical or imagined trauma of others from miles away. In spite of the lack of free print media, the common experience of the famine was a powerful coalescent force that created a shared identity based around the experience of the crisis. However, the shared experience had a cumulatively negative effect as the reports of suffering and the declining conditions in the country made thoughts on the present depressing and speculation about the future pessimistic.

B. Normalcy and Emotional Self-Preservation in the Crisis

The circumstances in the Mountain and on the coast during the famine made drastic changes to daily life across most segments of society. Even if one ignored the pitiful and emotionally traumatic scenes of physical starvation and poverty, the wartime environment was hardly conducive to emotional well-being for even those who were not at risk of starvation. High prices, conscription, forced relocation, corruption and increased vigilance by the authorities in their efforts to constrain speculation and prevent espionage inspired tension, fear and distrust for the Ottoman authorities. The execution of a number of proponents of decentralization and alleged spies inspired

bitterness even among those in society who had been sympathetic to the Ottoman cause. Compounding the trauma of the constant and pervasive psychological drain for those living through the famine period was the sheer boredom of life amid the intense social and economic constraints of the time. Deprived of normal amusements, which had ceased for practical or financial reasons, depression became a real risk. Amid the terrible suffering of the poor and the grating dullness of daily life, individuals clung to those things that could provide them with emotional stability and a shred of normalcy at a time when their world had been thrown terribly askew.

Even if the overall direness of the situation has been somewhat embellished in the sources, the overwhelming nature of the calamity and its human impacts left many writers expressing a morose sense of helplessness. The anonymous report on Sidon Station in 1917 observed that the progressive destruction of starvation, poverty and disease had drained the population of hope. The writer (undoubtedly George Doolittle, based on the handwriting) wrote, “at first the people literally lifted up their voices and wept, but by 1916-1917, they still more literally lay down by the thousands and died.”²¹ In one of Father Bulus ‘Aqil’s reports on the situation in Lebanon to the French on Arwad Island, he tersely observed, “hearts are impatient, souls annoyed. Sadness has overcome us. Lost hope and expectation of ruin. So please inform us of what is happening. Is relief near?”²² Loss affected those from every part of society. In 1917, W.S. Nelson of Tripoli Station wrote, “Everywhere we missed old friends and strong men whose places had been vacated by disease or the unwonted hardship of military

²¹ Anonymous, “Report of Sidon Station 1916-1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35 1.

²² Bulus ‘Aqil, “General Report on the Situation in Lebanon,” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. Diss. Georgetown University (1973), 2: 195.

service. The somber dress of the widow and the dejected appearance of the orphan cast a gloom over all.”²³ Echoing these thoughts, Jirjis al-Maqdisi characterized the years after 1916 by their despair, writing, “happiness ceased and was replaced by sorrowful sighs and unremitting sadness.” Like many other writers, Maqdisi was particularly affected by the suffering of children and families, which as “message sources” were effective means of demonstrating the tragedy of the crisis to his audience.²⁴ On the situation that had developed after 1916, he wrote, “the most severe sight for the soul was the sight of the children, sinuous from hunger, embracing their mothers who had fallen from weakness and emaciation, and *ya Allah*, from that gruesome situation!”²⁵

For the privileged observers of the famine, the ability to express these emotions in a healthy manner was hindered by the haunting sense of guilt and unwarranted privilege that many who merely suffered “vicariously” had begun to feel when contrasting their relatively petty emotional troubles with the immense, existential suffering of those whom they saw dying in the streets. Amid the anguish and squalor of the famine, even one’s own depression could be depressing.²⁶ In his 1917 diary, SPC Professor Edward Nickoley wrote, “there are all about us so many who are suffering so much more intensely that I am ashamed to let anyone know that I too have a regret and

²³ W.S. Nelson, “Tripoli Station Report, 1917,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 1.

²⁴ Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 68.

²⁵ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 69.

²⁶ Frederick Bliss, “The Question of Syria: Retrospect or Prospect,” Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, (1920). 1.

a sorrow, that I cherish a hope and a longing the realization and the fulfillment of which is indefinitely deferred.”²⁷

Compounding the difficulties posed by life amidst the suffering of the famine was the terrible ennui of life in the restrictive confines of the period. Atemporal, event-based recollections of the famine rarely convey the sense that hours and years during the famine period still consisted of their usual 60 minutes and 365 days,²⁸ all of which had to be filled in some way or another. Indeed, a number of sources deliberately reflected on the sheer boredom of the wartime period. Frederick Bliss referred them as:

Those years of indefinite apprehension, when, in very exasperation at the deadly quiet, we fairly shrieked for something to go off with a bang, even if we ourselves should be annihilated in the crash. Anything, we cried, anything but this menacing monotony.²⁹

The term, “monotony,” was repeated in correspondence during the famine period with striking regularity. W.S. Nelson of the Tripoli station wrote in a letter to Charles Dana on April 25, 1916 reporting that “we reached home this morning after a most comfortable trip which had absolutely nothing in the way of incident to disturb the absolute monotony of existence,”³⁰ and George Doolittle actually used the same phrase “monotony of existence” in his letter to Dana on August 1, 1917.³¹ Margaret McGilvary

²⁷ Edward Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” (1917). Edward Nickoley Collection, 1873-1937. ARCHIVE AA 2:3.3. Box 1, File 2. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 55.

²⁸ The leap year of 1916 excepted, of course.

²⁹ Bliss, “Retrospect,” 1.

³⁰ W.S. Nelson, “Letter from W.S. Nelson to Charles Dana, April 25, 1916,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

³¹ George Doolittle, “Second Letter from George Doolittle to Charles Dana, August 1, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

observed that over time, the initial excitement of the anticipated Allied invasion abated, reduced to a state of “dull apathy” as the crisis dragged on.³² On top of the numbing boredom, the Allied blockade and restrictions on movement in the country contributed to a sense of caged isolation, particularly for the foreigners. The Mediterranean had been transformed from a means of liberation and sustenance to a silent symbol of imprisonment and deprivation. Nurse Mary Dale of the SPC hospital remarked, “all news and conditions most depressing – even the beautiful, blue, utterly useless sea.”³³

Temporary escape was not as easy an option as it had been in the past. Though many Americans living in Beirut had made a tradition of summering in the languorous resort towns of the mountain, like Brummana and Bhamdoun, the wartime environment threw up logistical and practical obstacles to this practice. Long term stays in Mount Lebanon were regulated by the government, which issued *wathiqas* (or permits) to travel or to bring possessions and food into the mountain. Margaret McGilvary mentions that such documents could take months to issue, unless of course one was willing to pay a substantial bribe to the official in charge to expedite the process.³⁴ If one was granted permission to stay in the mountain, vacationers were still confronted by the consequences of the Ottoman requisitioning of pack animals and vehicles, which required most travel to be made on foot unless one was willing to pay the exorbitant fees demanded by muleteers or the few remaining carriages in the city. Edward Nickoley noted in his diary entry from July 23, 1917 that transport by carriage to the

³² McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 71.

³³ Quote reproduced in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: the Wartime Years,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 1: 424.

³⁴ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 183.

village of Shweir in the Matn, which normally took 3 hours, took 12 due to the wasted state of the horses, and cost an astounding 15 Ottoman pounds.³⁵

The cumulative effect of this took its toll on the population. William Nimeh noted in *al-Kulliyah*, that “people became depressed and despondent, and it reacted at times (sic) in an unhealthy condition of mind”³⁶ due to the cessation of normal leisure activities. In response to this monotony, members of society from nearly all levels engaged in leisure activities that belied the severity of the famine situation, often with the stated intent of preserving normalcy or at least allowing the participants to forget about the crisis for a few hours. Such activities were not only important distractions from the suffering of the wartime period, they were therapeutic means of alleviating the mental and emotional fatigue of the crisis.

Holidays played a particularly vital role, even if they were celebrated in a muted manner. The sources provide many examples of commemorations of Ramadan, Christmas, births, Easter and various other holidays, though the festivities themselves were hardly commensurate with what they had been before the war. During the wretched winter of 1916-1917, the Dorman family celebrated the New Year by holding a “hop,” complete with ginger cookies, pies and candies – which would have been remarkably expensive, since the price of sugar around that time reached 150 piasters a ratl.³⁷ To some extent, even the needy attempted to maintain some semblance of normalcy. In 1917 Edward Nickoley noted that the breaking of the fast for Ramadan

³⁵ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 58.

³⁶ “War Annals of the College Part 4: 1915-1916” *al-Kulliyah*, vol. 6, no. 5 (March 15, 1920), 37.

³⁷ Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 422. Price of sugar taken from a price list from May, 1917 in Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 45.

continued, though with less festivity than usual as a result of the conditions in the country. He wrote, “most of the people have been obliged to fast, not because they were religiously inclined, but because abstention was dictated by stern physical necessity... most of them have nothing.”³⁸ Though the Americans were not so direly affected, the lavish gifts that were normal in prewar bridal showers were transformed into “grocery showers”³⁹ during the war since manufactured goods were so expensive and difficult to obtain, and even common types of food could be elevated to “luxury” status.

To ward off the depression and anxiety the Syrian Protestant College engaged in frequent social activities to ensure the mental health of the community. As early as 1915 Nimeh,⁴⁰ writing on the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), noted the group’s “special attention to entertainments” in order to counteract “the gloomy, trying, time and to cheer up spirits as much as possible.”⁴¹ The accounts of life at the Syrian Protestant College during the war that were published in the student newspaper, *al-Kulliyah* in 1920 go into some detail about the efforts that the SPC leadership, and particularly Bayard Dodge, had made to lighten the mood of the college and the population of Ras Beirut. On its own initiative, the school arranged plays, concerts, receptions, and lectures, without which, Nimeh observed that “the world would have seemed darker than it was.”⁴² Thanks to the new power plant that had been installed prior to the war, the resplendent new West Hall became a haven for students and

³⁸ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 57.

³⁹ Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 422.

⁴⁰ Nimeh would later go on to write several historical works on Lebanon, this was not from one of them.

⁴¹ William Nimeh, “Report of the Young Men’s Christian Association for 1914-1915,” *al-Kulliyah*, vol. 6, 1914-1915, 29.

⁴² “War Annals of the College Part 4: 1915-1916,” *Al-Kulliyah* 6:5 March 15, 1920, 37.

became a fixture of the Ras Beirut social and cultural scene during the war as a result of its weekly Saturday entertainments. In addition to the usual events, the building featured a large common room for student gatherings, a skating rink, a bowling alley and a room for billiards.⁴³ Moreover, its large lecture hall was often repurposed as a movie theater, which was popular enough that the few reels of film that the college possessed began to deteriorate from use over the course of the war. In his history of the American University of Beirut, Stephen Penrose observed that, “to West Hall Dr. Bliss attributed in greatest measure the preservation of the normality of student life in the midst of constant alarms and excitement.”⁴⁴

In addition to such passive diversions, the college ensured that its annual student athletic activities continued as much as possible during the war. As with the films, such diversions proved so popular that wear and tear became a major concern after four years of continuous use with no replacements.⁴⁵ Field days continued to be held annually, pitting different classes against each other, and friendly matches continued to be held with students from other campuses, including the Jesuit University of St. Joseph, Choueifat, and other nearby schools.⁴⁶ This is important to note since it is a clear indication that the SPC was not unique in its social circumstances during the war, suggesting that the terrible suffering that befell many in the famine was less universal than it appears in many of the sources. The American sailors stationed on the U.S. warships that remained off the coast of Beirut until the diplomatic rupture between the

⁴³ Stephen Penrose, *That They May Have Life: The Story of the American University of Beirut, 1866-1941* (Beirut: The American University of Beirut, 1970), 156.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁵ “War Annals,” *al-Kulliyeh*, 37.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 37; Penrose, *That They May Have Life*.

United States and the Ottoman Empire were also mentioned as a pleasant distraction for the students during their numerous visits to the college to deliver correspondence and supplies, host concerts, and to play against the SPC intermural sports teams.⁴⁷

Although the college was the best example of such diversions, social activities were not restricted to the relatively well-positioned Americans. In her memoir, Anbara Salam al-Khalidi described a “Young Girl’s Club” that was arranged for young members of Beirut’s more affluent classes by the Wali of Beirut, ‘Azmi Bey. Initially comprised of Salam, Amina Hamzawi, Ibtihaj Qaddura, Adila Bayhum, Wadad Mahmasani and Wahida Khalidi, the group soon absorbed other members and began holding meetings in the house of the poet Bishara al-Khuri in the neighborhood of Zuqaq al-Blat, then a hillside suburb of Beirut. The group organized meetings, provided a tutor in the Arabic and French languages, as well as a piano teacher. It eventually expanded its offerings to include a sort of bland philanthropy by opening a school for children of Beirut’s “old established” families whose wartime misfortunes rendered them unable to pay for their education.⁴⁸

To the chagrin of many third party observers, the wealthy elite of Beirut continued to conduct themselves as extravagantly as in the period before the war. Various observers from the Turkish reformer Halidé Edib to Margaret McGilvary commented snidely on the sharp contrast between the splendor of the wealthy and the wretchedness of the poor in the streets of Beirut. The lavishness of the parties that the

⁴⁷ Archie Crawford, “The Diary of Archie Crawford,” published in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 194.

⁴⁸ Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, trans. by Tarif Khalidi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 73-75.

elite continued to hold was frowned upon equally by many, though such engagements were as much about politics as they were about leisure. In Khalidi's memoir, Jamal Pasha and other high Ottoman authorities were feted as a way of bringing the grievances of the city to the attention (he had apparently acknowledged the purpose of the gathering and had brought a plan for a relief project to the meeting).⁴⁹ Similarly, Aziz Bey noted that upon his arrival to Beirut, Jamal Pasha was hosted by the luminaries of Beirut's Greek Orthodox community at the home of Alfred Sursuq in their attempt to secure him as a political ally.⁵⁰ The ire that such associations sparked among many in society was such that rumors circulated that the Sursuqs had used their wives to ply Jamal for favorable treatment during the establishment of the wheat cartel.⁵¹

The extent to which the crisis subtly insinuated itself into aspects of daily life means that maintaining normalcy was not necessarily about detaching oneself from the famine or even maintaining oneself in a state of denial to its effects. Certainly this was a key for some, particularly those employing avoidance tactics to cope with the stresses of the famine and the emotional trauma that proximity to suffering prompted. For some, seeking normalcy was simply clinging to vestiges of prewar life, maintaining various rituals or practices in spite of the impact of the war, or even making the odd, even ill-advised indulgence in order to feel normal for even a few moments. Ultimately, maintaining a semblance of one's former life was a psychological necessity. Even in a time of desperate need, poverty and frequent squalid death, life inevitably went on for

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-'alamiyya*. Translated by Fu'ad Midani. (Beirut: 1933), 149.

⁵¹ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 360.

hundreds of thousands of individuals across the region. Since escape was not an option for most, they had to settle for adaptation to secure their emotional well-being.

C. The Interplay of Social and Cognitive: Mitigating Suffering in Daily Life

Experience is an active process. As in physics, actions and experiences by their very nature produce reactions. Unlike the laws of thermodynamics, these reactions are not necessarily equal or opposite, but can be manifested in any variety of ways according to the nature of the individual and the way in which he interprets the world around him. This phenomenon was evident in the responses to the developing crisis among individuals in Mount Lebanon and its adjacent regions during the famine. Over time, the stresses of the outside world that influenced the personal experience of the famine had a transformative effect on the individuals who had to deal with them in their daily reality. Rather than simply absorbing the impact of their own suffering and struggling forward, contemporaries of the famine actively and passively responded to the crisis, exhibiting modified behaviors, attitudes and worldviews as they coped with the tragedy around them. These changes were ultimately reflected back upon society through social interactions, avoidance behaviors and social interpretations of the crisis, which ultimately refined how they viewed the world as it changed around them.

Many of these changes were observed by contemporaries at the social level, but certain writers were very explicit about the effects that they observed in their own attitudes and behaviors. These mainly derive from the American college and missionary sources, since outside of a limited number of major sources,⁵² most of the authors of

⁵² Most notably the memoirs and retrospectives by Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiïte du Gabal 'Amil, tiré de: les notables chiïtes* (Damascus : Institut Français de Damas, 1998); Butrus Khuwayri, *al-rihla al-Suriya fi al-harb al-'umumiyya: akhtar wa ahwar wa 'aja'ib* (Cairo: al-maktab al-'arab, 1921); 'Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab*

Arabic language memoirs and reminiscences in particular were often vague about the details of their own personal experience of the famine period. Their vague reference to the “tragic” and “sad” aspects of the famine do little to augment our knowledge of the period. In particular, the detailed account given by the Syrian Protestant College’s Professor Edward Nickoley provides a fascinating case study of the personal experience of the famine, the personal effects of the suffering and stress of the famine in his daily life, and the rationalization and coping mechanisms that he employed to endure the emotional strain of the famine period. What emerges from this analysis is a far more complex picture than what is apparent from the social perspective alone. Not only were the social developments products of emotional changes on the individual level, but the ongoing social changes themselves fell into a feedback loop that continued to influence how individuals experienced, perceived and reacted to the crisis as it ebbed and swelled around them.

One of the most noticeable and detrimental of these adaptations was the decreased sensitivity to the suffering of others that many individuals developed over time. The persistence of the exposure to suffering after the first year and the steady increase in desperate refugees and homeless was credited with the decline in sympathy that was observed in the relations between beggars and the rest of the population. These observations coincide with claims from individuals like Nickoley that people had begun to inure themselves to the suffering of others as early as 1916. Professor Jirjis Maqdisi observed that in the terrible year of 1918, “mercy diminished as the mouth of the famine

Feminist; and to some extent Sulayman Dhahir, *Jabal ‘Amil fi al-harb al-kawniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-matbu’at al-sharqiyya, 1986).

gaped,” swallowing even those who had been in comfortable circumstances before the war, but who had fallen on hard times during the famine.⁵³

The causes of this were somewhat complex. To a large extent, fears about the future forced people to turn inward to focus on their own uncertain circumstances as the crisis worsened without a clear endpoint.⁵⁴ In a letter written in July, 1916, Bulus ‘Aqil, writing about his home village of Mayfuq, observed that “nobody gives because nobody has.”⁵⁵ Though financial concerns certainly played a large role in this parsimony, it was a marked shift from the sense of community and compassion that guided relations with the needy in the first year of the crisis. In his postwar retrospective, Jirjis al-Maqdisi observed:

In 1915, the sight of a starving man falling would cause people to surround him and give him some water, some food, and some dirhams. By 1916 we would walk in the streets with men, women and children lying in the mud on both sides, whimpering for mercy or for a crust of bread... Fewer reached a hand to relieve them because the burden was crushing and many were beyond saving. Most frequently, on passing, people turned their face and blocked their ears so they could not see or hear.⁵⁶

Maqdisi’s account suggests a growing acquiescence to the presence of suffering among the impoverished. Rather than seeking to address the suffering as they had in 1915, people became desensitized to the plight of the poor and some sought to excise them from their daily experience altogether.

⁵³ Maqdisi, *A’tham harb*, 97.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

⁵⁵ Bulus ‘Aqil, “Letter of Father ‘Aqil to Allied Agent, October 3, 1916,” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss. Georgetown University (1973), 2:180.

⁵⁶ Maqdisi, *A’tham harb*, 69.

The ubiquity of starvation and the inability to effectively assist a begging individual to any real extent drove many to begin avoiding the poor, or to exclude their suffering as much as possible from their own personal lives. Such avoidance coping behaviors were mentioned by Frederick Bliss, who described the debilitating effect of the plaintive moans of the starving, “from which we could never escape, walk we never so fast or so far.” Although Bliss possessed a deep sympathy for the individual starving on the streets, his ongoing exposure to such suffering made it difficult for him to bear the continual reminder. Similarly, in 1917, Edward Nickoley observed that when the penetrating cries of the starving poor on the streets became too overwhelming for the Americans at the SPC, rather than assisting the starving individual they simply closed their windows to muffle the sound.⁵⁷ Lest it appear that this was an affliction that was solely confined to the American community, the sources provide evidence that these same behaviors were common across society – Maqdisi, for one, observed that during the harsh winter of 1916, when the suffering began to reach a truly calamitous level, the rich simply remained inside of their homes.⁵⁸ Margaret McGilvary offers an excellent reason for this in her observation that those from the middle class were more frequently beset by beggars since the rich had sequestered themselves from the starving to evade requests for money and food.⁵⁹ Though the motivation for such avoidance may have differed from person to person – the end goal was quite similar: to escape the emotional stress that the suffering of others generated in their own lives.

⁵⁷ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 44.

⁵⁸ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 68.

⁵⁹ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, 206.

Such social behaviors are not atypical responses to traumatic situations. In his work on secondary traumatic stress, the psychologist Charles Figley theorized that individuals can be “traumatized by concern,” as a result of their exposure to the suffering of others, even when they themselves are not in physical danger.⁶⁰ And indeed, the natural sympathetic response to the suffering of others was itself a terrible emotional burden for those who merely observed the misery of extreme poverty in the famine. Though suffering was “vicarious” for the middle and wealthy classes, the emotional impacts were no less real. The ongoing exposure to suffering began to slowly modify how individuals began to view the poor and to interpret their suffering and behaviors. The social effects of this extended across society, resulting in such beneficent responses as relief work and charity, but also in an increasing stigmatization of poverty and suffering, compassion fatigue and psychosocial dissonance between those of means and those in need.

To repurpose a cliché, time was of the essence in the development of such pathologies. Presented with the same scene of suffering, the response of someone who had never witnessed such tragedy firsthand would differ from that of someone who had been repeatedly exposed to similar horrors and worse. As in economics, the glut of suffering diminished the tragedy for those who were continuously exposed to it. Such normalization was a natural product of the rationalization and psychological coping strategies that were necessary to preserve the emotional welfare of individuals exposed to suffering for a long duration. Those changes that accompanied such normalization of suffering were not simply a matter of degree, but of type. Over time, as stress compounded stress, many people hardened themselves to the suffering of others and

⁶⁰ Figley, “Compassion Fatigue,” 4-5.

looked after their own needs to the exclusion of those suffering most. This response was not necessarily a conscious one.

By far the best examples of this reaction were recorded in Edward Nickoley's wartime diary from the months of February to September 1917. Nickoley's case is of special significance since it is the most detailed personal account the fatigue that he suffered as a result of the suffering of others. At first glance, Nickoley's observations appear callous and detached from the intense suffering that he described in great detail in his diary. However, a great number of passages indicate that underneath the hardened shell that he had erected to shield his emotions from the grim reality around him, he nevertheless endured intense distress at both the misery of others and at his own developed immunity to their agony. His personal response to the crisis and his observations on his own psychological reactions illustrate the sorts of impacts that such second hand suffering could have on individuals during the war, and corroborate the sorts of observations that other contemporaries had made about social developments that developed over the course of the famine.

It would be easy to oversimplify when discussing how Nickoley portrayed these effects. However, as cold as Nickoley's demeanor appeared, in a number of passages he indicates that the emotional weight of the famine was actually difficult for him to bear. In his entries he candidly described his own process of disengagement from the suffering, referring to his response as "hardening." However, even in his efforts to evade the stress of suffering, Nickoley struggled with the fact that he was actually conscious of the changes that had taken place in his attitudes and behaviors, and unhappy with the results.

It was apparent from several places in his diary that he held complicated and at times conflicting stances on issues related to compassion and suffering. His portrayals of relief work are evidence of this. Though he was a skeptic who derided the relief programs for their apparently selfish motivations and useless effects, he nevertheless at times also displayed a sense of respect for some of those who made rational and tangible contributions to the well-being of others.⁶¹ Even as he derided the primary relief efforts as mere drops in the bucket and the hospital policies as absurd and almost cruel, he praised Philomena Van Zandt for placing herself at risk working in a typhus ward and lauded the March family for their project employing a few local families to grow potatoes to feed themselves in the wasteland outside of the city – even if the benefits of these efforts were far more limited than the larger scale relief work that he critiqued.⁶²

Because Nickoley was exceptionally self-aware, his diary provides a remarkable vantage from which to observe the personal struggles that otherwise good individuals faced when confronting their situational “badness.” The consciousness of his increasing compassion fatigue resulted in an intense internal conflict as he struggled with his acknowledgement that he should feel sympathy for his fellow human beings in suffering – and in a sense he did. He was deeply affected by the suffering of others, but because he felt the situation was hopeless, he chose not to act. He wrote:

The sights and the sounds haunt us, not only in our waking moments, but they pursue us in our dreams. And what can we do? Absolutely nothing. We feel as if we were up against a wall of stones, no, adamant. Our helplessness to give relief and our desire to avoid becoming morbid, tends to make us indifferent, to harden us and to make us cynical. It is a terrible

⁶¹ He makes reference to helpful and less beneficial varieties of volunteer work on page 5.

⁶² Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 4-5.

sensation to realize that you are losing your power of sympathizing with a fellow man in suffering.⁶³

Significantly, Nickoley slips into the first person plural in this description. Whether this is to suggest that others felt as he did (which is likely, and hinted at in other writings by McGilvary, Nelson, Maqdisi and Doolittle) or he was simply ashamed of his own behavior is inconclusive, but it is evident that his own way of coping added an additional emotional strain to his life.

Perhaps because of this conflict, at times Nickoley's diary reads like a confessional as he attempted to rationalize and admit his own unconscionable lack of action. In some places, his own personal guilt for his inaction was palpable. In one instance, he goes into astounding detail about a night he spent fighting with his conscience as he listened to a boy starving to death on the streets – even to the extent that he walked to the window to see the boy sitting just outside of the halo of the street lamp near the Nelson house.⁶⁴ Before going to sleep, he concluded that he would have been unable to do anything to save the boy, but his regret and shame was nevertheless apparent when Nickoley concluded his recollection by describing himself watching a cart collecting the boy's body the next morning.⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁴ One wonders why he mentioned the Nelsons by name. Was he attempting to assuage his own guilt by implicating them in the boy's death as well? If he heard the moans and was even farther away, the Nelsons would have had to have heard them even more clearly.

⁶⁵ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 50.

D. Suffering in the Eye of the Storm: Pain and Coping Among Relief Workers

Nickoley's experience was also reflected in the accounts of the relief workers who worked in Lebanon and the Wilaya of Beirut during the war. As detailed and often quite honest accounts of the emotional status of individuals who were closely tied to the suffering of the famine, such accounts are especially notable for their demonstration of the transformative effects of emotional trauma on individuals over a long period of time. The contemporary portrayals of the humanitarian aid projects conducted in Mount Lebanon and its surrounding areas during World War I were far from the glamorous exercises in piety and charity that were portrayed in postwar popular relief literature.⁶⁶ Although the aid workers were safely sheltered in the eye of the storm during the famine, the futility of their struggle against the social and physical ravages of the crisis and their ongoing exposure to emotional and physical suffering placed the workers under great emotional stress.

Recent research has shown humanitarian relief workers to be particularly susceptible to these types of secondary trauma over the course of their deployments, and the memoirs, diaries and correspondence of the relief workers from the wartime period offer excellent evidence that this was as true then as it is today.⁶⁷ For many of these relief workers, persistent exposure to high levels of suffering began wear on the workers as they attempted to cope with the stresses of daily life. Over time, these coping

⁶⁶ Examples of this include *Story of Near East Relief* by James Barton and *Story of Our Syria Mission* written after the war by former Mission Press secretary, Margaret McGilvary, as well as articles published in the *Missionary Herald*.

⁶⁷ Barbara Cardozo, Carol Crawford, Cynthia Eriksson, Julia Zhu, Miriam Sabin, Alastair Ager, Leslie Snider, Willem Scholte, Reinhard Kaiser, Miranda Olf, Bas Rinjen, Winnifred Simon, "Psychological Distress, Depression, Anxiety and Burnout among International Humanitarian Aid Workers: A Longitudinal Study," *PLOS ONE* 7:9, (2012).

mechanisms translated into a demonstrable shift in attitudes that began to affect their behaviors and even influence their interactions with the needy.

The relief workers are a case worth noting for two reasons. First, the suffering of those around them was especially intense, since they attracted the most desperate of individuals in the most traumatic of situations. Second, the relief workers could not simply hide from the stressors of their daily lives since it was their job to expose themselves to suffering so that they might ameliorate it. In February 1917, Edward Nickoley observed that in the soup kitchens, “there is more evidence of distress and suffering... than there is on any battle field, I am sure.”⁶⁸ Photos from the period indicate that the marasmus of the individuals in the late stages of long-term semi-starvation would have been pitiful to behold, if not horrifying.⁶⁹ Perhaps worse was the reminder of the humanity, despair and loss that sufferers encountered as they attempted to sustain their lives in the midst of the crisis. Bayard Dodge defined the terrible nature of the famine specifically in terms of the familial suffering that he saw at his relief operations in the Gharb, writing, “unless you have heard the wailing of little children in your ears for days at a time and seen weeping mothers clasping their dying babies in their arms; unless you have talked with strong men, whose shoes are worn in a vain search for work and whose brows are knit with worry and despair, you can hardly realize what starvation means.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Nickoley, “Historical Diary,” 5.

⁶⁹ Several photos can be found in: Robert Khuri, *La médecine au Liban de Phénicie jusque'à nos jours* (Beirut: Les Editions ABCD 1988).

⁷⁰ Bayard Dodge, “Report of the Abeih and Suk al-Gharb Soup Kitchens 1914-1918,” 1919. Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 3.

Because of the overwhelming force of the suffering, the effect of the emotional trauma on the workers was particularly powerful. Recent research suggests that such an effect could be expected, particularly given the type of work that they conducted and the lack of time allotted for emotional recovery. A 2012 longitudinal study conducted by Cardozo, *et al.* concluded that the stressors of aid work places relief workers at an increased risk of anxiety, depression, psychological distress and burnout over the course of their deployment, all effects that were evident from a number of sources that covered the relief work during the war. The study found that burnout, characterized by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, was far more likely for those who bore the burden of “extensive care for others,” as in the case of most of the emergency relief work that took place in the latter years of the famine.⁷¹ For the relief workers who served the starving populations of the mountain and the coast during the war, the risks noted in the study were compounded by the duration that many of the missionaries had spent in the field and their connection to the local societies in which they worked. Because many were integrated into the local societies in the prewar years, they were forced to confront the social effects of suffering in their adopted community. Their ties to the community forced them to personalize the crisis, since some of the people they were forced to turn away had been friends or associates before the crisis.⁷²

In spite of the additional stress that such work entailed, it was also a useful means of coping with the complex emotional struggles that many of the Americans had felt during the famine period. For some, relief work was an active way of confronting the feelings of guilt and helplessness that individuals like Bliss and Nickoley had felt in

⁷¹ Cardozo, *et al.* “Psychological Distress,” 2-3.

⁷² George Curtis Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria: A Book of Personal Experiences* (unpublished, 1920), 122.

the face of the crisis. Proactively working to relieve the suffering allowed the workers to assuage these feelings and gave them nominal power in a situation in which they had no control. Even if the actual effect that they had on the overall crisis was negligible, they could at least feel as though they were able to defy it in their own way. Frederick Bliss' account of the war provides an excellent example of this. In his discussion of relief work, Bliss described an overwhelming feeling of personal responsibility for the life and death of those around him. When justifying his participation in wartime relief, he cited his apparently seminal encounter with a woman and her infant on his doorstep, fixating on her "stabbing" eyes and her demand: "don't you let me die," which haunted him after he failed to save them.⁷³ Bliss' honesty is particularly rare, but the same sort of motivation can be seen in the behaviors of other members of the American community who conducted relief work during the period. Some, like the SPC's Bayard Dodge and Dr. James Patch worked extreme hours to confront the suffering that continued to mount despite their best efforts. Dodge, only 26 at the start of the war, earned a reputation for his spartan lifestyle and habit of walking for miles to oversee his relief establishments, which he managed in addition to his active role on campus at the Syrian Protestant College.

Even the much maligned elites of Beirut society endeavored to alleviate their discontent with the widespread poverty and suffering on the streets.⁷⁴ Although writers like Halidé Edib, Margaret McGilvary and Bayard Dodge have frequently accused the

⁷³ Bliss, "Retrospect," 2. Bliss wrote: "Was she real, that brave little woman, once tough and wiry, still fighting starvation with incredible energy, who dragged herself to our house and, stabbing me with her dying eyes, said "I have no one but God and you: don't you let me die." - could not keep her alive."

⁷⁴ Tanielian, who provides the best account of the relief work in Beirut, has made special note of the efforts of the wealthy merchant classes. Melanie Tanielian, "The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon," Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013).

wealthy elites of the city of dispassion or outright disregard for the suffering of others in the crisis, it is evident that the heads of the grand families of the city were aware of the suffering around them and made various attempts to assist those suffering. Primarily, these efforts were restricted to the use of political power to prompt structural changes to attempt to alleviate the economic crisis through supply-side manipulations. The notorious wheat cartel that was formed in 1915 was proposed under humanitarian pretenses on the initiative of the municipal leaders, including members of the Sursuq and Beyhum families. They met with Jamal Pasha to formulate a plan to supply the city with grain after the Damascene administrative council cut off food shipments to Beirut, Palestine and Mount Lebanon in order to protect their own population.⁷⁵ The plan ultimately failed due to corruption and hoarding and has, along with ‘Ali Munif Bey’s distribution system in Mount Lebanon, been remembered as emblems of malignant official misconduct and the disregard of the wealthy for the suffering of the poor. Although municipal efforts to counteract the crisis have also been maligned by recent research as propagandistic fabrications by a politically cowed press corps,⁷⁶ the dubiousness is somewhat unwarranted. True, the effects of the famine were certainly poorly reported during the war, but one would be remiss to ignore significant personal efforts to alleviate the crisis undertaken by local luminary ‘Umar Da’uq, whose

⁷⁵ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan fi al-harb al-kawaniya*, 59. The Surusqs were actually the logical choice to run this consortium since the cartel already had the immense capital on hand to purchase the grain and the connections from their experience importing grain into the city during the preceding decades.

⁷⁶ Melanie Tanielian, “Feeding the City: The Beirut Municipality and the Provisioning of Civilians during WWI,” Panel Presentation at the annual conference of the Middle East Studies Association, October 12, 2013.

commitment to the city was given a glowing review by the often pessimistic George Doolittle in his post-war account on the famine period.⁷⁷

Apart from Da'ûq, however, there were initially few from the upper classes who were willing to get their hands dirty engaging in direct aid to the poor. This seems to have shifted in 1917 as a result of a dual initiative between Ottoman high officials Jamal Pasha and 'Azmi Bey, 'Umar Da'ûq and a number of prominent Beiruti families. The memoir of Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, daughter of one of the pillars of the Beiruti political scene, Salim 'Ali Salam, offers a dramatic humanization of the upper echelon of Beiruti society, specifically in regard to the relief projects that the state undertook with the assistance of the great ladies of Beirut's Muslim and Christian merchant aristocracy. An individual especially attuned to the suffering of others, Khalidi described her heart "bleeding" as she saw children descend upon discarded banana peels near the central Bourj district of Beirut and recalled her mother taking food with them when they left the house to distribute to the poor, since the high prices would have rendered monetary handouts nearly useless.⁷⁸

Her inside accounts of the meeting between Jamal Pasha and the elite families of Beiruti society in Da'ûq's house suggests that the aim of the meeting had been to prompt Jamal to contribute to relief in the city. Khalidi wrote of her close family friend and leader of the Beirut Sunni community, Ahmad Mukhtar Beyhum, imploring her to speak to Jamal Pasha on behalf of the country, saying "Put your personal feelings to one side and think only how this scheme might save hundreds of women and children from

⁷⁷ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 62-63.

⁷⁸ Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, trans. by Tarif Khalidi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 68.

certain death.”⁷⁹ As a result of the initiative, workhouses and orphanages were opened to assist the impoverished women and children of the city, which were headed by wealthy ladies of Beirut society.⁸⁰ Some of the projects apparently prospered, though others were neglected and failed terribly, apparently in accordance with the rigor with which they were managed by the aforementioned women.

For many relief workers operating on the ground, their exposure to a high degree of suffering and the unremitting demands from the needy who patronized their projects placed them in an uncomfortable personal position. The necessary rationing of the relief created extraordinary demands on the consciences of some of the relief workers, who in many cases were very literally the ones determining who would live and who would die. In spite of the strict limitations that the relief work faced, the human face of suffering occasionally overwhelmed the emotional barriers that the workers had erected to guard themselves from the misery that surrounded them. When a woman asked Arthur Dray to take her five living children into his Brummana orphanage before she died, Dray pleaded with her to choose two since the orphanage was already full. After choosing two, George Doolittle wrote that “a little tot, just old enough to appreciate that he had been left out, clung to her thin skirts and grasped her hand and asked “oh mother, take me!” (emphasis in original) Dray, emotionally distraught by this scene, relented and took all of them.⁸¹ The mother was said to have been found dead on the road to Beirut soon after.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 69-70.

⁸⁰ Including (but not exclusively – Khalidi does not mention the women from East Beirut), Mme Najla Bayhum, Mme Abd al-Hamid Ghandur, Mme Ahmad Mukhtar Bayhum, Miss Ibtihaj Qaddura, Mme Muhammad Hamadeh, and Misses Adila Bayhum, Shafiqa Ghurayib and Thuraya Tabbara. Ibid., 103.

⁸¹ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 133.

The emotional trauma of such situations, on top of the typical pressures and trauma of relief work placed the workers under what George Doolittle described as “a tremendous sympathetic strain.”⁸² In response to this stress of their work, a number of the relief workers began to employ varieties of avoidance coping mechanisms in to help them overcome the emotional impact of the suffering. James Amirkhan includes among these a “panoply of escape responses” that generally aim to either preserve some semblance of normalcy amid the crisis, or to allow the individual to dissociate himself from the reality of the situation.⁸³ Over time, such individuals countered their empathetic response by emotionally sheltering themselves from the source of their pain.⁸⁴ Poignantly, the very power of their initial empathy dulled their capacity to feel for those suffering as they had in earlier stages of the crisis.⁸⁵ Those who exhibited these behaviors outwardly exhibited a gradually diminished empathetic response towards those in need. Although such a response was a coping strategy, it was not entirely effective: as Edward Nickoley’s diary indicated, those avoiding suffering were not exempted from it. Not only were they still internally affected by the suffering of others, they could also find themselves internally conflicted by their residual compassion and their dissonant unwillingness to emotionally expose themselves to the suffering of others.⁸⁶

⁸² Ibid., 122.

⁸³ Amirkhan, “The Coping Strategy Indicator,” 1073.

⁸⁴ Figley, “Compassion Fatigue,” 5.

⁸⁵ Similar observations were made by the authors of a study on the social responses to trauma in the Gaza Strip. See Abdul Hamid Afana, Douglas Pedersen, Henrik Ronsbo, and Laurence J. Kirmeyer, “Endurance is to be Shown at the First Blow: Social Representations and Reactions to Trauma in the Gaza Strip,” *Traumatology* 16, no. 4 (December 2010): 74.

⁸⁶ Nickoley, “Historical Diary,” 19, 50.

These reinterpretations of the crisis and those suffering within in had an insidious effect on how relief workers began to approach the tragedy of the crisis and those struggling to survive within it. After witnessing years of poverty, futility, degradation and exposure to the direst of need, the protective and emotionally generous responses to the poor that were evident in the American community's reports from 1914-1916 gradually evolved into ones of avoidance and distaste. The impact of time and the weight of suffering are evident in the darker tone of the reports filed in the last year of the famine. In 1915, William Jessup of the Beirut station wrote that the missionaries were, "harrowed by the sorrows and anxious for the welfare of the people of Syria, with whom they deeply sympathize," adding that they had, "a very real affection for them and their welfare."⁸⁷ In contrast, the anonymous report submitted in 1918 indicates that the missionaries had been enervated by the strain: "the sight of many dying on the streets from starvation and disease and the constant cries... have given us such nervous and physical wear and tear that no one has been up to normal strength and capacity."⁸⁸ After three years of exposure to worsening conditions, the effects of the famine had twisted the aid workers' compassion into a weary and wounded sense of duty.

Though much of what one can ascertain about the emotional responses to the horrors of famine is revealed inadvertently, through choice of language or through depicted behavior, such analysis offers remarkable insight into the lived experience of the famine as a personal, not merely a social phenomenon. Just as it is evident that the

⁸⁷ William Jessup, "Report of Beirut Station, 1914-1915," PHS Archives RG-115-4-17 Beirut Station Reports 1902-1916, 1.

⁸⁸ Anonymous, "Report of Beirut Station 1917 & 1918, Syria Mission." PHS Archives RG-115-4-17 Beirut Station Reports 1902-1916, 1.

poor did not simply suffer passively, it is clear that the relief workers did not merely offer themselves gladly for the salvation of the Syrian nation. They toiled, struggled, suffered, adapted, coped and modified their attitudes to sustain themselves in an emotionally traumatic environment. Perhaps more importantly, the relief workers offer well-documented examples of the effects of trauma that undoubtedly affected other members of society as well. Such relatively explicit examples help make sense of the adaptations that appeared in social interactions between members of society as the famine wore on.

E. Children in the Famine: A Duality of Experience in an At-Risk Population

- “Aywa. Where were the boys who were playing and shouting in the alleys of the towns and city?”

-Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi⁸⁹

As with the adult population, it is difficult to generalize about the experience of children in the famine. Differences in their circumstances defined the differences in their lived experiences. However, children are a more complex topic since the elements that defined their lives depended in part on their age, dependency and family situation in addition to all of the same social, financial and environmental factors that affected life for adults. The terrible suffering of the famine brought new and trying circumstances for the children of the rich, middle class and poor alike – and in a time of economic upheaval and epidemic disease, good birth was sometimes not enough to keep a child from becoming an orphan. Similarly, children who were not themselves at risk of suffering from starvation or the direct effects of famine were not necessarily spared

⁸⁹Ibid., 69.

from its influence. Though the sources suggest that many of the children were not completely aware of the implications of what they saw and that authority figures often attempted to protect them from the most devastating aspects of life in the famine, the wartime period was still characterized by a tenuous balance between the normalcy of home life and the aberrance of life outside. For children who themselves dealt with suffering on a daily basis, normalcy was often abandoned by necessity in favor of adaptation and acclimation as the children learned skills and behaviors that would help with their survival when few were willing or able to assist them.

Since children are a typically dependent group, they are at a particularly high risk during periods of famine. Though women and children were far more likely to receive relief aid during the period than men, the effects of conscription, disease and poverty on their parents often meant that those children who suffered often did so terribly, often without family to assist them. Jirjis Maqdisi described the suffering of children on the streets, some of whom were students before the war, some deprived of their livelihood by the war some whose parents had died, and some whose their father had sold them to a military officer, leaving them alone and without assistance on the street, where “death swept the deceased from them each day.”⁹⁰ Many were forced to endure the physical effects of famine, including epidemic disease, starvation, skin afflictions and infected wounds, blinding trachoma, ophthalmia, exposure and homelessness. The loss of a parent could result in not only deep emotional trauma, but also the added burden of care for younger siblings. The effects of loss, suffering and displacement were far less evident than the physical effects of starvation, but these were

⁹⁰ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 69.

nevertheless additional layers of emotional suffering for such young individuals to endure.

The emotional and physical effects of starvation and suffering in famine can be especially significant in the case of children. Poor nutrition at key points in their development can lead to physical and mental stunting, even though the body itself can recover relatively rapidly from the effects of long term semi-starvation. The emotional effects are far harder to quantify, but it is apparent from the folk historical memory of the famine that those who grew up during the crisis or were part of the generation that followed it were defined by their personal or social memories of the terrible period. According to psychologist Cynthia Monahon the events that traumatize children can leave long term residues that exercise “tyrannical” effects on the child in the long term.⁹¹ Even mild triggers can stimulate recollection of the trauma, which can be permanently seared into the child’s mind from as early as the age of two.⁹² Like in the Great Depression in America, the memory of the famine was defining and transformational to the extent that those who remembered it would attempt to convey the terrible suffering to younger generations who were at little risk for a repetition of such horrors. One individual mentioned in conversation that her grandmother used to link her finger and thumb around her wrist and tell her “you never would have survived.”

Some of the emotional effects of famine could be construed as byproducts of the physiological effects of long term semi-starvation, but it is also useful to see them as symptoms of the physical and emotional suffering that the children endured. The

⁹¹ Cynthia Monahon, *Children and Trauma* (New York: Lexington Books, 1993), xvi, 3.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 4.

experience of the orphans in the state and private institutions that were in operation during the time of the famine provides several well-documented examples of this. The children in these shelters suffered emotionally from the loss of their family and their homes as well as the physical effects of starvation disease and the often oppressive social climate of the orphanages. Several definitive characteristics are apparent in the sources. First, many of the orphans suffering from long term semi-starvation were described as initially listless and almost inert, spending much of their time sitting and staring at a fixed point on the ground. They rarely interacted with other children. More peculiar for the staff who reported on the behaviors of the children was their apparent lack of enjoyment in life, as they rarely smiled and had seemed to have forgotten how to play or have lost interest in it as a result of their experience.⁹³

In part, this was due to the severity of the social fractures that many of the children experienced on their road to the orphanage. The residual trauma of their past lives and particularly the death of their parents haunted many of the children. One particular girl sought to deal with the memory of her parents' deaths by clinging to the orphanage's director, Halidé Edib as a surrogate mother and acting out her parents' murders, referring to her mother as "Hadije with the bowels on the earth."⁹⁴ The impact of the tragedy explains the numerous observations about the solemnity of the children in the midst of the crisis. Jirjis Maqdisi asked, "where were the boys who were playing and

⁹³ James Barton, *Story of Near East Relief (1915-1930) An Interpretation* (New York: MacMillan Co. 1930), 253-254. Although both responses are characteristic of individuals suffering from long-term semistarvation, such loss of pleasure in normal activities and play is commonly found in children who experienced traumatic experience, an effect that gradually abates as the children regain their sense of security in the world. However, even their post-traumatic play often takes on an element of "seriousness," wherein children direct disproportionate amounts of their psychological energies to coping with their internal crisis, neglecting otherwise normal, joyful modes of diversion. See Monahan, *Children and Trauma*, 32, 6.

⁹⁴ Halidé Edib, *Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (New York: The Century Co., 1926), 467.

shouting in the alleys of the towns and city? Happiness ceased and was replaced by sorrowful sighs and unremitting sadness.”⁹⁵ Edib concurred with this assessment, writing, “I had never hoped to hear laughter in Aintoura; the most I looked for was less tears and less sickness.”⁹⁶

Children who were forced to fend for themselves in orphanages or on the street exhibited signs of aggression, independence and moral ambiguity. For children (particularly orphans) who had to fend for themselves, such behavior would have undoubtedly been necessary survival mechanisms. For many of the adults who were later charged with their care, these traits were regarded as antisocial to the point of being feral. The missionaries of the Sidon Girls’ School recalled one particular child who had been stuck living with relatives in Lebanon at the outbreak of the war while her parents were away in Egypt. The girl’s disregard for authority led her uncle to send her to the school as an orphan, where she lasted for a short period until evidence emerged that she had been stealing, at which point the school demanded that she return to her family.⁹⁷ There was no further mention of her fate.

The more dynamic social atmosphere of the orphanages, which in some cases resembled that of prisons, provided for more extreme examples of this phenomenon. Edib’s initial impressions of the ‘Aintoura are among the best descriptions of this. The groups of children, primarily of Armenian and Kurdish descent, were divided by not only language, but by a mutual hatred for the other community for its complicity in the dual waves of massacres that had made the children orphans in Anatolia in 1915. Many

⁹⁵ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 69.

⁹⁶ Edib, *Memoirs*, 446.

⁹⁷ Charlotte Brown, “Report of the Sidon Seminary Oct. 1917-Oct. 1918,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls’ School Reports 1906-1955, 2.

of the children had acquired aggressive and highly independent, self-interested characteristics as a result of the trauma of their experiences and the Hobbesian atmosphere that prevailed in the orphanage prior to Edib's appointment as its director. When she arrived, Edib wrote that the children looked and behaved like "little wild beasts," unwashed, mostly sick from malaria and diseases of filth, and accustomed to controlling their own environment in spite of the meek efforts of the orphanage workers.⁹⁸ In addition to the sectarian divisions, the older members of the shelter used their size to steal the food given out to younger children, which they then sold to members of the town outside the orphanage.⁹⁹ This behavior, which could have resulted in the deaths of the younger, helpless children, is similar to the self-interested attitudes that many adults had adopted during the famine to ensure that they survived or thrived, even if it meant that others suffered and even died.

A certain degree of aggressiveness was necessary since the development of increasingly negative social perceptions of these children over the course of the famine contributed to the difficulties that they faced in their daily lives. The growing number of orphans on the streets and their desperate or cunning measures to sustain themselves seems to have won them few allies among the more financially secure, particularly in a time when compassion fatigue had diminished the general impulse to offer assistance across the population. In an interview with Gregory Orfalea in *The Arab Americans*, Mary Kfoury Ma'alouf recounted her desperate attempt to acquire bread for herself and her two brothers while her mother was away in search of food and work. When she

⁹⁸ Edib *Memoirs*, 442.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 443.

asked a shopkeeper for a piece of bread, saying her mother would pay for when she returned, the woman drove her out, telling her that her mother was dead.¹⁰⁰

As the aforementioned case indicates, such children seem to have been regarded as pests or parasites during the famine period. Since they were not employed to sustain themselves, the children were forced to beg, scavenge or steal what they could to survive. With the urgent need to protect one's assets weighing heavily, even such acts of petty theft as raiding fruit trees for sustenance was deemed a moderate offense. In her report on the Sidon Girl's School from 1916-1917, Dora Eddy noted without a hint of irony that among the responsibilities of one of the school's employees was the defense of the orange and lemon trees that were a "temptation to hungry boys" during the "days of distress and starvation."¹⁰¹ Despite the harshness of such measures, they make some sense in light of the fact that at least in Jabal 'Amil (and apparently in Sidon and Beirut) many of the orphaned or abandoned children began organizing themselves into roving bands for protection, moving from town to town and city to city seeking shelter, food and safety from animals and criminals.¹⁰² A survey that canvassed the region of Sidon and the Chouf after the war estimated (conservatively) that 2,600 orphans had survived the war.¹⁰³ Even omitting the large number who had died, such a total suggests that the number of children living on the streets or in bands was potentially quite high in some of the larger communities. The village of 'Ayn 'Alaq was left with a total of 12 orphans after the war, and Father Antoun Hayak wrote that the village's youth were scattered

¹⁰⁰ Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2006), 69-70.

¹⁰¹ Dora Eddy, "Report of the Sidon Seminary, Oct. 1916-1917 Oct.," PHS Archives RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls' School Reports 1906-1955, 4.

¹⁰² Dhahir, *Jabal 'Amil*, 45-46.

¹⁰³ Maqdisi, *A 'tham harb*, 70.

through the valleys, across the Beqa' and even into Jordan in search of food.¹⁰⁴ Given the large number of orphans on the streets, it is curious that there is no mention of the common practice of organizing children into gangs of beggars or thieves, as was the case in Istanbul during the war.¹⁰⁵

In spite of the social stigma that seemed to surround the young beggars, the charitable institutions that were set up during the war were generally far more sensitive to the needs of children. Although the state lacked funding and material resources to support large numbers of needy individuals, children were always the first priority of the public and charitable works that were set up. When Jamal Pasha established the list of institutions and recipients that were to receive aid from the state in 1915, he specifically earmarked funds for monastic and religious institutions in Syria that cared for orphans (including the orphanage in 'Aintoura, which was set up for the Kurdish and Armenian orphans of the war and genocide in Anatolia).¹⁰⁶ As the famine began to deepen, local authorities like 'Azmi Bey, 'Umar Da'uq and Yusuf al-Hakim began to establish hospices to care for the swelling numbers of orphans on the streets. Such measures often required some initiative on the part of the regional leader – Hakim established the successful *jamia* 'awn al-faqir and shelters in the towns of 'Amioun, Kisba and Bishmezzine in Koura, but still had to beg the *Mutasarrif* to fund the increasing number of orphans using his shelters.¹⁰⁷ This indicates that areas with less

¹⁰⁴Father Marun Hayak, *'Ayn 'Alaq bayn al-qarn al-sabi' wa al-qarn al-hadi wa al-'ishrin*. (Beirut: Mia Press, 2005).

¹⁰⁵ Ahmad Emin Yalman, *Turkey in the World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1930), 258 .

¹⁰⁶ Aziz Bey, *Suriya wa Lubnan*, 116-117.

¹⁰⁷ Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi 'ahd Al-'Uthman* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1991), 253-254.

conscientious administrators were less likely to receive support, as was the case in Nabatieh and 'Akkar, among others. Religious charities likewise focused on children. Bishop Antoun 'Arida of Tripoli was lauded by Hakim for caring for 200 children and even selling the church's cross in order to pay for food to assist the population. The Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Damascus, Gregorios Haddad, took on hundreds of orphans of any religion, leading Jamal Pasha to grant him support to continue his relief work.¹⁰⁸

The portrayal of children as either victims or pests fails to capture the mature roles into which such children were forced in the absence of one or both parents, especially since many had to ensure the survival of younger siblings as well as themselves. George Doolittle of the Sidon Mission took particular care to record the personal suffering of individuals he encountered, particularly when they involved children. In his unpublished account of the war, *Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria*, Doolittle writes the story of a young girl who tried to distract her hungry sister from the fact that there was no food in the house by saying that they could not eat before going to see a public demonstration – relieving her mother of the terrible task of informing her child that there was nothing to feed her.¹⁰⁹ While paying a visit to the desperate Christian town of Alma in the hinterland of Tyre, Doolittle recalled watching a young boy walk into the church to ring the bell. When asked the reason, the boy tearfully replied that his brother had just died of malaria and the rest of his family members were too ill to come themselves.¹¹⁰ In a more extreme case, Mary Ma'alouf

¹⁰⁸ Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan*, 253-254.

¹⁰⁹ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 33.

¹¹⁰ George Doolittle, "Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 2.

was actually forced to care for her brothers for days at a time while her mother searched for work, doling out tiny strips of the one loaf of bread that her mother had given them to last two or three days. Both brothers eventually died of starvation after the family sought refuge in Zahle.¹¹¹

The famine was a threat to the children of coastal Syria and Mount Lebanon, but it was not an automatic death sentence. As with others in the famine, there are many examples of children developing remarkable aptitude for surviving in the physically hazardous and emotionally traumatic climate of the crisis. The independence and self-reliance that the more successful children possessed may even have been sharpened by the famine situation – a number of prominent political figures, including Antoun Sa’adeh¹¹² and Philip Abu Hamad, mayor of Brummana, were residents of Arthur Dray’s orphanage during the crisis.¹¹³ However, for the children who lived in poverty, it is apparent that the experience of the famine was exceptionally difficult. Between the physical pain of hunger, the cold of winter, the desperation of need and the psychological pain of loss, uncertainty, and the added stress from the need to care for loved ones, children were forced to deal with untold varieties of risk and distress.

Ensuring that the children were emotionally and physically sheltered during the period was an imperative for parents and authority figures of all levels of society. Although there was some criticism of parents in the famine for abandoning, ceasing to care for or even harming their own children, such situations were undoubtedly the sorts

¹¹¹ Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 68.

¹¹² Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Mariam Aswad Cortas, Mrs. Salma Aswad Risq and Mr. Emile Cortas” in Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 73.

¹¹³ Such independence may have contributed to a sense of “mastery” of difficult situations, as described by Cynthia Monahan. Monahan, *Children and Trauma*, 10.

of outliers that fascinated and horrified those writers who recorded their impressions of the famine. Since children were so vulnerable and impressionable, many went to extreme efforts to protect them, even at great personal risk or expense.¹¹⁴ Even if their physical security was not entirely ensured, many parents and authority figures made great efforts to shield the children from the worst of the famine's horrors. The sources note several examples of adults orchestrating schemes of deception and isolation to prevent the children from having to confront the reality of the crisis, but such attempts were not always as effective as they were intended. On the other side of the coin, some adults saw the famine as potential opportunity to develop the character of the children by performing relief work or basic charity as a way of making some contribution to the crisis, rather than merely sitting by and watching the crisis play out.

When the option was available, sending children to boarding school was one way of guarding them from the growing effects of the famine. It was also a major sacrifice for many families who had begun to feel the effects of the economic crisis. Given the cost of tuition and board, the fact that parents would be willing to spend precious money to send their children to school (and to safety) when they themselves risked hunger and deprivation is a powerful indication of the extent to which parents sought to guard their children from the crisis. Even after largely converting itself to a day school as a result of the high cost of food, the staff at the Sidon Girls' School considered itself a blessing to the parents who would otherwise have to face deprivation in the home. Dora Eddy wrote, "the crying of hungry children all over the country has been a sad strain on the nerves and tempers of the equally hungry mothers," noting that

¹¹⁴ Ibrahim 'Awad's grandfather took in his own children as well as their extended families in 1915, even when his own situation was uncertain. Ibrahim Khalil 'Awad, *Min 'ahd al-mutasarrifiyya ila 'ahd al-istiqlal: mudhakkirat* (Beirut: Matb'at Hayak wa Karam, 1981), 31.

“little children who had become a burden to their weary mothers were gladly taken in to be taught and cared for from eight till three.”¹¹⁵ Although tuition fees were reduced for some of the neediest students, even the reduced sum that was spent on the school would have bought a significant amount of food for families that were barely able to pay for their own sustenance.

Alternately, when the situation at home reached the point of desperation, parents attempted to remove their children from danger by sending them away. Some desperate parents would place their children in orphanages with the hopes that it would allow both them and their children to survive or at least to ensure that the child would be cared for if they knew that they themselves would not live much longer. Others offered them to individuals whom they believed might ensure their survival in the long term. Mary Dale wrote in her diary that an 18 year old woman asked her to take her baby because she could not keep him alive any longer. Others either gave or sold their children to Ottoman officers, sometimes out of mercy and sometimes for profit. Maqdisi’s account suggests that this plan was a poor long term solution since many of these children (mostly girls) found themselves on the streets without any support if the officer was called away or lost interest in the child.¹¹⁶ Though such actions were an affront to the sensibilities of many of those observers who documented the famine period, there was a degree of mercy in them as well. Sources suggest that adults died at a higher rate than children during the war. This was especially the case with men, who died at an

¹¹⁵ Dora Eddy, Dora Eddy, “Report of the Sidon Seminary, Oct. 1916-1917 Oct.,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls’ School Reports 1906-1955, 1.

¹¹⁶ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 6. See also Maqdisi, *A’tam harb*, 69.

“unbelievable” rate due to their higher metabolisms and duty to work for food or money to sustain their families.¹¹⁷

For many, this protection also involved shielding the children from the tragedies of the world around them. The sources note that the American schools sought to ensure that the children of the staff members and the students were guarded against the horrors of the crisis as much as possible. In some cases, this merely meant avoiding situations that would potentially expose children to suffering. In a retrospective written for the history of the American Community School (ACS), Harry Dorman wrote that children were not taken downtown, where the sight of the beggars, the starving and dead bodies was most common.¹¹⁸ In other cases, it involved concealing or postponing the inevitable by withholding information about not only the crisis in the community, but even the tragic developments from within the students own families. Dora Eddy commented in her report on the 1915-1916 school term that the school attempted to shelter the girls from the famine to the extent that they actually hid information about the suffering in student homes to ensure that the girls were “hardly conscious of its existence and we never failed to be thankful where we saw them so carefree and happy, that a few young lives were being spared the sorrow so pressing outside.”¹¹⁹ Whether delaying knowledge of loss until the girls returned home to horrific surprises was actually merciful is questionable, especially since it delayed the period of grieving and recovery, possibly by months. Indeed, given the prevalence of avoidance coping strategies that

¹¹⁷ On metabolism and famine, see Peter Svedberg, *Poverty and Undernutrition: Theory, Measurement and Policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 115-122. On death in the Syrian famine, see the anonymous report of Sidon Station from 1916-1917: NA, “Report of Sidon Station 1916-1917”, 1. See also: Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 3.

¹¹⁸ Jonathan Stacey, ed., *A History of the American Community School at Beirut* (Beirut: The Alumni Association of the American Community School, 1998), 13.

¹¹⁹ Dora Eddy, “Report of Sidon Seminary, 1915-1916.”

were apparent among the staff at the Sidon Girls' School, it is apparent that this strategy would actually be more effective at allowing the school's staff to avoid breaking terrible news to the girls and having to cope with the emotional impact of the girls' grief.

Because of the steady supply of food and the closely sheltered status of the institutions, those who remained in those boarding schools that remained open were able to continue their lives with only slight cosmetic alterations during the semester. At the school, the girls were provided with a safe, emotionally secure environment, medical care, shelter and regular meals. When they returned to their own homes and villages, they would have to confront the immediate effects of the famine face to face. The prospect of this seemed to affect the administrators and instructors of the school, who let their pupils return to their homes at the end of the semester with great trepidation. In her report on the Sidon Girls' School, Dora Eddy wondered who felt more sadness about the end of the year, the girls who were leaving their friends and teachers for homes "saddened by sickness and death and burdened with want," instead of the easy, "carefree" life they experienced while boarded at school, or the teachers, who "saw them go and realized more fully than they how hard the summer was going to be, and how uncertain it was that the following year would find them with us again."¹²⁰

Although the school administrations generally attempted to secure their pupils from emotional or physical risks associated with the famine, the American School for Girls in Beirut actually acknowledged the inescapability of the suffering and sought to use it for spiritual and moral development. The school, which generally catered to wealthier members of Beiruti and Lebanese society, was located close to the downtown

¹²⁰ Dora Eddy, "Synopsis of Sidon Seminary Report 1915," PHS Archives RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls' School Reports 1906-1955, 2.

areas that were the central point of congregation for beggars and the starving. Perhaps because of its proximity to the suffering, the staff took the opportunity to involve the girls in mild forms of relief work. The school's report on 1914-1915 proudly touted the nominal contributions it had been able to make towards the suffering, which at the time were little more than the girls' temporary suspension of usual privileges. For one week, the girls abstained from fruit during their daily snacks and donated the proceeds to charity. They likewise refrained from purchasing an annual "Christmas treat," which saved an astounding 450 piasters for use in flour distribution in the nearby quarter of Mousaitbeh. Collections that usually went to support foreign missionaries were redirected to support the poor locally, including paying for milk to assist a girl recovering from typhoid for two months and purchasing food and medicine for the poor. Remarkably, the girls were even enlisted in actual relief activities, distributing bread to the poor and reading bible verses about Jesus to the famished.¹²¹

For older students, including those at the Syrian Protestant College, relief work was actually an alluring prospect, likely for the same reasons as it had been for the adults. George Scherer of the American Mission's Sidon Station makes mention of volunteers from the school who took on the task of wheat distributions to needy villages around the school.¹²² Similarly, the SPC's Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), under the supervision of Bayard Dodge, spent the first few months of the crisis assisting the American Red Cross with its charitable and relief efforts in Beirut, including helping to maintain order in the investigation bureau of the Red Cross

¹²¹ Ottora Horne, "Annual Report: American School for Girls, Beirut, Syria, December 1914-December 1915," PHS Archives RG-115-3-1 American School for Girls, reports, 1838-1955, 1.

¹²² George Scherer, "Annual Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission for the year 1914-1915," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 7.

Employment Committee, running fundraisers for charitable activities and engaging in morale-building exercises to lift the spirits of those in the children's hospital and in the community at large.¹²³

Student participation diminished for the most part as the crisis worsened, but the medical students in particular remained an active and valuable part of the relief teams, particularly in their contributions to the hospitals and clinics set up throughout Beirut and Mount Lebanon to combat the effects of famine and the typhus epidemic. Student volunteers made up the backbone of Dray's Brummana orphanage, under the oversight of Dray and the SPC's Dr. Dikran Utidjian, and their assistance in the nursing and oversight of the patients in the SPC's hospitals was immensely valuable in the relief of the overworked medical staff. Student involvement in medical work was no trifling matter. The casual passage of lice from infected to uninfected individuals put even those individuals who were fastidious about their hygiene and safety at risk for infection from a single chance encounter with an infected louse. Mortality among doctors was high, and morbidity was likely higher. Joseph Hitti, a medical student at the SPC during the war, claims to have actually felt the louse bite that gave him typhus as he walked to campus in 1916.¹²⁴ This vulnerability seems to have even been a motivating factor in at least one individual. Philomena Van Zandt volunteered her labor cleaning and sterilizing at the typhus hospital that had been set up in the isolated sands of the

¹²³ William Ni'meh, "Report of the Young Men's Christian Association for 1914-1915," *al-Kulliyah*, vol 6 (1914-1915), 28-30.

¹²⁴ Nicholas Ajay, "Interview with Dr. Joseph Hitti" in Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 82.

southern edge of the city because: “the question seems to be whether I am to get these beasts¹²⁵ or whether they are to get me.”¹²⁶

In spite of the best efforts of the parents and teachers, in the end, it was impossible to completely obscure the effects of the crisis from children – it left subtle reminders in the dietary changes in the house and on campus, the effect on others who witnessed its tragedies more openly, and even in the dull moans that were an inescapable reminder of the starvation in the worst months of the famine. The starvation also left physical residues that hinted at the disruptions to the world outside the schoolyard. Harry Dorman wrote:

“We did use to see and wonder at the great circular patches of orange color that began to appear on the rough plaster walls that lined Beirut's streets and gardens, little orange circles and larger ones too.”¹²⁷

Dorman went on to note that the circles were made by those hungry individuals who rubbed the bitter outer peel from the oranges to expose the white pith underneath in an attempt to retain as much nominally edible material as possible. In an indication that the Sidon Girls' School was not as adept at concealing the famine from the girls as they imagined, Eddy reported that one girl whose tuition had been reduced to allow her to continue at the school somehow discovered the reason for her continued attendance and fell to the ground and kissed the feet of headmaster Charlotte Brown in her gratitude.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Typhus infected lice.

¹²⁶ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 4.

¹²⁷ Stacey, “A History of the American Community School,” 13.

¹²⁸ Eddy, “Report of Sidon Seminary 1915-1916,” 3.

Certainly, as a fundamental aspect of the children's lived experience, the famine could be excluded from some aspects of a child's daily reality, but it could not be avoided completely. As assiduously as caretakers worked to prevent the famine from affecting those in their care, the effects of the crisis were nevertheless an unavoidable element of life during the period for adult and child alike, and there is evidence that many of the sheltered children were impacted by the suffering around them. On May 23, 1917, Edward Nickoley recorded in his diary that babies had taken to mimicking the sounds of the starving that filtered in through the windows of homes and noted with some distress the "graphic details" with which young Marie Jessup described a boy she had seen dying on the side of the road.¹²⁹ For those who comprehended the meaning of such sights, the residual impact could continue for decades. In an interview conducted with Nicholas Ajay, Huntington Bliss stated, "the impression of the misery of these people is still with me. Even now I finish what is on my plate because I cannot forget that period when food was so precious."¹³⁰ The proximity to the famine certainly had some lasting impacts on some of the older or more sensitive children, but it is apparent from some sources that many of those who grew up on the fringes of the crisis either did not grasp the consequences of what they saw or were able to emotionally distance themselves from the humanity of the suffering.

Though hints of the famine managed to seep through the cracks in the walls erected around them, the children from more financially secure situations still had almost the opposite experience of the famine from those who suffered. If they were aware of the famine, it was generally from a distance. Unlike those children who were

¹²⁹ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 44.

¹³⁰ Nicholas Ajay, "Interview with Huntington Bliss," in "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 2: 108.

forced to live in poverty, whose dire familial circumstances often required them to take on additional emotional and physical responsibilities, children in better circumstances with more concrete and stable parental and community support were often tightly sheltered from the worst effects of the crisis. However, for many younger children, the crisis itself was simply not an important aspect of their daily lives to be of concern.

Harry Dorman described recess at the American Community School in 1917:

In those days, the game assumed mammoth importance and excitement for us. At recess we would pour out on to the playground, touch our own base line as a starter, and boldly move towards the central open area in challenge and defiance of any "fresher" girl who would emerge to chase us off... All this was during the terrible war years of World War I, and gives an idea of how completely, as kids, we were sheltered by our parents from what was going on around us.¹³¹

In spite of the slow smoldering of the famine around them, the children remained children, diverting themselves as the situation allowed. For some, the wartime environment even offered exciting new leisure opportunities. In an interview with Nicholas Ajay, Archie Crawford mentioned that when the Ottoman military test-fired their 75 mm cannon located in ‘Ainab, the boys would run down to the craters to collect the shell fragments.¹³² Although the locust swarms that came in April 1915 were a disaster for the country, the most unpleasant effect for the young boys from the American schools was their inability to swim on the coast due to the huge number of locust bodies choking the swimming holes near the SPC and ACS.¹³³ In several cases,

¹³¹ Stacey, *History of the American Community School*, 13.

¹³² Nicholas Ajay, "Interview with Archie Crawford," in Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918," Ph.D. diss, Georgetown (1973), 2:96.

¹³³ Ajay, "Interview with Huntington Bliss," in "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2: 108.

the creatures were actually repurposed by young boys for various forms of entertainment. Archie Crawford's diary recorded children capturing and converting the insects into kites, tethering them with string, or attaching small notes to the legs of "messenger locusts" and releasing them.¹³⁴ Huntington Bliss almost fondly remembered his experience with the creatures, hurrying home from Sunday school in order to bat them with a tennis racket "to their deaths" in the sea immediately below the college.¹³⁵ In his spare time, Crawford took special interest in the Allied warships, which patrolled along the coast off the shore of the Syrian Protestant College, where his father was a professor. His August diaries recorded the time and date of the passage of specific ships, noting their time of passage, names, origin, and even included sketches of their shapes.¹³⁶

More frequently, the children's activities were little more than the normal mundane frivolities that could have occurred at any time. Like with the college, the children of the Gerard Institute Boy's School in Sidon exhibited "more interest than usual" in 1914-1915 in athletics, and competed against the schools in Choueifat, the SPC and the Lebanon schools.¹³⁷ Archie Crawford mentions such usual diversions as shooting at the college's cats with an air rifle¹³⁸ and swimming in the rocky volcanic coves that pock the northern tip of Ras Beirut near the SPC and ACS,¹³⁹ (this in spite of the Ottoman paranoia about the coastline due to justified fears that Allied spies were

¹³⁴ Crawford, "Wartime Diaries," in Ajay "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2:133.

¹³⁵ ACS Staff, *History of the ACS*, 7.

¹³⁶ Crawford, "Wartime Diaries," in Ajay "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2: 145.

¹³⁷ Scherer, "Annual Report 1914-1915," 7.

¹³⁸ Crawford, "Wartime Diaries," in Ajay "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2: 127.

¹³⁹ *Ibid*, 142.

using the coasts to maintained contacts with the fleet and the French intelligence base at Arwad). In a retrospective on the war written for an institutional history of the ACS, Crawford recalled some of the normal activities in which he and his companions engaged during the war.

"we used to play in the yard extending north to the Eye (later Medical) Pavilion. I remember once we were throwing knives to try to stick them in a big fig tree trunk, and Gus Freyer threw his knife too hard so that it bounced back and stuck itself in his calf. That finished that game for us! We asked to have a big skipping rope, and one day I was coming down when Frank was coming up, and his head hit my mouth and broke off half of my upper front tooth; I think the missing piece is still in his skull.¹⁴⁰

When the areas around the campus did not prove sufficiently stimulating, Crawford and his companions would purchase some of the reduced price tram booklets that sold for between one and two metaliks (between a quarter and a third of a piaster) and travel into the city from the tram stop that ended at the lighthouse near Crawford's house.¹⁴¹

The adult perception of children as fragile, passive participants in the crisis who needed to be protected for their own good seem to clash with the reports on the famine that came from the children who lived through it and many of the observations of the children who suffered in it. Although the paternalism of the adults in their attempts to control the environment around the children explicitly to *prevent* the children from experiencing the famine was well meaning, it was also demonstrably ineffective. As the memoirs and personal recollections of the period so clearly indicate, even those who were sheltered from the suffering of the famine were acutely aware of the situation that had developed in the country but were coping with it through the same sorts of active

¹⁴⁰ Stacey, *History of the ACS*, 12.

¹⁴¹ Crawford, "Wartime Diaries," in Ajay "Mount Lebanon," 2, 147.

and passive mechanisms that the adults employed. Though the authority figures could not fully shield the children from the horrors of the crisis, the ability of their young charges to adapt to the situation enabled some children to not only deal with the limited exposure to those bits of the crisis that made it past the protective walls set up around them, but to willingly work to ameliorate what they could through charity and even limited relief work.

A question remains, however, as to exactly how cognizant these children actually were about the actual gravity of the situation in which they found themselves. As heartwarming as the image of children distributing gruel and gospel to the poor may sound, it is difficult to know to what degree the children comprehended the life or death implications of their charitable acts or the terrible exigency of the aid for those in need. Current psychological research suggests that children achieve a “mature” understanding of the various aspects of mortality at ages ranging from 4 to 12, with most children understanding the biological aspects of death by the age of 7.¹⁴² For the older children and college students working alongside the Red Cross and hospital staff, the degree of suffering and even the risks to their own safety were well understood, and yet a number of the youth persevered in order to contribute what they could to address the crisis. As with the adults, their engagement with the crisis, either through normalizing it and rationalizing its presence in their lives, or by attempting to resolve it through charitable activities, allowed them to better accommodate it and its role in their daily lives.

¹⁴² Mark Speece, “Children’s Concepts of Death,” *Michigan Family Review* 1, no. 1 (1995), <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mfr/4919087.0001.107?rgn=main;view=fulltext>.

F. Conclusion

As frivolous as the notion of securing one's mental health may seem in the context of the immense physical suffering that so many underwent during the famine, emotional security was nevertheless a concern for all elements of society in their experience of the famine. The emotional challenges posed by the crisis contributed to the sense of boredom, depression, hopelessness and powerlessness that characterized the wartime atmosphere. The overwhelming and inconceivable nature of the crisis dominated conceptions and recollections of the crisis as individuals sought to understand and come to terms with the inconceivable changes that were taking place across society.

The obsessive focus on the famine by the sufferer and observers alike monopolized the cognitive processes and social discourses of those living through the period, dominating their worldview and guiding the logic by which they conceived the world. In many ways, the emotional experience of the period revolved excessively around the famine because the horror and fascination with which individuals viewed the situation compounded the actual suffering that they encountered in their daily lives. Rather than giving them power over the situation, this knowledge, most of which was entirely spurious or exaggerated, instead reinforced the sense of dread and horror that pervaded daily life during the famine.

In an effort to preserve their emotional welfare and that of loved ones, individuals employed active and passive measures that enabled individuals to cope with stresses in their own lives and the emotional trauma induced by the suffering of those around them. The effects of these changes were not always benign, and frequently

involved abrupt shifts in how individuals conceived of their own roles in the crisis, or how they shaped their perceptions of others. In a situation in which the fate of those suffering and even oneself was often completely beyond one's control, maintaining a sense of control of one's immediate surroundings, even briefly, lessened the malaise of daily life. But as this chapter showed, such measures were not without their own cost as well. By attempting to confront the crisis head-on, relief workers encountered additional and perhaps far more horrific scenes of suffering, familial dislocation and despair than they would have otherwise, which contributed to a noticeable shift in attitudes over the course of the crisis – the effects of which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter.

The experience of children during the famine is particularly interesting since many of their contemporaries paternalistically viewed them as passive participants in the crisis who either suffered and died unjustly or who needed to be protected from the prevalence of suffering and death in society. Both the children who were subject to the terrible effects of poverty and loss and those who were brought up through the crisis in relatively stable and supportive environments nevertheless demonstrated resiliency in the face of often great challenges. Though many children struggled, suffered and died, many altered their outlook on life, coped and confronted the crisis in order to survive it – often using measures similar to those taken by adults. However, the experience of the children is also a helpful reminder that in spite of the transformative power of the famine and the obsessiveness that it inspired in society, the famine was but one aspect of daily reality for many who lived through the period. The steady progression of time did not cease during the period, and individuals (adults and children) both had to continue their normal activities to whatever extent they could given the economic crisis and limited access to normal foodstuffs and modes of entertainment. The American

community in particular sought to ensure continuity and normalcy in their community and the extended local community that they had formed through their schools, missions and social institutions. Even if this could not obliterate the lingering knowledge of the persistent famine outside of their walls, the events, entertainments and parties enabled those who participated to feel normal for at least a few hours

CHAPTER VI

A FAMINE OF THE SPIRIT: ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE FAMINE

“The worst of famine is its effect upon the living, rather than its silence upon the dead.”

– Bayard Dodge¹

The lived experience of the famine was defined not only by often extreme social and personal change, but also by the way that individuals logistically and emotionally negotiated these dislocations. Just as changes to the human ecology and social fabric of Mount Lebanon and coastal Syria determined how individuals coped and survived, the emotional and psychological changes stimulated by hunger, the dour wartime atmosphere, and the effects of secondhand suffering (among other factors) affected how individuals interpreted the crisis around them and how they behaved in their everyday social interactions. In this way, purely psychological phenomena like shifting attitudes and social interpretations of key concepts like poverty, morality, faith, death and taboos came to redefine how individuals viewed themselves in relation to others in the crisis. The result of this was the development of temporary situational identities that reflected the experience of the famine and the means by which individuals had come to cope with the calamity around them. The particularly squalid nature of the poverty in which the starving poor lived and the consistent presence of suffering in public spaces began to

¹ Bayard Dodge, “Relief Work in Syria During the Period of the War,” (1919), Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 12.

redefine how the needy perceived others and also how they were perceived, ultimately affecting how they were treated in social interactions with others in society and how they were valued in such grave matters as death and charity. In this atmosphere, paradoxes abounded. Observers of the crisis despaired at the perceived decline in morality and the growing indifference towards the suffering of the poor, even as they themselves at times experienced remarkable shifts in attitude and opinion over the course of the crisis in response to the persistent suffering and grinding monotony of the wartime social atmosphere. Overtly and unintentionally, the humanity of those in the crisis was reassessed according to the conditional social interpretations that individuals and groups had begun to make in response to what they had seen and heard. Attitudes and beliefs, like so many other aspects of life, began to adapt to the internal logic of the crisis.

The result of these shifting social interpretations of the famine and those within it is striking. The social discourse that developed over the course of the famine reframed perceptions of identity and humanity and also informed the social reorganization that began to take place as individuals and institutions sought to confront the terrible effects of the crisis. The physical decay of long suffering individuals and the decrepitude of the stripped, neglected buildings became metaphors for the slow erosion of social norms and morality that the often pious non-suffering contemporaries observed with great anxiety. Acts of desperation that were intended to preserve the physical body became indicators of degeneration. The indicators of extreme poverty and the behaviors that were the only means of sustenance in such an extreme state became stains that marred the very humanity of the starving poor, in many cases rendering them inhuman, or even

generationally ruined past the point of saving.² This growing distaste for the impoverished and the abstract, dehumanized manner in which they were viewed began to inform actual social interactions, including the relief work that was the lifeline for many suffering the dire economic consequences of long term unemployment, inflation and high prices.

A. The Observer as a Reporter

“Wild rumors filled the air, none authentic.”

- Harriet La Grange, 1917³

The most detailed analysis of this shift can be found in the attitudes of the non-suffering observers and the changes in their social interpretations of the crisis and its participants over the course of the famine. The experience of this middle strata of society has remained a glaringly overlooked aspect of the famine period, paradoxically because these observers were the ones who left the most detailed accounts of the suffering of others in the crisis. Indeed, much of what we *think* we know about the famine is derived from these subjective observations from individuals who were themselves privy to only a narrow view of the crisis, which was only discerned from their limited vantage point and was often based on the dubious information that tumbled out of the rumor mill. Far from being omniscient, these individuals formed their beliefs

² Edward Nickoley of the Syrian Protestant College estimated that it would take generations for the country to morally recover from the disaster. Edward Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” (1917). Edward Nickoley Collection, 1873-1937. ARCHIVE AA 2:3.3. Box 1, File 2. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 6.

³ Harriet LaGrange, “Tripoli Girl’s School Report 1916-1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-19-8 Tripoli Girls’ School 1885-1964, 2.

about the famine by filtering gossip, rumor and their own limited firsthand experiences through the lens of their preconceptions about the world and their attitudes towards those around them. Their social discourse about the famine is one of the best indications in the literature about the different ways that people began to differentiate and revalue suffering, and even human beings, as they coped with the crisis and sought to address its distressing, depressing and often grisly consequences.

It is no accident that the majority of the judgments about the moral and social transformations of the famine period were written from the perspectives of those who were themselves somewhat shielded from suffering. Few of those who actually starved during the crisis were able to record their recollections of the period, leaving little access to these valuable firsthand perspectives beyond the oral narratives passed through families. On a practical level, this leaves the historian in an epistemological quandary. Although all of the firsthand sources reported on the events of the famine with an air of authority, in the end, their observations were merely impressions of a situation that was far more complicated and varied than they could accurately discern from their myopic position within the crisis. Although it is tempting to accept the accuracy of these judgments at face value, they also hide a fundamental lack of understanding of the nature of suffering from an insider's perspective. When William Jessup questioned a destitute woman prying the window shutters from her house she replied "what use is a house if we had no food to keep us alive?"⁴ The process of recording what they did know, or what they thought they knew, further obscured the picture since such recollections were forced to compress their ineffable experience into

⁴ Robert Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 5.

a representative depiction. The sheer magnitude of the crisis was such that the writers often resorted to broad generalizations to attempt to convey the impact that the entirety of the famine had upon *them* the observers. For this reason, information on the apparent attitudes of the observers and what they chose to report are in some ways more reliable information than the actual factual content of their narratives – which were frequently little more than unsubstantiated rumor and *topos*.

The emotional toll of the crisis also influenced what they reported and how they framed their observations. Although they were exempted from physical suffering from the famine, these observers were frequently traumatized by the very sight and contemplation of the agony around them – and even by their own impotence to offer anything but the most nominal assistance to those in need. The effect of this secondary emotional trauma cannot be ignored. For many, the suffering of the poorest in society was a defining aspect of the emotional experience of the period. In an interview with Nicholas Ajay, Halim Musa Ashqar explicitly recalled: “the thing that sticks most in my mind was the starvation.”⁵ Salwa Salibi noted that her mother wept for a week after seeing people rooting through the garbage to find food.⁶ In a number of letters written during 1916, the Maronite priest and French intelligence agent Bulus ‘Aqil described the suffering as something that “crushes ones insides and turns tears into blood.”⁷ Since

⁵ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Halim Musa Ashqar” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1972), 2: 18.

⁶ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Salwa Salibi,” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1972), 2: 90.

⁷ Bulus ‘Aqil, “Letter of Father ‘Aqil to Allied Agent, October 3, 1916,” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut: 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1972), 2: 181. Although ‘Aqil’s work as a propagandist and a spy cast aspersions on the motivation of his judgments (which were clearly intended to provoke an Allied intervention on humanitarian grounds), he did place himself at great personal risk and undoubtedly saw an immense degree of suffering as he traveled the country on his missions to distribute aid and gain information on the situation in Syria.

this was a natural sympathetic response, it meant that the secondary suffering could even impact those who were not close to the crisis. Entries in the diary of Edward Nickoley of the Syrian Protestant College indicate that merely witnessing the suffering and contemplating its effects could have a dramatic emotional impact on the observers. Something as simple as the weather was enough to bring thoughts of suffering to Nickoley, who regarded the bitter cold of the rainy days of February as “heart rending” since they would undoubtedly intensify the suffering in the mountain.⁸ Although Nickoley was quite honest about his desire to avoid facing the horrific effects of the crisis, he was clearly still affected by the plight of those who suffered, the thoughts of whom tainted even his moments of relaxation in the cool sea breeze during the summer of 1917.⁹

Perhaps because of this sort of sociological tunnel vision, the impressions that the witnesses gave were frequently far more concerned with the grisly nature of the famine than with their own circumstances, which were often relatively comfortable.¹⁰ Although suffering and need tended to dominate the social discourse of the famine,¹¹ it is also apparent that individuals’ personal social conceptions of the world were also influenced by the degree and type of suffering prevalent during the period. To convey the severity of the crisis, many writers meticulously described the most shocking events that they had seen or heard about, using outliers to represent or qualify the gravity of a

⁸ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 17.

⁹ Ibid, 55-56. Dray’s house still remains, a dilapidated ruddy Ottoman style three story building, sitting on the hillside over the Riyadh stadium and the Bain Militaire.

¹⁰ Margaret McGilvary noted almost as an afterthought to a chapter on the dangers and irritations of the famine period that the circumstances for the Americans were really not nearly as difficult as they appeared from abroad. Margaret McGilvary, Margaret McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era in Syria* (New York: Fleming H. Revell & Co., 1920), 199.

¹¹ Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 30.

situation that they could not put into words. The ubiquitous use of the term “horrors” in descriptions of the famine is instructive in this regard. “Horrors” are fundamentally aspects of one’s private experience that cannot exist independent of a perceiver. They require witnesses to internalize, interpret and transmit them – to be “horrified” by them. The horrors, as with the writers’ depictions of society, were brief colorful representations of a famine that confounded the normal array of adjectives and adverbs at their disposal.

This ineffability is also reflected in the literary depictions of the famine in the postwar accounts in particular. Several writers remarked at the surrealism of the horrid scenes that they viewed or of which they were informed. Nickoley wrote that, “the daily sights along the streets seem like a dream – like a horrible nightmare.” Frederick Bliss opened his wartime retrospective by rhetorically questioning his memories of the experience, as if they were too appalling to have actually occurred. He asked “was it all a dream?,” “were they real years...?,” “were they real, those sights?...” and “was she real...?”¹² Encapsulating the essence of their experience of the famine in words seemed to be difficult. Many descriptions of suffering were excessively florid. Others commented on the indescribable nature of the crisis in order to convey their severity. In a passage intended for his wife and children, who had remained in Greece during the war, Nickoley wrote: “Did you ever see a starving person? I hope you never may... It is indefinable but when you have once seen it you can never mistake it, nor ever forget it.”¹³ In his report on the Abeih and Suq al-Gharb soup kitchens, Bayard Dodge echoed

¹² Frederick Bliss, “The Question of Syria: Retrospect or Prospect,” Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, (1920), 1.

¹³ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 4.

these sentiments, noting that it was impossible to truly understand famine without having witnessed the emotional suffering of those straining to sustain their loved ones in the face of overwhelming odds.¹⁴ In both cases, the indescribable nature of the experience involved both the appearance of those suffering, but also the terrible emotional responses that such suffering provoked in the observer.

This preoccupation with tragedy and the visually ghastly nature of the famine ultimately affected how it was conceptualized by those who witnessed it. Although famine writers were frequently obsessed with the squalid and pitiful existences of those living on the edge of starvation, such characterizations were frequently poor indicators of how most individuals actually lived during the period. They naturally skewed to the extremes to indicate the severity of the crisis without reference to the rest of society outside of the occasional description of those who had fallen from middle class or wealthy status into an ignoble death in the gutter. The image of famine that was most often captured was a still-life of a wretched situation, with occasional descriptions of how the starving meagerly subsisted in the face of almost certain annihilation. These dark scenes and cadaverous characters were depicted timelessly – they existed horrifically and they died. What happened in the intervening period seemed inconsequential.

The reconstruction of attitudes about the crisis and those it affected followed a similar trajectory to the suffering in the famine itself. Though this was a largely personal emotional process, it had profound social and practical implications as well. In spite of their often questionable reliability as reporters of fact, these witnesses'

¹⁴ Bayard Dodge, "Report of the Abeih and Suk al-Gharb Soup Kitchens 1914-1918," (1919). Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 2.

repetition of similar anecdotes and interpretations indicates the outline of the discourse that surrounded the famine and its participants. This discourse reflected and shaped contemporary interpretations of the famine and of those who lived through it. Even if these perceptions were warped by their figurative and physical distance from the daily experience of those who actually had to endure desperate poverty in their daily lives, for the observers, such perceptions *were* their reality. Such modified attitudes were frequently characterized by pity, but in the later years of the famine, when desperation and starvation were severe, those who suffered the worst were depicted as degenerated shells of their former, human, selves. Ultimately, these revised social interpretations destabilized the very foundation of the social interactions that took place on a day to day basis.

B. The Darker Side of Normalcy: Judgment and Coping in Crisis

As the declining economic and social situation began to leave dramatic scars on the face of society, individuals sought to preserve pockets of normalcy that connected them to those typical activities and living standards that they had enjoyed in the years before the war. These measures were taken by rich and poor alike, each to his means, as a way of gaining therapeutic respite from the monotony, stress and trauma of the crisis, while also helping to fill the days of the war that were lengthened by boredom, poverty, sickness, sadness, hunger or some combination thereof. Although all classes of individuals and groups resorted to such normalizing behaviors, the social responses that such activities prompted from other members of society is remarkable. While observers often saw no problem with their own strategies or similar ones, they at times regarded

other individuals' or groups' attempts to achieve normality in their own lives as irresponsible, disrespectful or garish.

Superficially, many of the leisure activities that were described in the wartime literature seemed to project indifference towards the suffering that was so prevalent across the country. Among Halidé Edib's first impressions of Beirut was the distasteful contrast in the ostentatious display of wealth among the social elite of the city contrasted with the abject poverty of the beggars who lined the streets.¹⁵ The allegations of the dispassion of the wealthy during the war has frequently been supported by references to their opulence during economic crisis and their insistence on hosting lavish parties while thousands starved on the streets. At a time of immense economic disparity, the luxurious trappings of the wealthy were visual representations of the social injustice that was killing the poorest members of society while enriching those at the top. Generally, the extravagance of the wealthy contrasted poorly with the squalor of the conditions of the impoverished, and the obvious prevalence of exploitation and marketeering left many in Beirut and the Mountain with a dim view of their notables, of whom Sulayman Dhahir wrote, "they were not disturbed by the moans of those weak with hunger, who formed into wailing armies."¹⁶ Certainly their efforts to cloister themselves away from the pleas of the poor did nothing to contradict this perspective. Jirjis al-Maqdisi alleged that the wealthier inhabitants of Mount Lebanon sought to detach themselves entirely, shutting themselves in their homes as the famine worsened in the winter of 1916.¹⁷

¹⁵ Halidé Edib, *Memoir of Halidé Edib* (New York: MacMillan & Co, 1938), 401.

¹⁶ Sulayman Dhahir, *Jabal 'Amil fi al harb al-kawniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-matbu'at al-sharqiyya, 1986), 43.

¹⁷ Jirjis Khuri al-Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, (Beirut: al-matb'a al-'ilmiyya, 1927), 68.

While this does indicate some of the disjuncture that clearly existed between the lives of the wealthy and the rest of society, such evidence is a poor indication of the true attitudes and beliefs that the wealthy actually held, or why they held them.¹⁸ The prevalence of poverty and the dramatic increase in beggars drove a wedge between the poor and not just the wealthy, but middle classes as well. A number of sources describe increasingly aggressive behaviors from the beggars, some of whom would go door to door looking for assistance, targeting the middle class since they were more accessible than the truly wealthy, even though they had less to give.¹⁹ To avoid this, many sought to limit their contact with the poor, or at least preferred to associate with members of their own social status. According to an oral account given by Soumar Dakdouk, members of her family would dress in ragged clothing before making a trip to Beirut to get wheat and other supplies in order to blend in with the beggars and forestall the inevitable requests for aid and threat of confiscation by the Ottoman soldiers posted along the roads.²⁰ Margaret McGilvary noted that foreigners were immediate targets for those seeking aid, and that giving to one person inevitably drew other beggars looking for assistance.²¹ She wrote that “the foreigner was literally besieged with requests for help, which he could not grant... to give to one beggar in the street meant that twenty would spring up out of the ground to demand alms.”²² For McGilvary, the extent of the

¹⁸ They could not be expected to renounce their own wealth in order to suffer in solidarity with the poor, even if they were so inclined. Examples of this sense of social injustice can be found in McGilvary’s *Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, Antoine Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère* (Cairo : Imprimerie Emin Hindie, 1922), Maqdisi’s *A’tham harb*, and Halidé Edib’s *Memoirs*, among others.

¹⁹ Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 1: 397.

²⁰ Interview conducted with Soumar Dakdouk on October 13, 2013.

²¹ McGilvary, *The Dawn of a New Era*, 206.

²² *Ibid.*, 206.

suffering made traveling about in Mount Lebanon “more than the heart can bear,”²³ a sentiment that was reflected in Maqdisi’s observation about the general decline in compassion for the starving poor on the streets.²⁴ In order to evade such situations, those with means began to associate with those of their own social status and wealth, generally avoiding contact with the needy.

This tendency was particularly pronounced in the activities of the American missionaries, notably in the reports of the Sidon Girls’ School. Although the sympathy of the school’s staff for the suffering of the community was evident in reports from the early years of the war,²⁵ the reports from 1916 to 1918 portrayed a community that had grown uncomfortable rubbing elbows with even their own impoverished members. In her annual school report on the year 1916-1917, Dora Eddy wrote that house calls to members of the school community had been reduced, in part because they had become little more than “mere doleful recitals of the hard times and the high price of food.”²⁶ The school’s extracurricular activities provided further evidence of this shift. The Thursday meetings of the women’s club was segregated in 1917, ostensibly due to fears of typhus at a time when soap was exceedingly expensive. However, Eddy’s phrasing is telling:

We found that it was neither agreeable nor sanitary for the well-to-do to have their unwashed sisters of the very poor sitting too near them in those

²³ Ibid., 206.

²⁴ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 58, 69.

²⁵ Ellen Fleischmann, “Living in an isle of safety”? Isolation and empathy in a world of suffering during World War I,” Presentation, MESA Conference, October 12, 2013. See also, Eddy, “Report 1914-1915.”

²⁶ Dora Eddy, “Report of Sidon Seminary, 1915-1916,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls’ School Reports 1906-1955, 3.

days of typhus fever, and with soap beyond the reach of many, we quietly let the clean people go upstairs to one meeting and had a second gathering on the ground floor for the unmended, unwashed and underfed, some of whom were practically beggars.²⁷

If such meetings were themselves attempts to preserve a shell of normalcy in the crisis, their ragged sisters were unwelcome reminders of just how abnormal the world had become.

The wealthy were not the only ones to engage in such behaviors. Just as the rich were condemned for holding wasteful parties as their countrymen died on the streets, the choices of the poor were similarly subject to judgment. In 1918, William Jessup condemned a family's decision to buy *kibbeh*²⁸ with all \$1.25 of their cash handout from the American Mission, since the money could have helped to extend the family's food budget (or presumably given to another family more willing to submit to the mission's desired degree of abstention). In response, the father simply stated that "we have longed for *kibbeh* and the Lord will provide." For his family, the meal was as much a means of seeking emotional comfort as it was a means of physical sustenance – perhaps even more so.²⁹ While Jessup's perspective on the issue focused on the practical matter of sustainability, the father was concerned with providing the illusion of the everyday to his family in their time of need.

²⁷ Ibid, 3.

²⁸ *Kibbeh*, a mixture of spices, pine nuts, burghol and ground meat, would have been relatively expensive at the time.

²⁹ The fact that they were receiving aid may have even emboldened them to make the decision. Robert Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-33, 3.

In the stress and immense need of the crisis, coping behaviors came under intense scrutiny, in part because such behaviors were by their very intent attempts to capture a remnant of life as it was prior to the famine – making them quite abnormal in the midst of the crisis. It may not have been prudent to overspend on an expensive food item or to purchase luxuries like tobacco or alcohol when one’s family was hungry or scraping by on charitable aid, but given the uncertainty of the future and the misery of the present, such attempts to recall a period of safety and security had a certain value for the emotional welfare of those who were not sure they would survive the famine. For those who enjoyed a degree of economic security or even opulence during the war, their attempts to maintain their own lives or to distract themselves with light diversion during the depressing wartime atmosphere could likewise subject them to scrutiny and even derision from others in society, who viewed such actions as insensitive to the suffering of others or unnecessarily ostentatious when many were forced to sell their prized possessions to merely stay alive.

C. A Famine of Faith: Belief, Religiosity and Judgment in the Face of Crisis

“These were days which tried the souls of men.”

- Margaret McGilvary³⁰

Although the Biblical maxim runs, “man cannot live by bread alone,” the effects that the famine had on the faithful suggest that the absence of bread risked a corresponding famine of faith. The apparently arbitrary suffering of the crisis was certainly a troubling matter for the spiritual life of the inhabitants of the region, who

³⁰ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 167.

experienced or observed wanton suffering for which there seemed to be no purpose, no mercy, and no respite from above. In *The Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, Margaret McGilvary wrote, “these were days which tried the souls of men. Each was thrown back upon himself, and many a philosopher or a Christian was forced to redetermine just how much his beliefs were really worth. Did he really have faith?.. was his creed merely a jumble of meaningless phrases which proved of no value in the face of a real crisis?”³¹ Although there is no scientific measure of the impact of the famine on religious belief, there is evidence that this “testing” of the population was dramatic enough to affect the spirituality of certain individuals or communities. This was manifest in a variety of ways: some clung to their faith as a safety net against the suffering and uncertainty of the famine situation, others rejected their faith for another, and many simply neglected or discarded the beliefs that had done little to protect them or their communities from terrible suffering.

This observed tendency itself offers an interesting insight into the shift in how individuals and society began revaluing the trappings of their lives. However, since these interpretations were made by those in society who did not directly suffer the dreadful physical effects of the famine, it is perhaps more interesting to view the commentaries on the religious health of the region as part of the broader process of social reinterpretation that had begun to transform attitudes, relationships and even social identities over the course of the crisis. There have been observations about the religious life of the region during the war,³² but this section focuses mainly on those

³¹ Ibid., 167-168.

³² The most notable of these can be found in Tanielian’s work. Melanie Tanielian, “The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon,” Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013).

observations made by the American and Syrian Presbyterians tied to the American Mission, who were active in both spiritual and humanitarian matters throughout the war. This community's position as an observer existing ambivalently within and outside of both Syrian society and the traditional social hierarchies gave them a curious, (if not wholly accurate) perspective on the trends within society during the famine. Their professional interests as missionaries and their close association with the suffering of the famine led members of the community to tie the problematic attendance and recruitment to the perceived rise in crime, begging and immorality that paralleled the spike in poverty and suffering across the region. Over time, the community's correspondence began to tie suffering to irreligiosity and apathy, if not outright moral decadence. These perceptions about the moral and spiritual nature of suffering and the behaviors of those who suffered gave poverty a moral quality, which affected how the community conceived of and responded to those in need.

Given the significance of religion to the inhabitants of Mount Lebanon and Syria generally, one would expect religion to play a prominent role in the coping strategies that many adopted during the famine. Religion was embedded in the daily life of the population to the extent that sect was a social identity and God an integral feature in daily life. Many colloquialisms that make up a significant portion of the spoken Arabic language imply God's active hand in the most mundane of matters.³³

³³ Among these, "hopefully" is rendered "*in sha' allah*," or "God willing," and goodbye can be aptly rendered "*allah ma'ak*" (God be with you) for both Christians and Muslims. Upon returning from travel or dealing with an illness or some other danger, one is greeted with "*al-hamdu lillah al-salama*," (Praise be to God, you are safe).

A number of studies corroborate this notion, indicating that religiosity can be a vital coping mechanism for those undergoing stressful situations.³⁴ Psychologist Kenneth Pargament indicates that the role that religion plays in times of crisis depends largely on one's preexisting beliefs and tendencies. He argues that intense or dangerous situations do not so much trigger a religious "on and off switch," rather they tap the "reservoir of religious resources" within each individual – the potency of which depends on the holding capacity of this metaphorical well.³⁵ If the "reservoir" was deep, an individual might find solace in religion, whereas those who were ill-inclined towards religion prior to the crisis would not be likely to resort to God to help them cope with the drastic new challenges.

Significantly, Pargament avoids using a concrete notion of "religion," as a reference point since it is so vague and static.³⁶ Rather, in exploring the subject as an experience, it is important to refocus on more fluid concepts like "religiosity," or the personal instantiation of religious beliefs, which makes the point of inquiry the states of mind that contribute to attitudes and behaviors. Intuitively, this approach has merit since attitudes are subject to change depending on changes to one's social and personal context, which is particularly relevant since a person's situational feelings about one's religion or the idea of religion itself are hardly guaranteed to remain the same during the emotional upheaval in crisis and the physical suffering of famine.

³⁴ Michael Argyle and Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. *The Social Psychology of Religion*. Oxford: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975; Kenneth Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping: Theory, Research, Practice*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001, 4.

³⁵ Pargament, *The Psychology of Religion and Coping*, 5.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

Not surprisingly, the American missionaries left some of the most thorough accounts of this phenomenon. The writers of the reports were self-consciously interested in the spiritual state of the region, not for its rhetorical value, but as a matter of business. Though open evangelism had ceased to be the primary function of the Presbyterian missions by the 20th century,³⁷ any negative spiritual effects of famine on the Protestants of the mountain nevertheless counteracted all that they had worked towards since the 1820s. As such, they were acutely sensitive to evangelical trends ascertained from the reports of missionaries and parishioners in villages across the mountain and the flagging conversion rates that began to worsen as the crisis deepened.

Although the American Presbyterians were highly attuned to the decline in piety and religious behaviors in general, the issue of religion in the context of the famine cannot be overlooked as simply the hand-wringing of missionaries who were distraught at the unraveling of their century of hard work. Beyond its personal impacts, these changes in attitude toward religion influenced the ways in which the crisis was socially interpreted by outside observers, many of whom were responsible for directing life-saving aid. These interpretations contributed to the discourse about the moral and social decay of the period and the state of decline into which the population had allegedly fallen. In their reports, the missionaries wrote of a small number of the tragic and potentially inspirational hagiographies of those who had perished, shining in their piety like martyrs, but were often far more concerned about the reports of dispassion and discontent that circulated about the villages that the missionaries visited on their tours of the mountain.

³⁷ Howard Bliss, *The Modern Missionary* (Beirut: The American Press, 1920).

The effect of the crisis on religious belief changed dramatically from the beginning of the crisis to the end. Initially, as Pargament's argument predicts, the threat of death actually seems to have prompted individuals to seek solace in religion, or at least to pursue a sense of companionship and community in the arms of the church. The Sidon Seminary had reported that the initial year of need had actually increased the number of converts in Sidon station, which George Scherer interpreted to mean that "undoubtedly the troubles which the people have been experiencing have driven them to God."³⁸ However, the duration of the famine ensured that this was to be a brief trend that was reversed within a year, as widespread poverty and hunger sent conversion rates plummeting and churches increasingly empty. Though conversion rates were hardly a measure of religious belief, they appeared to signal a red flag for a number of the missionaries, particularly in conjunction with flagging church attendance as the years passed.

Aware of the potentially devastating effect that the declining situation would have on the morale of the population, the foreign missionary community went to great lengths to attempt to preserve the spiritual life of their own communities. It is apparent that leaders like George Doolittle, William Jessup and Bayard Dodge worked to ensure that the religious needs of the community were met through ongoing services, Sunday school and the observation of religious holidays. For the missionaries in particular, their financial security during the war prevented them from experiencing the direct physical suffering that seemed so devastating to the beliefs of their parishioners, but their exposure to the suffering of others nevertheless challenged their preconceptions about

³⁸ George Scherer, "Annual Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission for the year 1914-1915," PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 9.

faith and their notions of God. Financial security may have preserved their faith more so than the poorer members of the community, but as McGilvary noted above, it did not exempt them from the trials of faith and practical applications of theology that the famine imposed.³⁹

Their reports are indicators of the dissonance generated by the declining conditions of the famine as contrasted with the beliefs and attitudes that they felt obliged to project in their writing. Though their reports were rife with biblical allusions and frequently opened and closed with pious proclamations, during the latter years of the famine these seemed to be more formalities of the mission report genre than they were reflections of the true beliefs of the community. Indeed, the sharp contrast between the blatant cynicism of the bulk of the reports and their saccharine conclusions is almost disorienting for the reader, particularly in the accounts of the stations in Tripoli, Sidon and Zahle from 1916-1918.

Initially, the missionaries made efforts to inspire “godliness” among their flocks in the mountains, but over time their efforts stumbled in the face of logistical and practical challenges. W.S. Nelson of Tripoli Station reported that the visits to distant communities were reduced since the cost of feeding the pastor and his horse would have placed undue hardship on their hosts, who needed the food far more for their own sustenance.⁴⁰ Seeking to use the tremendous suffering of the famine as a lesson in moral character, the Christian Endeavor Society in Zahle publishing a topical pamphlet entitled “Repentance,” which Paul Erdman described as: “compiled with the hope and prayer that these difficult and trying times shall not pass without leading many to a

³⁹ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 167-168.

⁴⁰ W.S. Nelson, “Tripoli Station Report, 1917,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 9.

sense of spiritual need and to a real repentance that leads to godliness.”⁴¹ What effect such a chastening pamphlet had on a community already stricken by famine was not recorded, but subsequent reports suggest that it did not do much to improve morale among the local Protestants. Although it was intended to bring people closer to God when imminent death was all around them, the central thrust of the pamphlet associated the suffering with the missionaries’ dogmatic and rather patronizing judgments linking the crisis to God’s will. As noble and redemptive as the suffering appeared in the church’s epistles, for those who actually suffered, the writings were little more than insensitive pious platitudes.

Even if some individuals did fall back on their faith as a way of coping with the effects of the calamity, the general trend seems to point to a gradual regression in religiosity as the prolonged period of dearth afflicted the population without any apparent logic or justice. After a strong year of recruiting in 1915, the Presbyterian missionaries in Zahle reported that the year 1915-1916 yielded 17 converts, its worst total in years.⁴² Attendance lagged, attentions were diverted, and even the missionaries themselves began to play down their role as evangelicals. The missionaries were often willing to explain away these slips as products of the abject need that prevailed during the crisis. The 1918 report of Zahle’s Lebanon Station (which was penned after the start of the British occupation) explained this drift as a natural consequence of the desperate need in which so many had fallen.

⁴¹ Paul Erdman, “Report of Lebanon Station, Syria Mission September 30, 1914 – September 30 1915.” PHS Archives RG-115-10-10 Lebanon Station Reports 1911-29, 5.

⁴² Paul Erdman, “Report of Lebanon Station, Syria Mission, September 30, 1915 – September 30 1916,” Syria Mission,” PHS Archives RG-115-10-10 Lebanon Station Reports 1911-29, 4.

Quite generally, the bodily needs so engrossed the attention of all that the soul needs were very generally left aside. Where whole villages were left and people migrated in the hope of getting a meager living, it is perhaps no wonder if many, not to say most, dropped out of mind every interest but that of food.⁴³

Another report from Tripoli on the relief station in the city noted that: “It was not found easy to instill any great amount of spiritual instruction, since, on their arrival, [the needy] were too hungry to give close attention; and when they had received their pittance they were eager to go on their way in search of something more for the (sic) emaciated bodies.”⁴⁴

However, a simple practical interpretation of this shift in behaviors is not entirely adequate. The Protestants had provided a significant amount of support to those suffering during the war, and in Tripoli, the community actually made special efforts to ensure that its own flock was at least somewhat well fed⁴⁵ – a situation which should have increased recruitment, if anything. Moreover, the missionaries actually described what they regarded as a slipping regard for religion in general that reflected in the weak attendance and conversion rates. In their eyes, the population was not merely unable to devote energy to matters of faith, they appeared to have become unwilling to do so.

This change was perhaps a natural consequence of the famine conditions. Pitrim Sorokin predicted as much in his sociological analysis of famine, in which he observed that famine causes a dramatic increase in the interest in food-acquisition behaviors and a

⁴³ Anonymous, NA, “Report Lebanon Station 1918, Syria Mission,” PHS Archives RG-115-10-10 Lebanon Station Reports 1911-29, 3.

⁴⁴ W.S. Nelson, “Tripoli Station Report, 1917,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 2.

⁴⁵ Arthur Fowler, “Tripoli Station Report for 1914-1915,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 3.

consequent decrease in interest in unrelated activities.⁴⁶ For Arthur Fowler, a Presbyterian Missionary in Tripoli, and perhaps many more, the disinterested attitude of the parishioners and population at large towards matters of the spirit was a matter of personal and professional frustration. In his report on the Mission's Tripoli station from 1914-1915, he acknowledged the terrible social ills that had already led to great suffering in the city, but expressed irritation that the "despair" that this had inspired had not driven them into the arms of God as a means of "deliverance." Indeed, the population seemed more concerned about how to obtain remittances from America than about "how to get eternal riches from Heaven."⁴⁷ Fowler was appalled and indignant. He ends his commentary on the spiritual situation in Tripoli with the comment:

Let us pray to Him with an intensity and a faith that we have not yet known that He will show us how to present the Gospel to these poor dying creatures that they shall turn to Him in repentance. *One feels that it would be comparatively easy for us to stand the oppression and the burden of physical misery, were we but surrounded by souls turning to God and asking the way of salvation.* (emphasis mine)⁴⁸

Though an additional year of exposure to the growing suffering of the famine had tempered his 1916 report – to the extent that he "could hardly blame" the parishioners for the church's relative inactivity – he nevertheless felt as though the failures of the community had rendered his report "unsatisfactory."⁴⁹ Surely, recruitment was hampered by the wartime conditions, including sickness, poverty, government

⁴⁶ Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity*, 51.

⁴⁷ Arthur Fowler, "Tripoli Station Report for 1914-1915," PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁹ Arthur Fowler, "Tripoli Station Report 1915-1916," PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 7.

interference, and the need to guard one's crops,⁵⁰ but one cannot solely attribute this poverty of the soul to material conditions alone.

Indeed, as the famine deepened, the missionaries seemed more resigned to the fact that many in their community had become disillusioned with religion as a whole. The 1918 report from Sidon station observed that, "many people turned away from God saying 'God has turned his face from us God has left us.'"⁵¹ Even in the mission schools, which incorporated an element of worship in their curricula, the Lebanon Station's 1917 report bemoaned the fact that school's religious life "left a great deal to be desired."⁵² As conditions declined as the famine worsened, proselytization began to be regarded dismissively in a number of the reports and letters. The 1917 report of the Lebanon Station in Zahle repudiated typical measures as useless. In it, the anonymous author (likely Paul Erdman) wrote,

At this time when so much of conventional Christianity proves ineffective and life is gauged (sic) by material standards and by deeds, even more than commonly... a demonstration of Christian work is perhaps as valuable if not more valuable than the spoken word. Certainly the latter seems to carry all too little weight in these troublous times.⁵³

The surprisingly frank anonymous report of Tripoli station in 1918 suggests that even the missionaries themselves were not altogether convinced of their own words, or the forthcoming mercy of God. It read: "if even the thought of doubt entered our heart, we

⁵⁰ Robert Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918" Sidon Station PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35, 6.

⁵¹ Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917-1918," 7.

⁵² Anonymous, "Report Lebanon Station 1917," 3.

⁵³ Anonymous (likely Erdman), "Report of Lebanon Station 1917, Syria Mission," PHS Archives RG-115-10-10 Lebanon Station Reports 1911-29, 3.

may be sure that it was very strong in the hearts of the poor dirty hungry creatures who were listening as if to a fairy tale.”⁵⁴

Nor was this shift in attitude solely found in the Christian community (though observations on the matter from outside of it are admittedly rare). In an interview conducted with the author, Hayat Mahmud mentioned a story of blasphemy involving her grandfather and his brother-in-law, which the latter had turned into a family parable. On their way through the Cedars of Baruk on a smuggling run to the Hawran, the two stopped to rest and regain their strength. Mahmud’s grandfather, Jammul Mahmud, broke out a loaf of bread, some olives and an onion for lunch. Breaking the onion on a rock, Jammul intoned “*al-hamdulila ‘ala hathihi al-na’ma*” (“Praise God for this blessing”), to which his brother incredulously replied that Jammul should not offer him praises so freely for their meager lunch since God was clearly taking them for granted – he should make God work to get them.⁵⁵

At first glance the issue seems to be a matter of spiritual choice, but it is possible that there were social factors at play as well. Given the fissures that had begun dividing the wealthier members of society from their poorer brethren after the first year of the famine, one must question whether the attitudes of the church’s elites were in some way responsible for driving the impoverished members of their community away. In 1917 the Sidon Girls’ School reported that it had segregated the weekly women’s meetings by economic status, suggesting that the wealthier members of the community and the missionaries preferred to associate with each other, rather than with the poorer members

⁵⁴ Anonymous, “Report of Tripoli Station, 1918-1919,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 2.

⁵⁵ The brother-in-law became religious later in life and began recounting this tale on his deathbed as a parable – he died of cancer in great pain, whereas Jammul was blessed with a peaceful passing. Interview with Hayat Mahmud, conducted January 24, 2014.

of the congregation. This attitude was captured in Charlotte Brown's discussion of one of the performances held at the school in her 1917-1918 report, in which she wrote, "we had prepared seats for a limited number but as the women and girls kept coming more chairs were brought, people were squeezed tighter and tighter and *what made it more embarrassing was the fact that some of the more honorable ladies came last after the most honorable seats had been taken.*" (emphasis mine). Given the demonstrable development of increasingly negative attitudes towards the poor among the wealthier members of society, it is conceivable that the decline in religious activity was at least partially related to the social dissonance between the different, redefined strata of society – those who had, and those who suffered.

The moral value of certain poor individuals was at times resurrected in their deaths, as the missionaries sought to use the examples of certain doomed parishoners to inspire or guide the remainder of their flock following the war. The most explicit examples of piety recorded in the mission reports were published in the 1918 report of Beirut Station – after the war had already ended. The report described in some detail the deaths of a number of upstanding members of the Protestant community over the course of the war. Special emphasis was placed on the desperate deeds of Aneese Fayadh, who sold scraps of scriptural passages to passersby to feed himself and his two companions until he finally succumbed to hunger and exposure.⁵⁶ Such stories were presented as examples of upright morality to give value to the deaths of some individuals who had, in the missionaries' minds, persevered and stayed true to their spiritual duties at a time when so many others transgressed in order to prolong their lives.

⁵⁶ Anonymous, "Report of Beirut Station 1917 & 1918, Syria Mission," PHS Archives RG-115-4-17 Beirut Station Reports 1902-1916, 3.

In a region wherein one's social and political identities were intertwined in one's religious identity, the issue of faith in the famine is not negligible. Initially, piety seems to have increased as the threat of death loomed, out of concern for their immortal souls or to increase their chances of social support by associating themselves with the relatively well-connected missionary community. However, time and the increased suffering that overtook the country appears to have reduced the faith that people had that God would intervene on their behalf, or even led to alienation from their faith altogether in response to God's quiescence as they and their neighbors sank deeper into poverty and despair.

However, the issue of religiosity is far more telling a measure of the nature of the experience of the famine, and the way in which attitudes and interpretations shaped the worldview of those within it. The American missionaries who observed these trends responded with a mixture of grim resignation and spurned outrage. The growing faithlessness of the people was yet another depressing development for a group that had begun to cast social judgments on the poor for the desperate measures to which they had been driven in their struggle to stay alive. Whereas they valued those like Aneese Fayadh, who struggled in vain and died nobly in tremendous saintly misery, those who eked out a living ignobly presented a problem for the missionaries. Since their mission during the famine had shifted to emergency relief, the famine's insidious impact on behaviors and values created a conflict between their religious obligation to uphold and promote godliness and their ethical obligation to save the bodies of the poor. This perception of the spiritual decline coincided with a growing sense that society was on a downward moral trajectory in general. For individuals tasked with deciding who was to live and who was to die, this could have deadly consequences.

D. Social and Physical *Inhitat* and the Stigma of Poverty

“Body diseases were accompanied by moral diseases. It was a period of *inhitat*.”

- Yusuf Rufayil, Dblita, Kisrawan⁵⁷

The moralization of famine and the dehumanization of its impoverished victims is actually so common in depictions of famine situations that it has developed into a sort of *topos*. For those who observed the effects of famine without having to suffer from actual want, the “disease of wretchedness” from which the impoverished suffered was not merely a bodily affliction, but one which tainted the individual to his very core.⁵⁸ Over the three years of high prices, unemployment and spreading social malaise, the suffering of the poor and the diminished regard for the state’s authority opened the door to a variety of socially unacceptable behaviors. Some of these behaviors were necessary for the preservation of life, but many others also reflected the troublingly diminished regard for typical social norms over the course of the calamity. As literary tropes, such depictions of the decline of the poor were unfortunate, but innocuous. However, such derisive perceptions of the collective poor (or even the population at large) also affected how the observers socially interpreted the events and situations that were taking place across the country and how they perceived and interacted with other members of society. For contemporaries of the famine, this ostensible state of *inhitat*, or decline, represented an actual state of physical and moral deterioration that was readily apparent for those who surveyed the changes that had taken place over the course of the famine.

⁵⁷ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Yusuf Rufayil” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. Diss. Georgetown University (1973), 2: 61.

⁵⁸ Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*, Translated by David Gentilcore (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), 26.

The horrifying visual indicators of starvation made this distinction all the more visceral. The marasmus that displayed the bones of the starving poor physically distinguished the needy from the rest of society. On them, Jirjis Maqdisi wrote, “their image became the severest, blackest oppression. Their bones stuck through their skin. They became as rough as wood. Their skin blackened like a *tannour* from the heat of the fire of hunger.”⁵⁹ Even in sympathetic portrayals, the starving poor were reduced to odious caricatures, transforming into “monkeys,” “skeletons,” “waifs,” and worse.⁶⁰ The physical degeneration of the starving inspired a mixture of pity and horror in observers. Edward Nickoley described the scenes as living in a “nightmare,” commenting in his diary (written for his wife and child in Greece), “Did you ever see a starving person? I hope you never may. No matter how emaciated a person may be from disease he never looks exactly like the person suffering from pangs of hunger. It is indefinable but when you have once seen it you can never mistake it, nor ever forget it.”⁶¹ In a later entry he reiterates his point: “no description can do justice to the situation... No one who has never seen famine and starvation knows what it looks like in its physical embodiment. It is a ghastly subject.”⁶²

For some writers, the state of *inhitat* into which the starving poor had fallen intrinsically contrasted the degraded individual (or society) with their former wholeness. In the most extreme depictions, such portrayals relieved the subject of his humanity to render him denatured, bestial or broken, in what Piero Camporesi has described as “the

⁵⁹ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 70.

⁶⁰ A. Tylor Brand, “Years of Horror: The American Experience of the Famine of World War I in Lebanon and Western Syria,” *Southern Horrors: Northern Visions of the Mediterranean World*, edited by Gilbert Bonifas and Martine Monacelli, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013): 179.

⁶¹ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 4.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 19.

last stage in a troubled metamorphosis: the long voyage in the destruction of what is human and the passing birth of the man/animal..." in his account of Italian famines.⁶³ Sulayman Dhahir of Nabatieh observed, "we saw with our own eyes the victims of starvation fallen on the roads, in the alleys, on the streets, and their cries filling the air. We saw them degrade into scared animals and compete against each other for scraps."⁶⁴ Jirjis al-Maqdisi, who was one of the most sympathetic of the writers dealing with the suffering of the famine, was particularly struck by the transformation of the middle class into the desperate individuals he saw dying by the waysides. He wrote: "those who once ate sumptuous foods fell in the streets. They who were brought up in crimson embraced the dung."⁶⁵ Rarely sentimental, Edward Nickoley deemed the saddest sight to be those individuals whose physiological response to long-term semi-starvation had rendered them mechanical in their search for sustenance: "their eyes are constantly fixed on the ground, moving restlessly from side to side in the hope of seeing something that they can pick up and eat. Their eyes have been turned from the higher and better things in life, with them it is simply the existence of a brute." He marveled at "how tenaciously the human being clings to life, to what desperate measures the individual will resort to keep the vital spark alive."⁶⁶ Even in his reference to the humanity of the sufferers, Nickoley regards the matter with a sense of emotional detachment, using the sterilized terms "human being," "individual," and "the" vital spark, rather than the more humanizing "person," "man," or "his."

⁶³ Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams*, 26.

⁶⁴ Dhahir, *Jabal 'Amil*, 45.

⁶⁵ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 69.

⁶⁶ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 17.

The spreading indigence sapped what remained of the state's coercive power to preserve order, or in many cases its will to try to do so. The apparent decline in piety by many in society (to what extent that such a trend existed) and the rise in criminal behaviors were regarded ominously in several of the sources. Bayard Dodge painted a dark landscape of a society in decay:

Laziness, pauperism and all kinds of dishonesty became prevalent. Petty thievery, highway robbery and assault grew common. The presence of soldiers and officers offered a never-ending temptation to thousands of starving and despairing girls... Officers and soldiers carried on a regular business of corruption and oppression; priests grew selfish and mercenary, and the poor sank into an extremity of moral weakness which can only be realized at a time of physical breakdown and religious despair.⁶⁷

The perceived decline of the population from its prewar state of existence fascinated observers like Dodge. For these individuals, the increase in violations of social taboos and the uptick in crimes of opportunity and desperation were indicative of a sort of social miasma that had settled on the region.

There was a good deal of truth to these observations – by 1917, the famine had undeniably loosened many of the strictures that normally bound individuals in their personal and social conduct. The social, legal and ethical norms that typically guided society became malleable as the need intensified and the ability or willingness to enforce social controls waned. In the vacuum of social restraint and the state's inability to strictly impose order, individuals began to modify their emotional and moral outlook on life to better suit their immediate context. This could be seen in adaptations to sustain one's life or maintain a certain standard of living (or vestiges thereof), or conversely, in

⁶⁷ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 427.

the rejection of those ideals and attitudes that had guided their social and personal behavior in the prewar years. Though the justifications and extent of such behaviors varied, the broader effects of the change in social attitudes began to appear in society as the famine wore on.

Such judgments were corroborated by the examples given of alleged moral deterioration among the rich and poor alike, though the crimes of the two groups were portrayed quite differently. For the poor, there was at least some excuse for their violations of usual social norms. Indeed, their desperate behaviors could almost be expected in famine. The monopoly that hunger exercises on one's cognitive faculties generally contributes to a diminished regard for social, legal and moral conventions – in famine people steal because they are hungry and they no longer care what others think of their actions. The personal inhibitions and moral or ethical constraints on prohibited behavior may continue to exert force on a person's decisions, but in their conflict with the individual's survival instinct, the stronger force would eventually overwhelm the weaker. Although many times this internal battle justified legal or ethical violations, it also meant that matters of morality and social behavior were still a matter of personal choice driven by need and opportunity, not an irresistible trend to be followed blindly. Despite the potency of the impulse to prolong one's own life or those of his loved ones, there was still a process of negotiation between the exigency of immediate need and the character and beliefs that the individual held or had held prior to the famine that guided his normal social behaviors. Sympathetic observers like Maqdisi observed with some incredulity that starving people would "writhe" in the immediate vicinity of bread that

they could very easily have stolen to sustain their lives, and yet they refrained from taking it out of fear or because it was humiliating.⁶⁸

And certainly poverty and need were not the only factors that contributed to the sense of lawlessness – individuals who were not at risk of starvation stole, brigands extorted and murdered in the countryside, wealthy speculators played the markets to profit at the expense of others, and corrupt officials skimmed money and exacted bribes for simply doing their job. Even if in many cases instances of moral relativity and outright criminal behaviors could be attributed to acts of desperation and the need to survive, there was a measure of opportunism in many of the illegal behaviors of the wartime period that justified the aforementioned behaviors. Just as many of the crimes of the desperate can be explained (if not justified) by the exigency of bodily need, many of the “white collar” crimes that took place could be justified as a means of survival – one did not have to fall fully into desperate poverty to feel the threat of the crisis or see an opportunity to ensure that he would benefit. In some cases, it is apparent that corrupt officials were merely seeking to take advantage of their office in order to profit personally (in some instances significantly),⁶⁹ but for many, minor malfeasance was a means of self-preservation. Yusuf al-Hakim attributed the prevalence of corruption to the effects of inflation on the pay of civil servants, whose salaries were paid in paper lira at a rate commensurate with their salaries prior to the war.⁷⁰ With the depreciated value of the paper money the actual value of their pay diminished to a fraction of its

⁶⁸ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 70.

⁶⁹ Notably in the cases of Police Chief Muhieddine Bey and the head of the wheat consortium in Lebanon, Najib Asfar, who both profited significantly from the state's control over food acquisition and distribution in Beirut and Mount Lebanon respectively. See Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère*, 50; Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 73.

⁷⁰ Yusuf al-Hakim, *Bayrut wa Lubnan fi 'ahd Al-'Uthman* (Beirut: Dar al-Nahar, 1991), 255.

nominal value even before they attempted to purchase anything at the drastically inflated prices.

Regardless of their motivations, corrupt officials and white collar criminals have become stock characters in portrayals of the famine. Perhaps their harshest critic, Sulayman Dhahir, blames the confiscation and heavy-handed taxation of the governor of Nabatieh for exacerbating the economic crisis and creating the conditions of the famine, noting that the indigent had begun cursing officials, saying, “because of you I spent the night on my belly.”⁷¹ Margaret McGilvary provides detailed condemnations of officials ranging from Beirut’s Wali, ‘Azmi Bey to the Chief of Police, Muhieddine Bey to the lower level officials who withheld paperwork for bribes or used their position of power to make extra money on basic necessities. The venal predations of the “formerly struggling” merchants who had shifted their business focus to speculation and money lending after the closure of the port drew especially harsh critiques in the sources.⁷² However, there was a difference between the perceptions of white collar crime and the crimes of desperation committed by those in abject poverty. Although usurers, speculators and corrupt officials were portrayed as villains in by their contemporaries, apart from one individual who was referred to as a “slimy serpent,” the wealthy transgressors were not regarded as having shed their humanity.

The desperately needy were at times not so fortunate. For the most part, the perpetrators of more common crimes were viewed with a mixture of pity and derision. Nickoley mourned the degradation of morals in society as individuals began resorting to petty theft across the country – and even on the campus of the Syrian Protestant

⁷¹ Dhahir, *Jabal ‘Amil fi al-harb al-kawniyya*, 43.

⁷² Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 32.

College. In his diary, he deliberately notes the progression in the type of such petty larceny from small, sellable goods like watches to the basic “necessities” of daily life – shirts, shoes and sheets – which suggests that he viewed the theft as a matter of basic survival (and therefore somewhat justifiable).⁷³ W.S. Nelson from Tripoli Station reported with similar acceptance that after some boys had been taken in and revived from their state of starvation, after which they “later proved their skill by helping themselves to certain items of moveable property belonging to the school,” he commented that, “it was a satisfaction to know that they had been saved from death for a time.”⁷⁴

Acts like prostitution occupied a curious middle ground. Although the women who engaged in the sex trade were often depicted retaining some shreds of nobility since their decision was seen as a way of feeding themselves and their families, either out of a Puritanical sense of propriety or an inability to separate the body from the ideal of feminine purity, their sexual transactions were almost universally described in more symbolic terms. In the diary of the soldier Ihsan Turjeman, the writer commented on the moral decline in Jerusalem with a mixture of scorn and pity, writing: “what miserable creatures, selling their bodies for pennies to satisfy the bestial needs of men. I am sure that most prostitutes would not practice their processions except for their financial need.”⁷⁵ Mary Dale similarly reported that a neighbor’s friend had “sold herself” for a loaf of bread in November 1916.⁷⁶ As euphemisms go, “selling oneself” carries a degree

⁷³ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁴ Nelson, “Tripoli Station Report, 1917,” 2.

⁷⁵ Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 54.

⁷⁶ Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 1, 394.

of permanence, since it is not something that one can purchase back. In the eyes of her honorable judges, this particular act of desperation reclassified the woman among the dishonorable, even if her motives were pure. Such divisions among the poor were significant, since the honorable poor who suffered in Christ-like silence were later to be deemed the “worthy poor,” who could be granted salvation by those distributing life-saving aid.

Other acts of desperation were viewed less charitably, particularly when they involved family and children.⁷⁷ Some parents sold their sons and daughters to Ottoman officers. Motivation for this ranged from the benign, such as attempting to ensure their survival if the parent could not afford to continue feeding them, to the malicious. Witnesses recalled with alacrity tales of such social transgressions. On his visit to Khiam, George Doolittle wrote, “parents lost their parental affections and fathers hid the food from the eyes of their starving children. One woman reported that she had sold her daughters to the Arabs, each for three bushels of corn, and seemed delighted to have got rid of them!”⁷⁸ Yusuf Rufayil was so struck by the phenomenon that he noted two cases in his interview with Nicholas Ajay: one of a mother snatching food from the mouth of her hungry child, and the other of a son rejoicing at the news that his father had died since it meant more bread for him.⁷⁹ Robert Byerly noted in a report on relief work in the vicinity of Sidon that the workers had begun feeding children on site because parents would take the food from their starving children to eat for themselves, and one

⁷⁷ Tanielian takes these reports as an indication of a broader trend of behaviors, but there is reason to suspect that the sources were making a point about the general degradation of society when using these examples – if they were even real. Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 63-67.

⁷⁸ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 95.

⁷⁹ Nicholas Ajay, “Interview with Yusuf Rufayil” in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918,” Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1972), 2: 60,62.

father even refused to send his daughter to collect her portion of food if she could not bring it back to share.⁸⁰ In one of Nickoley's morose reports on the rumors of the day, to offer a short summary of the state of affairs in the country, he recorded that "a woman threw herself off the roof because she could not bear to see her children starving. Another woman is found beating, biting and otherwise mutilating her children, she has gone insane from the physical suffering and anxiety."⁸¹

One of the recurring tropes in representations of the decline of society revolved around the disgusting fodder that individuals were driven to consume in their desperation. The dietary practices of the poor captivated those observing the actions of the starving since both the foods and the acts of obtaining it were so appalling. Some of the non-sufferers were emotionally devastated by the spectacle, weeping as they watched their neighbors devouring garbage in the streets.⁸² 'Anbara Salam al-Khalidi observed that the ragged, distended children who descended upon the discarded peels of the bananas that she had purchased downtown appeared more like apes than humans.⁸³ Others saw the behaviors as living metaphors of the physical and spiritual degeneration of the country. Najwa al-Qattan has observed that such behaviors further served to distinguish the suffering from the non-suffering, with imagery and descriptions that rendered the starving poor as, at best, denatured human beings – at worst, beasts and

⁸⁰ Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918," 3.

⁸¹ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 17.

⁸² Mahmud Khalil Sa'ab, *Stories and Scenes from Mount Lebanon*, trans. by Tamam Abushakra (London: Saqi, 2004), 209. Ajay, "Interview with Salwa Salibi," in "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2: 91.

⁸³ Anbara Salam al-Khalidi, *Memoirs of an Early Arab Feminist: The Life and Activism of Anbara Salam Khalidi*, trans. by Tarif Khalidi (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 68.

monkeys.⁸⁴ Such dehumanization even when framed compassionately, reduced the humanity of the individuals portrayed and trivialized their suffering.

However, it also diminishes the great lengths to which the needy went to secure their existence, in defiance of the social derision that such behaviors would call upon them. Because some of the foods consumed were toxic, such acts of desperation were tremendously dangerous as well. Numerous sources report the consumption of carrion and dead animals, in some cases having dire consequences for those who ate the meat. Edward Nickoley's diary tells of a rumor of the villagers of Dbeih cutting up a dead donkey and distributing the meat through the town, resulting in the death of 20 from "ptomaine" poisoning.⁸⁵ George Doolittle gives a similar account of a formerly well-to-do family – after eating a baby goat that had been found dead in their field, all died but one son, who remained alive but insane.⁸⁶

The means by which individuals acquired their appalling fare was perhaps even more repellant for the observers than their actual consumption of it. Memoirs and interviews drew special attention to those who, in their desperation, scavenged undigested pieces of grain from animal dung.⁸⁷ In the eyes of those not suffering from starvation, feces was clearly still a taboo that, like cannibalism, inspired both fascination and disgust. Jirjis al-Maqdisi commented that those who rooted through garbage and

⁸⁴Najwa al-Qattan, "Eating Grass in WWI Syria: Animals and Identity in the Discourses of the Famine," presented at Middle East Studies Association annual conference, New Orleans, October 11, 2013.

⁸⁵ Ptomaine is now regarded as a non-technical term for food poisoning. It is possible that the high rate of death was the result of botulism. Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 4.

⁸⁶ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 114.

⁸⁷ Nickoley, "Historic Diary," 17.

dung heaps to find edible material were left with the “stench of a skunk.”⁸⁸ Edward Nickoley described his own experience with the poor who haunted downtown Beirut in remarkable detail:

We see children running after dogs to take bones away from them and then fight among themselves to determine who shall gnaw the bone. Children congregate at the meat stalls in the market and grab up greedily scraps of bone, gristle and skin that are thrown away and eagerly chew them. A woman with her finger nails picking bits of meat left in a hide and eating them as she peeled them loose, children chewing horns of animals to suck the meat taste out of the portion nearest to the head.⁸⁹

The hunting of domestic animals and the consumption of grass and other herbs was notable, not only for the clear animalistic associations, but also for the sheer desperation that it entailed. Nickoley wrote of a rumor that all the dogs of Mansourieh had been consumed by February 1917.⁹⁰ Father Antoine Yammine described the unfortunate Lebanese searching for greens in fields filled with rotting bodies, in a dual reference to the tragedy of the situation.⁹¹

Perhaps more than anything, cases of necrophagy and outright cannibalism conveyed an unthinkable collapse of humanity in the perpetrators. Though confirming tales of cannibalism is difficult given the high prevalence of rumors involving it (and the lack of specificity in many accounts), there are several cases discovered that are corroborated with enough official detail that they cannot be discounted.⁹² Many of these

⁸⁸ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 68.

⁸⁹ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁹¹ Antoine Yammine, *Quatre ans de misère* (Cairo : Imprimerie Emin Hindie, 1922), 46.

⁹² The story of the girls who murdered boys near Tripoli can be found in a number of sources, and the tale of the man from Damur appears in at least three, including Nickoley, Dhahir and Doolittle.

reports appear to have originated from the police, a fact which lends the tales slightly greater credibility. Grave robbing was treated with revulsion, but less than in those instances wherein cannibalism required premeditated murder. Sulayman Dhahir seemed particularly fixated on these sordid tales, describing floridly the discovery of “human flesh,” and the various methods of butchery and preparation which the police found when they raided the aforementioned man’s home in Damur. He even provided detailed information on the types of meat that were discovered in the house, as though the consumption of man was somehow worse if it was meticulously prepared as *sawda* or *kofta* rather than simply eaten raw.⁹³ In the case of a woman who was found with the heads to two missing children in her home, Dhahir actually named the victims, a boy named Abd al-Hassan and a girl, Hafiza.⁹⁴ Similarly, the 1918 report of Tripoli Station included reference to the two sisters who had lured and murdered children, noting that they had boiled the remains to sell the fat in the market – making the offense doubly horrifying since it implicated others in unknowing cannibalism as well.⁹⁵

The will to maintain life in spite of one’s tremendous physical and emotional suffering is apparent in the willingness of some of the most desperate to violate taboos in order to keep themselves alive. However, the transgression of social norms led casual observers to interpret these acts as ones of unspeakable degradation and decline rather than indications of the persistence of hope in a time of the darkest need. Such a judgment was not without precedent, as this more pessimistic outlook coincided with

⁹³ The police found a liver removed and apparently ready for cooking, as well as ground human flesh. Dhahir, *Jabal ‘Amil*, 45-46.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁹⁵ Lahd Khatir, *Jabal Lubnan fi ‘ahd al-Mutasarrifiyyin fi Lubnan* (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1982), 207. NA, “Tripoli Station Report 1917-1918,” 4.

the narrative of decline and decay that was used by the vast majority of the writers who covered the famine. Apart from the sheer horror and fascination that such acts inspired in observers, it was apparent that the stories themselves were useful as allegories or representations of a broader theme intended to apply to society as a whole. Since the writers felt that they could not adequately capture the gravity of the situation, they relied upon extreme examples to demonstrate the deplorable depths of the crisis. Many Lebanese writers in particular fit such behaviors into an antagonistic plot arc in which the suffering poor were victims of the misdeeds of others, and even the cannibals or criminals were driven to their grisly deeds by something – the Turks, local officials, or desperation, among others.

For some of the contemporary observers of the famine, the taint on the character of the population was regarded as permanent. Edward Nickoley commented that, “the demoralization is so complete that it is sad to contemplate the condition of the people even after peace is established and after life once more resumes its normal course.” His speculation that it would take generations to overcome the effects of the famine imply that the current one had been broken beyond repair.⁹⁶ From this perspective, human beings were regarded as objects that could be irreparably spoiled or tainted by physical degradation, desperation or moral deviance. In the end, what emerges from such depictions of suffering and the desperate struggle to overcome the terrible odds of the crisis are images of individuals who were, in Maqdisi’s words, “beyond saving.”⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 6.

⁹⁷ Maqdisi, *A'tham harb*, 69.

E. Morality and Mortality: Adjusted Attitudes and the Perception of Death in the Famine

“They must die, there is no saving them, for even what they now receive can merely serve to prolong slightly the miserable existence which they are leading.”

- Edward Nickoley, 1917⁹⁸

Death, particularly when it was preceded by immense physical and emotional suffering, became a frequent and altogether unwelcome aspect of daily life that individuals and communities began to rationalize and accept psychologically and logistically. Burials became a common and frequently unmarked affair. Although death, as with suffering, became almost trivialized by the process of normalization that took place during crisis,⁹⁹ the observations assertions about attitudes towards death that appear in the sources primarily dealt with the writers’ perceptions of three very different matters: how one felt about one’s own death, how one felt about the death of loved ones, and how one felt about the deaths of others. Ultimately, such judgments were to some degree determined by the attitudes that individuals had developed as a result of their own experience with death and suffering during the famine.

The manner in which individuals began to regard mortality shifted as their perceptions of others in the crisis and of the dual nature of the body itself changed in response to the profound suffering of the famine. It is apparent from the observations made during the Syrian famine that social notions of the body can be situationally constructed. As with situational identities, such constructions retained many pre-famine notions as their foundation, but were formed by a worldview that had been denatured by the ongoing crisis itself like wax near a fire. For those who experienced the famine, the

⁹⁸ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 17.

⁹⁹ Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 65-66.

natures of the body were conceived both as having a social, human side, which was the vessel of life and the seat of the individual (the soul), and a more abstract physical form (the clay). As indicated earlier, the decay of the physical self was perceived to have consequent impacts on its moral and spiritual self, which were apparent for the observers in the desperation to which bodily need drove those who most acutely suffered the effects of starvation. The abstract body was subject to decay through starvation and disease, and remained, empty, after all life had ceased.

The glut of death in society and the subtle threats that the bodies represented to the wellbeing of the living, (particularly in a time of epidemic disease), rendered the physical corpse itself reprehensible and devoid of value – in many ways reflecting the devaluation of the poor starving individuals themselves prior to their eventual demise. Although such characterizations are not convincing proof of the actual changes in perspective that the starving poor undoubtedly experienced (which varied as much as other personal beliefs), it does reveal a tremendous amount about the perceptions of the observers of the crisis, for whom a revised conception of society provided a rational basis for their assumptions about the attitudes and behaviors of others.

The impact of mortality was softened most for those whom the death could be abstracted or normalized, most typically in the cases wherein the dead person was simply another anonymous victim of the famine. While the risk of one's own death and the deaths of loved ones could still be emotionally devastating, even after immense suffering, the deaths of others were easier to rationalize and even accept as a blessing. In 1917, Edward Nickoley commented that the rapid action of death by typhus was preferable to prolonged death by starvation, assuming in both cases that death was the inevitable conclusion. He wrote, "in a way it is a mercy and a relief to those who are so

far gone and there are no means of rescue in sight. The quick action of the fever would seem preferable to the lingering torture of famine with a no less sure result.”¹⁰⁰

Likewise, many who recorded their own observations about the famine abstracted the deaths of others as a convenient means of characterizing the situation. Although Nickoley commented (with good reason) that statistics had no meaning in a crisis of the magnitude of the famine, the unbelievable mortality estimates and the appalling nature of the deaths from starvation and disease were generally reserved for when writers sought to punctuate depictions of the crisis to convey its immensity.¹⁰¹ Such uses were not intended to trivialize death, but the effect was certainly to depersonalize the deaths by instrumentalizing them, changing the relatively meaningless loss of physical life by an anonymous or unknown individual into a fraction of a percentage or a single vast total that could help to define the terrible nature of what the observer wished to convey.

Like with the portrayals of suffering, depictions of death were often characterized by allusion and metaphor that sought to capture the gravity of the situation or to give meaning to an otherwise unfathomable crisis. George Doolittle dedicated an entire chapter of his unpublished manuscript *Pathos and Humor* to “The Path of the Reaper,” which he frames in counterpoint with the Biblical famine of Egypt.¹⁰² The terminology used to describe the dead and suffering was excessive in its imagery and frequently reduced the dead and dying often euphemistic pejoratives like “wretches,”

¹⁰⁰ Nickoley, “Historical Diary,” 3.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰² Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 86-88.

“skeletons,” and the like.¹⁰³ In these descriptions, the pity with which these individuals were regarded was mitigated by the implications of inhumanity that the words conveyed.

The hideousness of death and starvation were ultimately more vexing for those who viewed the suffering from afar – those who were actually suffering had more pressing concerns than the disturbing appearance of their protruding bones. The physical grotesqueness of those suffering from long term semi-starvation and their apparent misery had transformative effect on the perception of death for those who wrote on the famine. The horrid appearance of the slow decline of starvation paradoxically gave death an almost benevolent aura in some of the accounts. The feeling of horror and revulsion that Nickoley felt is apparent in his musings on death from his diary entry from February, 1917:

One method of destroying life is more spectacular and more sensational than another, it seems more horrifying to send several hundred persons to the bottom of the sea than to subject a community to starvation. It seems so, until you have seen actual starvation. Were I to take my chance between being speedily dispatched by a torpedo or being starved – give me the torpedo every time and give it quickly.¹⁰⁴

Nickoley’s honest descriptions in his diary portrayed a man uncomfortable with the suffering to the extent that death would be a blessed release from the squalid suffering of starvation – even as he described individuals going to desperate measures merely to maintain their lives in such a state. He even saw death as a kind release for those children suffering in the cold of the mountains, saying, “their emaciated bodies, their

¹⁰³ Brand, “Years of Horror,” 179.

¹⁰⁴ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 2. Emphasis in the original.

swollen feet and faces are blue with cold. They must die, there is no saving them, for even what they now receive can merely serve to prolong slightly the miserable existence which they are leading.”¹⁰⁵ For Nickoley, who silently suffered from compassion fatigue and his own guilt at the callousness to suffering that he had developed over the course of the crisis, such an observation suggests an inability to comprehend the will to live in such squalid suffering, just as he found it difficult to confront or even imagine the daily reality of those who were starving and dying on the streets around him.

The increased prevalence of death in daily life made it somewhat easier to swallow for many contemporaries. The higher mortality rate necessitated a more active role by the community in disposing of the bodies, but the volume of mortality often reduced the formality of the event to a matter of inconvenient practicality. Clearly, this applied primarily to the impoverished poor and homeless refugees, who faced anonymous burial in mass graves or the indignity of being devoured by scavenging animals in the fields and roadsides. Those of better circumstances or higher standing, like the Syrian Protestant College’s venerable Daniel Bliss, were buried with far greater distinction and customary respect.¹⁰⁶

Death also created logistical issues for the living. For those who were weakened by starvation and unable to pay for a normal burial, the disposal of a loved one could be a difficult necessity. The concern for the dignity of the dead was diminished by need and the frequency of death. George Doolittle observed a mother removing the clothing from her dead child before burial, reasoning that her living children were in more

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 17.

¹⁰⁶ Tanielian makes a similar observation in “The War of Famine,” 61.

desperate need of the rags.¹⁰⁷ Worse, Mary Dorman observed that graveyards themselves offered a sort of grisly harvest, as thieves began rifling the remains of the dead in search of gold teeth.¹⁰⁸ There were reports of bodies dumped down wells, buried loosely in the sand by the side of the road, or simply left in the fields to decay when there was no one left to care for their final remains. In small mountain villages, families who succumbed to starvation or epidemic disease were occasionally interred in their homes, the bricks were simply pulled down over the body.¹⁰⁹

The severity of daily life would have undoubtedly stimulated even more drastic reappraisals of mortality and one's relationship with it among those who were forced to deal with death or the threat of dying on a regular basis. George Doolittle's 1916 report on the Sidon Mission noted that, "everywhere the overburdened women are disheartened, and in many places indifferent. Children are dying of starvation before their mothers' eyes." Doolittle further noted that when a pastor came to visit a family whose only infant son had died, he encountered silence and solemn acceptance rather than weeping and grieving.¹¹⁰ Several well documented cases of this phenomenon in other societies in crisis validate such observations. In her work on the *favelas* of Brazil, Nancy Scheper-Hughes has observed that the state of perpetual need, disease and semi-starvation in the shantytowns in which she had worked had made death an expected risk

¹⁰⁷ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 34

¹⁰⁸ Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 399.

¹⁰⁹ Bulus 'Aqil, "Intelligence Report to Allied Agent, 19 October, 1916," in Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 2, 194-195.

¹¹⁰ George Doolittle, "Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916" 9-10.

of childhood that was so prevalent that mothers had ceased to display emotion at the loss of a child – as with the Syrian infant, theirs was a “death without weeping.”¹¹¹

Nickoley introduced his commentary on the effects of death on society in his May 23, 1917 diary entry with the statement: “death, in its most squalid forms is on every hand.” In major towns and cities, which had become refugee centers for those who fled the mountain in search of work and food, the large number of bodies and their anonymity reduced the matter of disposal to a bureaucratic necessity. Carts circled Beirut several times a day to collect bodies from the streets and either dump them in mass graves in the sands to the south of the city or in the sea.¹¹² McGilvary reported that in large towns like Aley, the bodies were collected in the morning and cast off the hillsides, where they were devoured by jackals and hyenas.¹¹³ In Tripoli, bodies were initially dumped into the river by the municipality, creating a public health risk for those who relied upon its water for use in the home. The city later began collecting the bodies in an empty house, to be transported for burial in “the sand” every few days.¹¹⁴ For the leaders of communities suffering from a lack of revenues, the mounting death tolls were a matter of terrible inconvenience. When Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi passed through Tyre during their survey of the Wilaya of Beirut, the mayor of the town complained specifically about the costs that the community had incurred due

¹¹¹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). Curiously enough, Masterman observed a similar attitude among Palestinian women, for whom dramatic infant and child mortality rates had made sickness a time for mourning, but death a time for stoicism. See. E.W.G. Masterman, “Hygiene and Disease in Palestine in Modern and Biblical Times, Chapter 2,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (1918), 71.

¹¹² Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” 431.

¹¹³ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 204.

¹¹⁴ NA, “Tripoli Station Report 1917-1918,” PHS Archives RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919, 4.

to the deteriorating situation. He claimed that the annual cost of burials to the municipality was normally 3,000 lira, but that the town had spent 2,700 lira in the previous three months alone to deal with the excess mortality.¹¹⁵

Undoubtedly, the growing distaste for the poor among the population influenced how the dead were discarded, or even how the living were treated as death approached. The town of Khiam in Jabal ‘Amil, which was plagued by conscription, disease and poverty during the war, furnished a particularly grisly account. Doolittle recounted the story of a refugee family that fled the countryside to seek work in the town. On the way, the father had died, and as they neared the town, the mother fell and could not get up. When the daughter came crying that her mother had died, the townsfolk came out to bury her. Upon finding that she was not yet dead, they commenced to dig the grave as she lay next to it, occasionally opening her eyes to watch them. After waiting for some time, the men were instructed to turn her from side to side to accelerate her demise, but this had little effect. Eventually, they decided to simply bury her alive.¹¹⁶ Doolittle was aghast at this report, which he discovered during his surveys of the countryside during and after the war. The fact that this all took place while the woman was still alive and so close to the town is indicative of the attitudes that had developed in the impoverished rural community over the course of the famine. Although the townsfolk could have brought the woman into the town and attempted to revive her, her condition was such that she was viewed as irreparably broken, on whom the valuable food would have been a waste. Not only was saving her a poor investment, it would have been a sunken one: if she had lived, the village would have had to continue to support her.

¹¹⁵ Muhammad Bahjat and Muhammad Rafiq Tamimi, *Wilayat Bayrut* (Beirut: Dar Lahd Khatir, 1987), 1: 290.

¹¹⁶ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 95-96.

The disposal of bodies was frequently farmed out to the lower castes of society. Porters who had lost their jobs when the port was closed found work during the famine transporting bodies, which by 1917 moved in a “procession” to the cemeteries located just outside of the city. Nickoley noted that the police began treating traffic jams of coffins as they might handle normal congestion, creating scenes that were almost macabrely humorous. He wrote that when the police “jogged” some of the porters for moving too slowly, the men justified their pace by the fact that there were three bodies packed inside of their coffin.¹¹⁷ George Doolittle described a similar story. A porter was assigned to transport the body of a boy to the cemetery for burial. Upon arriving at the gates of the cemetery and finding them closed, the bearer simply threw the corpse of the child he had been carrying over the gate, reasoning that it would be buried in the morning.¹¹⁸ Aghast, Doolittle concluded that death had lost its meaning.

Fear of contracting a fatal disease during an epidemic further reduced the incentive to participate in normal rites and even those necessary procedures to prepare the body for burial. As Shaykh of the village of Shaqra, which was beset by intense poverty and an epidemic of cholera during the war, Mushin al-Amin was forced to assign the task of washing corpses of those who had perished from the disease to two individuals, ‘Ali al-Zein and ‘Amsha al-Dib, simply to ensure that the bodies were properly interred. Even when they were not actually performing the burial procedures, fears of disease deterred Amin’s efforts. In one instance, the villagers refused to allow the body of one woman to be washed near their homes, and Amin was forced to press

¹¹⁷ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 44.

¹¹⁸ Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 34.

passers-by into service to bear her coffin to the cemetery.¹¹⁹ A similar instance was recorded in Tripoli by George Doolittle, who wrote of an instance wherein a woman dropped dead in the streets from an acute attack of cholera and lay there for hours in the plain sight of a guard, who refused to leave his post to deal with the fallen woman. After repeated pestering, the guard eventually demanded two bishliks to purchase lime to sprinkle over the corpse as it lay in the street, but took no initiative to actually remove the body.¹²⁰

Ultimately, these altered perceptions of death were reflective of the broader shift in attitudes towards those parts of society that had been denatured by the famine. Just as the pre-famine social norms were to some extent discarded in favor of more situationally appropriate guidelines, conceptions of the body and its mortal remains changed as the crisis began to dictate new modes of logic and shape new lenses through which individuals examined and interpreted their experiences. For many, their overexposure to death and to corpses reduced the value of the body to its constituent flesh. Which, given the social redefinition of the starving during the famine, was worth very little indeed.

¹¹⁹ Muhsin al-Amin, *Autobiographie d'un clerc chiïte du Gabal 'Amil, tiré de: les notables chiïtes* (Damascus : Institut Français de Damas, 1998), 164.

¹²⁰ In all fairness, this was not his job. Doolittle, *Pathos and Humor*, 87.

F. Separating the Sheep from the Goats: Relief and the Implications of the

Moralization of Suffering

“Over against this appalling picture of suffering and want, of heartless cruelty, of bribery and corruption, of a nation’s crucifixion on the cross of military absolutism, stands out in pure –white light the resplendent altruism of the American people.”¹²¹

- George Doolittle, 1916

“...the principle of selection was adopted lest, in the end, we should find that the worthless had survived the worthy.”¹²²

- Robert Byerly, 1918

The perception of the moral and social “*inhitat*” of the people ultimately served as an organizing principle for those who observed the crisis. The stigma of poverty and perceived social decay stratified people not merely based on their social status, but on the very quality of their humanity. In this new social environment, even protected members of society like widows, children and the elderly could be devalued by their poverty and their engagement in atypical behaviors that allowed them to sustain their lives at a time when society had closed itself off to them. These reified attitudes informed decisions as to who was granted life and who would be permitted to die. In the cases of those dispensing aid, the moralization of poverty also provided a standard of justification for decisions that relied upon appeals to character or worthiness to shade over the ethical problem posed by aid rationing in the relief projects.

This latter point is particularly significant. The effects of the moralization of the suffering poor were not merely literary or symbolic – the dehumanizing judgments that

¹²¹ Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to summer 1916,” 2.

¹²² Byerly, “Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918,” 1.

were passed on the poor became a barrier to life-saving aid as well. The social disconnection that had grown between the financially secure and those in need was reflected in the aid philosophy delineated in the late October 1917 meeting of Red Cross and American Mission staff members (who would later come to constitute the American Relief Committee). The finite resources available for relief work set hard limits that demanded hard hearts. For each of the individuals selected to receive aid from the Mission or the Red Cross, hundreds of others had to be turned away to ensure that the relief was sustainable over the course of the war.¹²³ The exigency of their quotas demanded that the relief workers make judgments about the candidates based not only their neediness, but their *worthiness* as well. For this, they constructed a series of moral and social guidelines that would make the decision process easier, but which consequently codified the otherization of the poor. It also pushed the aid work uncomfortably towards the realm of social engineering.

Though the guidelines that were adopted were derived from developments that were specific to the famine period, the philosophy that guided these projects actually originated much earlier in the Protestant notions of the “worthy poor.” The purpose of charity for the missionaries was, in a sense, one of social reconstruction, which became a problem when this process of selection was used to determine who among the needy was actually deserving of life saving aid. Lynn MacKay has termed this approach the “remoralizing” of the poor, wherein the conditional distribution of aid was seen as a means of encouraging productive behaviors that would eradicate mendicancy from the

¹²³ See A. Tylor Brand, “‘That They May Have Life:’ The Practice and Practicality of the Syrian Protestant College’s Humanitarian Relief Projects in Beirut and Lebanon during the Famine of World War I. *The American University of Beirut: 150 Years* (forthcoming).

inside out.¹²⁴ During the famine, such idealistic notions clashed with the reality of the situation that had developed after years of growing poverty and desperate need. Those who were worthy of aid were the ones who did not beg or engage in socially deplorable behaviors. This paradoxically would eliminate many of those who had engaged in such acts, who were often those who were least able to help themselves, and who were thus in the most desperate need of assistance.

Some of the practices that the missionaries employed, such as the investigation bureau of the Red Cross and similar boards used by the American Mission were rooted in the practices of earlier religious charitable work, such as the Mendicity Societies from Victorian England. These organizations used such bureaus to determine the level of neediness of those seeking aid as well as the extent to which the applicant met the moral criteria that determined whether they were worthy of receiving it.¹²⁵ Such notions were reflected in Poor Laws, and more relevantly, in the Protestant charitable ethos that guided the Presbyterian aid work across the globe, a development which echoes Max Weber's argument that the Calvinist notion of a Protestant work ethic had transcended the merely religious to become an actual cultural pillar.¹²⁶ This cultural ethic pervaded many of the social judgments that the Presbyterian aid workers made about poverty and the recipients of relief during the famine period.

The degree to which such a winnowing system was used varied by location, but it was enforced far more forcefully as the famine began to increase pressure on the

¹²⁴ Lynn MacKay, "The Mendicity Society and Its Clients: A Cautionary Tale," *Left History* 5, no. 1 (1997): 42.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹²⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Translated by Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner 1958).

limited funding available for aid work.¹²⁷ Robert Byerly's report on Sidon Station in 1918 delineated the evolving process of relief aid (which was distinct from the remittance distribution program that the Mission conducted from 1915 to 1917). Initially, in 1915 aid was delivered to the neediest recipients. However, Byerly notes that as members of the middle classes began to sink into poverty as the economic crisis worsened and savings dwindled, the Mission started making exceptions for those from this higher class, whom they deemed "more deserving of help."¹²⁸ In Tripoli, this policy seems to have been in place from the start of the crisis, as Robert Fowler indicated in his report on Tripoli station from 1914-1915:

Being only finite, we probably erred more than once, sometimes on the side of mercy in helping the very needy whom we considered comparatively worthless and sometimes on the side of justice in helping the unfortunate but worthy ones who perhaps did not need our aid quite so much.¹²⁹

Even if it was to some degree necessary, the need to choose did not sit well with many of the aid workers. A number of the writers commented on their discomfort at casting judgments on their fellow human beings that surely doomed some to a terrible death by starvation. In his postwar retrospect, Frederick Bliss distastefully noted that "it was terrible to assist consciously in the carrying out of the law of the Survival of the Fittest. We felt like Octavius, Antony, and Lepidus 'pricking' those whom we doomed to die by eliminating them from the list of those whom it seemed wise to help."¹³⁰

¹²⁷ For more on this, see Brand, "That They May Have Life."

¹²⁸ Robert Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918," 1.

¹²⁹ Fowler, "Tripoli Station Report for 1914-1915," 4.

¹³⁰ Bliss, "Retrospect," 2-3.

Margaret McGilvary, who acknowledged the need for such selection, nevertheless observed that making choices that privileged one individual over another, in spite of the logic of the criteria, was somehow “usurping a divine prerogative.”¹³¹

However, for those who designed the system, the aim of the aid was not to doom, but to save - if they could not save everyone, a choice had to be made to determine who would receive assistance. The members of the Relief Committee that was formed in late 1917 eventually settled on a mixture of merit and need based assistance that ultimately privileged aid to those from the “best classes,” who had fallen into poverty over the course of the famine. Even if such individuals were ultimately “less needy,” they were nevertheless deemed a better investment than their peers from the lower classes.¹³² The adopted plan stipulated a strict set of criteria and a system of investigation that evaluated the applicants to ensure that the aid was distributed to those whom they deemed to be the right people.¹³³ These guidelines are detailed in Robert Byerly’s 1918 report on Sidon Station, with additional detail provided in correspondence between Paul Erdman and Charles Dana. They were:¹³⁴

1. To save those most “deserving” of being saved. This excluded those suffering from an “evil disease,”¹³⁵ confirmed beggars or those who refuse “suitable

¹³¹ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, 199.

¹³² Byerly, “Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918,” 1.

¹³³ All taken from Byerly, “Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35; and Paul Erdman, “Letter from Paul Erdman to Charles Dana, October 31, 1917,” PHS Archives RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917.

¹³⁴ Byerly, “Report of Sidon Station, 1917 to 1918,” PHS Archives RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35 and Paul Erdman, “Letter from Paul Erdman to Charles Dana, October 31, 1917.”

¹³⁵ Although this was not specified, it likely means venereal diseases like syphilis or gonorrhea, since aid was readily offered to those stricken by potentially fatal diseases like typhus and malaria.

work,” those who were “helpless cripples” or those whose existence would be a burden on others more able to survive.¹³⁶

2. To only offer aid to those individuals who could be sustained through the end of the war.
3. To “personally” investigate the aid applications to ensure that those accepted were truly worthy of the aid and not merely unworthy individuals who had been added by local shaykhs and *mukhtars* out of compassion or deceit.
4. To give principally to children and to attempt to prevent parents from taking their food from them. The relief work ultimately aimed to preserve whole families, rather than merely one or two individuals from a larger number.
5. To give food aid rather than money.
6. To provide medicine and a special diet to those afflicted by malaria
7. To provide clothing for those in need, using the products produced by the workhouses attached to the shelters.

The missionaries readily acknowledged the life and death implications of these decisions, using verbs like “save” to indicate recipients rather than “distribute.” Nevertheless, the relief workers considered such policies to be consistent with the underlying aim of their mission, or even necessary distinctions given the remarkable task they faced in determining who to assist.

Two aspects of the relief strategy are remarkable indicators of the shift in attitudes towards the poor that were directly attributable to the stresses of the famine. The first was the implicit distrust of the recipients, whose drive for physical and

¹³⁶ See Erdman, “Letter to Charles Dana, October 31, 1917.”

emotional self-preservation clashed with the unyielding moralization of the missionaries' system. This was reflected in a number of the policies that were implemented in the plan. The investigation board was established as a way of ensuring the proper distribution of aid by not relying solely on potentially deceitful *mukhtars*, who at times added the "less worthy" or elderly to their lists. On-site distributions to children were favored explicitly to prevent parents from taking the food and either eating it themselves or distributing it to other members of the family. Finally, material aid was favored over cash, since the poor might be tempted to spend money on nonessential foods or items that provided emotional comfort rather than merely using it to address their basic subsistence.¹³⁷ This final point was a rather practical one, given the staggering cost of running the shelters: Arthur Dray's immense relief network in Brummana cost \$180,000 over 30 months,¹³⁸ and Bayard Dodge's more modest series of shelters still required roughly \$27,000 to sustain.¹³⁹ These are astounding figures since the *mata'im* were actually considered a more cost-effective way of ensuring the survival of the recipients given the grotesque inflation of the paper currency.

The second, and far more serious aspect was the assignment of relative values to individuals – in a sense, separating the sheep from the goats. It is true that the Mission in Tripoli and the Red Cross had used review boards to govern the distribution of aid as early as the summer of 1915, but its justification had been mainly practical and ideological – intended to direct charity, not life-saving aid. However, the 1917 plan was

¹³⁷ William Jessup was particularly critical of a family's decision to buy expensive kibbe (meat and burghul), because they had wanted kibbe. Though it appeared wasteful, it was likely the family's way to seek normalcy in the terrible crisis. Byerly, "Report of Sidon Station, 1917-1918," 3.

¹³⁸ McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era in Syria*, 224.

¹³⁹ Erdman, "Letter from Erdman to Dana, October 31, 1917," 2.

the most explicit in its emphasis on the need to save the most “deserving”¹⁴⁰ among the applicants – not the neediest. The guidelines that were established were explicitly tailored to meet the social and moral ideals that the missionaries had established as a matter of philosophy and of perspective. It eliminated those whose physical or moral characteristics rendered them unworthy of aid, a policy which implicitly favored those who had fallen from middle class into poverty, who would have been less likely to have engaged in acts of desperation that would have eliminated them as candidates for relief. In a sense, this moralization made the strategy itself a somewhat self-fulfilling paradox. By stipulating that those who would be saved must meet a moral criteria that could only reasonably be met by those of a certain social status, the burden of weighing need and worthiness was somewhat lessened. The needy, because of their very desperation, would be less likely to remain worthy, leaving the aid to those classes who by their status were less in need of it, but whose survival would seem more beneficial for the future of the region. The implications of these guidelines were clear. Those regarded as social dead wood would not be “saved” in order to allow the younger or more vital members of society to have a chance to flourish. The policy that the American aid workers ultimately adopted looked as much to the future as to the present. In the words of Robert Byerly, in his 1918 report on Sidon station, the aid strategy would ensure that after the war they would not “...find that the worthless had survived the worthy.”¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Byerly, “Report of Sidon Station 1917-1918,” 1.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

G. Conclusion

The complexity of the social and emotional experience of the famine cannot be overemphasized, and nor can the effects that such experiences had on individuals and society. Although individual behaviors varied from person to person and from context to context, these provide hints as to the range of experiences of the crisis and the motivations and goals that individuals sought to achieve as they responded to it. The extent to which individuals were morally and emotionally impacted depended on a variety of factors related to their own personal characteristics and experiences from the famine period and before. Even those watching from a position of safety were profoundly affected by the apparent devolution of social norms and the rise in lawlessness and socially and morally aberrant behaviors amid the obvious increase in physical suffering.

For these individuals, the horrors of the crisis eroded the normalcy of daily life and introduced forms of secondary trauma that slowly produced changes in their perceptions of the famine and others living within it. In this atmosphere, an individual's self-perception was inevitably colored by his role in it and his relationship with those suffering the most. The perceptions of the observers of the famine who were not under the thrall of hunger were ultimately reflected back upon society in their social interactions. When viewed through the increasingly jaded and often disconnected eyes of the observers, the poor were individuals who had events happen *to* them. They were portrayed as passive victims of events that were beyond their control, doomed to die or merely suffer at the hands of an overwhelming famine, which stripped them of their money, their flesh, their families, their humanity, and ultimately their lives.

To mitigate the impact of the crisis, many of these observers distanced themselves from the crisis, using avoidance strategies to cope with the suffering. This abstraction of the crisis and its sufferers had a transformative effect on the attitudes of these observers. The same forces that had changed the world in which they lived reshaped the lenses with which they viewed it. The inevitable comparison between the state of society prior to the famine and the terrible deterioration that had set in during the crisis led many to conclude that the country had fallen into a state of moral and physical decline – a notion that was corroborated by the increase in antisocial activities and behaviors as a result of the decline in the power of the state and the increase in desperation among the poorest members of society.

The impacts of this trend outlined in this chapter are a testament to the active nature of experience during crisis. The changes that took place across society and in the human ecology of Mount Lebanon and coastal Syria as a result of the famine sparked a response from individuals who themselves had to adjust to accommodate the modified social environment. For many, this was a matter of survival. However, even for those who were not in danger as a result of the crisis, the stresses and emotional hazards of the famine period led to a gradual shift in attitudes and behaviors that helped them to rationalize, understand and cope with the changes to their daily lived realities. Basic responses like compassion, sympathy and even faith were warped by the experience of the famine, altering attitudes about poverty, charity and even suffering and death. In a very real sense, many of the aberrant behaviors and attitudes that appeared in the sources were a product of the famine itself.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: LIVING THE FAMINE

“Calamity molds an entire culture in its own image”

- Pitrim Sorokin¹⁴²

Historians have often found it impossible to end their analysis of the greatest disaster to befall Lebanon and Western Syria in its modern history without some sort of coda to resolve its role in one or more broader historical narratives. Since no such narrative is satisfying without a beginning, climax and an ending, to date, this has generally meant explaining the political or remembered significance of the famine for the nation. Indeed, historians of the memory of the famine have often assumed that the famine *should* have become a symbol that transcended the three years of immense suffering that it actually entailed. And indeed, the tragedy of the famine years and its deep social consequences would seem to suit it well to identity construction or nation building.

The notion only becomes problematic when the idea of the famine is retrofitted into parochial or anachronistic interpretations of the past – a tendency that has been a persistent problem in Lebanese historiography generally.¹⁴³ To counter the confessional associations that the famine has acquired, the few dissertations written on the crisis have

¹⁴² Pitrim Sorokin, *Man and Society in Calamity* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1942), 156.

¹⁴³ This is the problem that prompted Kamal Salibi's greatest historiological work. See: Kamal Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions: The History of Lebanon Reconsidered* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988).

concluded their works by offering a somewhat sanitized historical reinterpretation of the period of the war, using the weight of the rest of their thesis to support their revisions. Given the breadth of analysis that a study of the famine entails, this is neither surprising, nor often satisfying. After his vast and nuanced analysis of Beirut and Mount Lebanon in the war, Nicholas Ajay curiously chose to spend the bulk of his conclusion rethinking the notoriety that Jamal Pasha and the Ottoman wartime administration had gained in the national memory.¹⁴⁴ Echoing Dennis Walker's commentary on political forgetfulness and the event of the famine,¹⁴⁵ Melanie Tanielian wondered at how the tremendous mortality of the famine was supplanted in the national narrative by the handful of convenient surrogates who were martyred during the war.¹⁴⁶ Although the intent of this work is noble, such historiographical housecleaning is not likely to convert local perceptions of the famine anytime soon. The earnest politicization of the famine by Maronite and nationalist historians of the period, coupled with the general association of the crisis with Patriarch Huwayik's justification for the creation of Greater Lebanon at the Paris Peace Conference¹⁴⁷ has burdened the famine with an imposing amount of political baggage, giving these initial social and political representations of the period a great deal of inertia, even into the present.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁴ Nicholas Ajay, "Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The War Years," Ph.D. diss., Georgetown University (1973), 1: 529-545.

¹⁴⁵ Dennis Walker, "Clericist Catholic Authors and the Crystallization of Historical Memory in Lebanonist-Particularist Discourse, 1918-1922," in *The First World War as Remembered in the Countries of the Eastern Mediterranean*, edited by Olaf Farschid, Manfred Kropp, Stephan Dahne (Beirut: The Orient Institute, 2006): 122-125.

¹⁴⁶ Melanie Tanielian, "The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon," Ph.D. diss., University of California Berkeley (2013), 206-207.

¹⁴⁷ Text of which appears in Meir Zamir, *The Formation of Modern Lebanon* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), 269-278.

¹⁴⁸ The Sursuq family archives at the Holy Spirit University in Kaslik are notably, not to say suspiciously, devoid of any references to the grain trading that the family had conducted during the war.

Moreover, efforts to rewrite the history of the famine from a more impartial perspective have been hampered by the fact that the few contemporary sources that have been available to historians are the very perspectives that they aim to revise. This was an issue that was particularly vexing to Ajay, who frequently offered conciliatory or critical remarks about his sources (particularly regarding the work of Margaret McGilvary). Such a strategy was not without its own problems either. For one, mounting too thorough a challenge to one's own sources does little to inspire confidence in work that relies upon them. If argued too thoroughly, the victory can be unwittingly Pyrrhic. Even in the best scenario, it is difficult to offer new and satisfying explanations for the problems in the historical account of the famine while relying exclusively on the same sources that created the problems in the first place.

Part of the aim of this dissertation has been to provide the historian with a buffer against the traditional narrative by offering an analysis of the development of the crisis through the patterns and trends that are evident in climate and price statistics from the period, following the well-trodden path worn by historians of population and famine in the European context. Although numbers can lie as effectively as words, climatic data and the objective price lists from the Yuhanna Marun Monastery offer an opportunity to understand the famine as a gradually developing set of consequences of a series of interrelated systemic failures – rather than a constructed, or even orchestrated, event. The conclusions that can be drawn from the data clarify the complexities of the context of the developing crisis in a manner detached from the myopic speculation of contemporary observers. Analysis of the data indicates that the progression of the famine followed patterns that would seem familiar to economic and social historians of other contexts. Perhaps more importantly, the statistical analysis draws parallels

between the famine of WWI to similar, milder famines in the decades that preceded it. By linking the causes of the crisis to the traditional source of famine in the region – namely environmental and climatic aberrations – the important question then shifts from the heavily politicized issue of why the famine occurred to questions about the nature of life within it. Though the famine was “manmade” in the sense that it was a response to market conditions, its roots and the factors that so often determined life and death in its midst were based on rather mundane environmental fluctuations. Their deleterious effects on agriculture and farmers of the region in turn set off the social and economic chains of events that eventually led to the widespread starvation associated with the famine.

Analyzing the history of the period through environmental and ecological lenses offers several advantages that have been thus far unavailable to historians of the period. First, they provide relatively objective and well-theorized points of reference from which to test contemporary observations. By establishing what one would expect to find in a given situation, contemporary judgments can be logically evaluated, and if the claims do not make sense, or fit preconceptions more than expectations, then one can reconsider the validity or at least the perspective of the source (as in the case of Yammine’s typhus holocaust of 1916).¹⁴⁹ The second benefit of using a varied set of tools from a broad range of disciplines is that such cross-evaluation provides a series of checks against the historian’s own ingrained biases while mitigating against weaknesses in the source material. Likewise, knowing the relationship between the environment and the agricultural markets makes sense of the timing of the series of Ottoman policies that emerged after 1916 to confront the growing crisis (many of which did little more than to

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter 2.

aggravate it). This environmental interpretation offers a conclusive explanation of why the crisis began, and even a timeline for its development, which is vital for those wishing to understand the texture of daily, seasonal and annual life during the crisis.

This dissertation has also reinterpreted the relationship between ecology, health and society to accommodate the wide and intricate range of factors that contributed to the health crisis during the war. Shifting from a largely medical explanation of the epidemiology to an ecological one offers a more detailed and convincing account of disease and death during the famine by explaining the unseen catalysts of disease about which only generalizations could be made otherwise. Rather than confirming the somewhat simplistic argument that diseases happened because of the famine, this interpretation explains why certain diseases flourished in the social and environmental context of the famine, and why they followed certain geographical and temporal patterns. This environmental and social analysis of the developing crisis suggest that the climatic and social shifts that took place during or because of the famine began to reshape the human and disease ecologies of communities across the region, increasing the risk of disease among at-risk populations and even those who would otherwise have been shielded from such diseases of poverty.

These new, cross-disciplinary approaches offer an opportunity to move beyond the traditional interpretations of the crisis that have for so long defined how the era has been conceived in the historiography. However, although the environmental and ecological perspectives are necessary elements of the complex set of factors that influenced life in the famine, the traditional narrative sources of the famine remain important parts of the explanation. Rather than seeking a single cause, it is important to look at how the elements of causality interacted to produce the complicated set of

circumstances of the famine and the complexity of the experiences of those who endured it.

A. Transformations

One of the important distinctions that this dissertation has sought to preserve is the fact that the famine was not merely a crisis of society, but a crisis of humanity as well. To capture the essence of this difference, this work has sought to provide a history of life *in* the famine, not simply a history of the famine itself. If this formulation seems to merely project more complexity onto the already tremendously complicated crisis, then this is a necessary sacrifice for the sake of a better understanding of the range of experience that existed during the time of the crisis. As comforting as it might seem to be able to point to a timeline and follow a direct progression of acts, decisions and causes that had concrete and obvious consequences, the chaotic, nonlinear nature of a famine cannot be reduced to a simple chain of events without eliding the nuances that made the experience truly human.

Rather than simply attempting to balance or “correct” the perspective of the famine, this dissertation has sought to elevate perspective to a position of great importance, even while arguing that it cannot be trusted. Through the eyes of the contemporaries of the famine, it is possible to discern a great deal about what it was like to live in the famine and why. This experience was not solely limited to the physical struggle to survive that captivated a large, but ultimately limited percent of the population, but even for those whose lives were more lightly impacted but who were forced to accommodate the new and terrible realities that life in the crisis entailed. To a certain degree the experience of the crisis was one that was shared by those who lived in

the region - the economic and social conditions that developed over the course of the famine became the context for the lived experience of members of all social strata and different places. However, it is apparent that the experience was not shared equally. By delving into these differences and the textures that set even similar cases apart from each other, one can discern complex insights into life in the period that have been largely omitted as mundane or inconvenient in previous historical accounts.

The personal perspectives that defined one's outlook on life in the famine and on the social transformations of the crisis are perhaps the most important of all. Reducing the crisis to its most basic level, it becomes clear that those transformations that took place in response to the famine were not always the inevitable, inexorable consequences that they often appear. For every factor that imposed change on individuals and communities, there was a reaction counteracting these changes as individuals clung to the vestiges of life from the world before the famine. However, this valiant struggle for normalcy in the terrible environment of the famine often offered little more than a temporary respite. Those who employed coping mechanisms clung to a poor facsimile for the life that they had lost, but one that was still far better than the reality that confronted them on a daily basis. Although many of the personal and psychological changes that individuals experienced over the course of the crisis took place beyond the ken and comprehension of those who exhibited them, these coping measures were powerful and often defining elements in the personal and social behaviors of those who lived through the period. Significantly, these personal coping strategies were not always internalized, and were at times extended into social interpretations and behaviors, ultimately influencing how individuals interacted with those around them. In this, the famine not only transformed society, it transformed how society conceived of itself.

As tainted as the famine has become in the Lebanese historical memory, “famine” is in the end merely a noun that describes a particularly tragic set of social and economic circumstances in which people lived, and very often died. Certainly for those living through the crisis, the famine was not a “thing” or an event, but rather a condition that they felt inside their homes, outside their doors, in the markets and in the streets. It was the evolving *milieu* in which people acted, lived, survived and struggled – for many until they could struggle no more. It shaped their lives and constricted the range of the very choices that they were forced to make as they sought to survive, endure and cope with the tremendous weight of calamity. It was a profoundly human experience that forced those who lived through it to adapt their lives, their behaviors and even their attitudes and beliefs to fit a world thrown askew.

The transformations that reshaped the social, physical and psychological landscape of the areas affected by the famine were terrible and far reaching, but ultimately ephemeral. Though contemporaries dreaded the possibility that the crisis would have generational consequences, the most catastrophic effects dissipated over time as relief and remittances flooded into the country following the conclusion of the war. Unlike areas like Bengal and Ethiopia, which frequently serve as the case studies for famine analysis, the recovery from the Syrian famine was actually accelerated by the same peculiar social characteristics that placed so many at risk during the famine in the first place. The merchant economy of the coast and the arrival of relatives and remittances from abroad began to counteract the terrible poverty and debt that had become commonplace by the end of the war. Debts that were incurred over the course of the crisis were settled according to a postwar law that placed paper money on par

with gold for debt repayment.¹⁵⁰ The destruction to the Lebanese silk industry during the war and its increasingly marginal role in the world silk economy left the economy of the mountain in an uncomfortable state of flux. But over time, the famine faded from reality to become a tragic memory – a nightmarish episode in the lives of many, recounted darkly to terrorize younger generations of children or to provide a poignant setting for the parables told at family gatherings or on one’s deathbed. Like the suffering that pervaded the dark days of the crisis, the situationally adapted identities, attitudes and behaviors began to regain a semblance of normalcy as the famine slipped into the past – life went on.

¹⁵⁰ In spite of the law that stipulated that debts could be repaid at a 1:1 paper to gold rate, regardless of how the loan was contracted, some insisted upon paying the actual amount using the proscribed currency for the sake of honor. Ibrahim Khalil ‘Awad wrote that upon returning from America his father repaid the family’s debt to the butcher who did not take advantage of him and his family’s desperation during the early years of the famine. Ibrahim Khalil ‘Awad, *Min ‘ahd al-mutasarrifiyya ila ‘ahd al-istiqlal: mudhakkirat* (Beirut: Matb’at Hayak wa Karam, 1981), 28.

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ARCHIVAL SOURCES

AUB: American University Beirut, Beirut

Collections:

Howard Bliss Collection 1902-1920 (AA: 2.3)

Edward F. Nickoley Collection (AA: 2.3.3)

Bayard Dodge Collection (AA: 2.3.4)

Journals

al-Kulliyah

Lisan al-Hal

L'Asie Française

USC: United States Consular Documents

Despatches from United States Consul in Beirut

PHS: Presbyterian Historical Society Archives

RG-115-17-19 Sidon Station Reports 1907-35

RG 115-19-18, Tripoli Station Reports 1891-1919

RG-115-16-10 Relief Work 1915-1917.

RG-115-16-11 Relief Work 1915-1917

RG-115-4-17 Beirut Station Reports 1902-1916

RG-115-17-18 Sidon Girls' School Reports 1906-1955

RG-115-3-1 American School for Girls, reports, 1838-1955

RG-115-10-10 Lebanon Station Reports 1911-29

RG-115-8-16 Hamlin Memorial Sanatorium Correspondence 1916-27

RG-115-18-2 Suk-ul-Gharb Lebanon School for Boys Reports 1909-1927

RG115-19-10, Tripoli Kennedy Memorial Hospital 1914-1963

RG-115-19-16, Tripoli – Medical Reports 1895-1914

RG-90-2-12 Station Reports 1915-1920

INTERVIEWS¹

Hayat Mahmud, conducted January 24, 2014

Soumar Dakdouk, conducted October 13, 2013.

¹ The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the American University of Beirut deemed the collection of anecdotes for this dissertation to be outside of the scope of their oversight, and permitted me to collect and use them to enhance my research.