

Documents on the Effects of WWI on Ottoman Civilians

#1 – Disease and Suffering Hit Civilians, Not Just Soldiers

Misfortunes Visit Us All at Once:

Locusts, War, Inflation, and Diseases
Sunday, May 9, 1915

I write this with my mind totally preoccupied. I cannot think of anything except our present misfortune. When will we finish with this wretched war, and what will happen to us next?

Our lives are threatened from all sides: A European war and an Ottoman war, prices are skyrocketing, a financial crisis, and the locusts are attacking the country north and south. On top of all this, now infectious diseases are spreading throughout the Ottoman lands....

Typhus Is Spreading in Jerusalem
Monday, May 24, 1915

I was shocked to hear today about the death of Ahmad Effendi Nashashibi....He died from typhus in the prime of his youth. He was buried this afternoon. Diseases are spreading like wildfire among the population, especially among Muslims – for they do not take the proper precautions, may God forgive us. I was told from one of the health inspectors in town that four typhus cases were reported in one day alone in Bab Hutta. When I heard the news, I was struck with great dread, not only for the people but also for myself. First, because I live and breathe all day among soldiers, in a place that is full of bugs and lice; and second, because of the lack of good hygiene in the workplace....I love life and enjoy its offerings. Please God, I am still young, do not take me away.

“The Diary of Ihsan Turjman.” In *Year of the Locust: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past*. Salim Tamari and Ihsan Salih Turjman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 117-118, 127-128.

#2 – Locusts Add to Wartime Starvation in Palestine



American Colony in Jerusalem. "Photograph Album, Locust Plague of 1915." *Library of Congress Digital Archives*.

--- Locust Swarms Reach Baq'a. May 20, 1915

Locust swarms are spreading everywhere, and the insects are laying their eggs. Crops have been laid waste across the country, but the situation is particularly severe around Jaffa and its environs. People arriving from the city report that Citizens are compelled to go out in the fields and destroy the locusts.

"The Diary of Ihsan Turjman." In *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past*. Salim Tamari and Ihsan Salih Turjman. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011. 125.

#3 – Turkish families with men at war

Excerpt from the writings of George Abel Schreiner (a war correspondent of the Associated Press of America, who observed and wrote about events in the Ottoman Empire).

It got to be the turn of the Turkish population.

There was by that time not a single Turkish household in the empire that did not have all of its able-bodied men of military age at the front or in the barracks. What fighting there was done in the Caucasus and in Mesopotamia was done by Turks. The Ottoman Greek is of no value as a soldier, and the Armenian was no longer trusted. The former was employed in the sanitary service and on the lines of communication; the latter built roads, dug trenches, and acted as beast of burden. That meant that the Turkish population lost all the blood on the battle-fields.

George Abel Schreiner. *From Berlin to Bagdad: Behind the Scenes in the Near East*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1918. 357-360.

Think about the effect on the Turkish population of so many of their young men being sent to war. The young men were gone, leaving women to support families without the help of their husbands, leaving children without fathers. In addition, historians sometimes speak of the “long World War I” for Turkish soldiers as they fought in wars from the Arabian peninsula to the Balkans (1910-1914), then World War I, and then the Turkish War of Independence (1920-1923). In other words, Turkish soldiers fought almost continually for thirteen years: 1910-1923.

#4 – Armenian Genocide

Excerpt from the writings of George Abel Schreiner (a war correspondent of the Associated Press of America, who observed and wrote about events in the Ottoman Empire)

Bosanti, Anatolia, April 25th [1915]

...Coming around the bend of the old pass road was a caravan, afoot and clothed in red – a dirty, wet red.

More Armenians!...Old men in rags; women in red calico pantaloons, red waists, red shawls, and some of them in red veils; children of all ages, dressed like their elders; the halt, the blind, the sick made up this miserable column....

The spectacle was pitiful. The rain was still coming down in a cold drizzle. It was cold up in that elevation – a sort of March weather. Few of the exiles had shoes; all of them were soaked to the skin, the clothing hanging to the weary bodies limp and wet. All faces showed suffering – hunger, exposure to the cold and wet, together with mental anguish about their kin and the future....

Five miles I had gone, and still there was no break in the column. Since the exiles walked in groups and preserved no uniform marching order, I could not estimate their number. All I can say is that the exiles numbered no less than 4,000.

Then I came to the stragglers. The picture grew yet more harassing. It was composed of men and women trying to help some sick relative or friend along. Some of them sat by the wayside, tired and disconsolate, while the object of their care lay in the wet grass, resting or asleep. Two men were digging a grave. I passed a woman who was groaning under the weight of a large boy she carried on her back. To judge by the size of the child's head, I should say that he was a cretin and not in control of his withered limbs. Another woman was leading a blind man. More carts with sick children aboard came, their screeching wheels filling the ravine with dismal sounds.

It was afternoon before I got beyond the red train of misery....A new picture! ...Several hundred Armenian soldiers were sitting by the roadside, breaking rock. The Turkish officer in charge of the party explained that there was less intention in the music to entertain than design to get the work done. The "band" was employed to make the working-party keep time with the hammers, more rock being crushed in the manner. He had hit upon the plan himself, said the officer.

The Armenians, I learned, were part of a regiment which had just been disbanded and disarmed.

"We cannot trust them any longer," explained the officer. "So we took their arms away from them and put them to work improving the roads."

He had ten Turkish infantrymen to control the party of nearly 500 Armenians.

George Abel Schreiner. *From Berlin to Bagdad: Behind the Scenes in the Near East*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1918. 200-204.

#5 – anti-Ottoman sentiments in Palestine/Lebanon

Excerpt from the writings of Alexander Aaronsohn (son of Romanian Jewish immigrants to Palestine)

It was with high hopes and expectations that I approached the Lebanon. I was looking forward to the moment when I should find myself among people who were free from the Turkish yoke, in a country where I should be able to breathe freely for a few hours.

But how great was my consternation, when, on entering the Lebanon, I found on all the roads Turkish soldiers who stopped me every minute to ask for my papers!

...While I was watering my horse, I tried to ask questions from a few inhabitants. My fair hair and complexion and my khaki costume made them take me for a German, and they barely answered me, but when I addressed them in French their faces lit up. For the Lebanon, for all it is thousands of miles away from France, is nevertheless like a French province. For fifty years the French language and French culture have taken hold of the Lebanon. No Frenchman has more love for and faith in France than lie in the hearts of the Lebanese Christians....

I could not help wondering at the mistakes of the Allies. If they had understood the situation in Palestine and Syria, how differently this war might have eventuated! The Lebanon and Syria would have raised a hundred thousand picked men, if the Allies had landed in Palestine. The Lebanon would have fought for its independence as heroically as did the Belgians. Even the Arab population would have welcomed the Allies as liberators. But alas!

Alexander Aaronsohn. *With the Turks in Palestine*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916. 58-60.

#6 – lasting effects of the war (children’s stories from an American orphanage in Jerusalem)

- “Evelina Izrak is nine years old and Greek Orthodox. Her father was killed in the war; her mother, Leah, unskilled and working at odd jobs, has another child to support.”
- “Khadegie Imwaked, aged eleven, is of Mohammedan parents, both dead. The family was well-to-do but was reduced by the war.”
- “Marie Aboud, eight, is a little maid of the Greek Orthodox Church. Her father George Aboud, is paralyzed from shell-shock, and her mother Wardy, is dead.
- “Erfat Ersas, aged twelve, is a little motherless Mohammedan, whose father Hafiz Ersas, was impoverished by the war.”
- “Lydia Farrah, aged fourteen, is a Greek Orthodox maid, whose father, Moussa Farrah, was killed in the war. The mother, Katingo, has two small boys to support. Lydia was removed from degrading surroundings.”
- Aishey Abdul Azaz is five years old, and a Mohammedan. After her father, Abdul Azaz, son of Hadj Saleem from Anatolia in Asia Minor, was killed in the war, her mother, Alameye, married again and left Jerusalem, deserting Aishey to roam the streets. A Moslem acquaintance of the American Colony brought her to the Orphanage.”
- “Guldusla Bada, aged ten, is a Mohammedan girl. Both parents died when she was quite small. She was taken care of by a Mohammedan family, who were so reduced financially by the war that they were unable to care for her any longer.”
- “Maria Elias, age eight, is a Protestant child. Her father, Nasrie Elias, was a school-teacher of the Church Missionary Society in Gaza, but was deported with his family to the east of the Jordan by the Turks, because he had worked for English people. In Es-Salt, the family suffered privation and sickness. Finally the mother died. After the British occupation, Nasrie Elias came back to Jerusalem with his three daughters in a sad state of poverty. Lack of food and privation had so undermined his health that he found himself unable to support his children. His three daughters are in the Orphanage.”
- “Zaheye Fallace, age six, is Greek Orthodox. Her father, Jameal Fallace, died in a hospital from privations endured in the Turkish Labor Corps in the war. Her mother, Jamelie, is an invalid as a result of typhus fever and slow starvation. She has no means of support.”

Stories of girls in “Record Book Listing Girls Receiving Support through the Christian Herald Orphanage, As Supervised by the American Colony [in Jerusalem].” 1920-1927. *Library of Congress Digital Archives*.