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A Climate of Confessionalization: Famine and Difference in the Late Ottoman Empire

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Abstract

After the 1877–78 Russo–Ottoman War, the Ottoman Empire saw the rise of ethnic and sectarian clashes in Anatolia, the Balkans, and elsewhere, and the task of explaining that rise remains unfinished. Many have examined the intellectual formations of ethnic and sectarian solidarities after 1878, but the availability of new ideas cannot alone account for their widespread uptake. Why after 1878 did ordinary people respond more to calls upon ethnic and sectarian solidarity? Drawing on sources surrounding the 1879 famine in the Ottoman East, this article steps away from imperial metropolises to examine overlapping environmental, financial, and technological disjunctures. Adopting the methods of political ecology, the article underscores the simultaneous effects of drought, sovereign default, and an influx of modern weapons, each of which imposed uneven hardships along ethno-religious lines. Together, they created a climate of lived confessionalization that highlighted the communal categories upon which emergent movements called.

Keywords: Ottoman Empire; famine; environmental history; political ecology; ethnic conflict; sectarian conflict; Armenians; Kurds; Turks

Between the 1840s and the 1890s, the eastern regions of the Ottoman Empire saw the rise of ethnic and sectarian categories that could mobilize masses, and the project of explaining that development remains unfinished. In the 1840s, a conflict erupted in the eastern provinces over the rollout of Ottoman reforms, and spiritual leaders called on Muslims and non-Muslims alike to support the government. Yet, as will be argued, their calls met with mixed results. The subsequent struggle pitted cross-confessional coalitions—not sects or ethnicities—against one another.

Although ethno-religious solidarity achieved only middling results in the 1840s, it became an effective rallying point by the 1890s, as illustrated during the Hamidian massacres (1894–97). These attacks targeted Armenians, other Christians, and those who dared to defend them. There had been sectarian violence in the past, but the Hamidian massacres were of a different scale. They covered a broader geography, they continued for several years, and—importantly—survivors and subsequent scholarship have both suggested that the perpetrators were not only officials but also “masses” of “ordinary” Muslims.¹ What had changed

¹ Levon Giridlian, interview by J. Michael Hagopian, Film, March 22, 1984, 4:56–12:32, Armenian Film Foundation (AFF) 218, University of Southern California Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education, <https://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56468&segmentNumber=4&returnIndex=0>; Vahram Eretzian, interview by J. Michael Hagopian, Film, October 3, 1985, 9:00–11:42, AFF 309, University of Southern California

between the 1840s and the 1890s? What made ethno-religious categories so powerful for mobilizing these “masses” and “ordinary” people across such a wide region?

The period surrounding the 1877–78 Russo-Ottoman War is crucial for explaining the rise of pan-ethnic and pan-religious movements, what Hannah Arendt has called “pan-movements.”² After the war, “a full mobilization of Muslim and Christian identities” swept the Ottoman Empire.³ Russia and its allies wrested lands from the Ottomans and expelled their Muslim residents, constituting a violent “unmixing of people” that created a clear Muslim majority in the Ottoman Empire.⁴ In response, calls to pan-movements emanated from officials and opposition figures alike. A beleaguered sultan, Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909), deployed a pan-Islamic “politics of unity” aimed at holding the empire together, and these attempts saw some success.⁵ Yet, as important as a humiliating defeat and a savvy sultan may have been, these factors were not new. By 1878, the Romanovs had been encroaching on Ottoman domains for a century, and previous sultans had also combined piety and politics to shore up imperial unity.⁶

Other authors have urged us to step back from Istanbul and other imperial metropolises to attend to the dislocations taking place in rural areas, where most Ottoman subjects lived and where much ethno-religious violence took place.⁷ This work has highlighted the deteriorating status of small-holding cultivators who faced dispossession and violent taxation across the nineteenth century, and it has also cast 1878 as a turning point in the rise of ethno-religious belonging.⁸ Yet, to explain why 1878 was a turning point, many have still focused on the Russo-Ottoman War and its results: the 1878 Treaty of Berlin and its “internationalization” of the Armenian question. Those results were no doubt important, but we must also explain the localization of the Armenian question. Why did growing numbers of local people begin to respond to voices calling on ethno-religious solidarity?

Shoah Foundation: The Institute for Visual History and Education, <https://vhaonline.usc.edu/viewingPage?testimonyID=56663&segmentNumber=10&returnIndex=0>; Ali Sipahi, “Deception and Violence in the Ottoman Empire: The People’s Theory of Crowd Behavior during the Hamidian Massacres of 1895,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 62, no. 4 (2020): 833–34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417520000298>; Edip Gölbaşı, “The Official Conceptualization of the Anti-Armenian Riots of 1895–1897: Bureaucratic Terminology, Official Ottoman Narrative, and Discourses of Revolutionary Provocation,” *Études Arméniennes Contemporaines*, no. 10 (2018): 51–53.

² Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1979), 222–27; Selim Deringil, *The Well-Protected Domains: Ideology and the Legitimation of Power in the Ottoman Empire 1876–1909* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 10–11, 50–56; Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 81.

³ Cemil Aydin, *The Idea of the Muslim World: A Global Intellectual History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 59.

⁴ Rogers Brubaker, “Aftermaths of Empire and the Unmixing of Peoples,” in *After Empire: Multiethnic Societies and Nation-Building: The Soviet Union and the Russian, Ottoman, and Habsburg Empires*, ed. Karen Barkey and Mark Von Hagen (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 156–59.

⁵ Stephen Duguid, “The Politics of Unity: Hamidian Policy in Eastern Anatolia,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 9, no. 2 (1973): 139–55; Deringil, *Well-Protected Domains*, 16–44.

⁶ On piety and attempts to shore up unity under Mahmud II (r. 1808–39) and Abdülmecid I (r. 1839–61), see Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Islamic Roots of the Gülhane Rescript,” *Die Welt Des Islams* 34, no. 2 (1994): 182, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1570929>; see also Butrus Abu-Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya in the Ottoman Lands in the Early 19th Century,” *Die Welt Des Islams* 22, no. 1/4 (1982): 33–34, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1569796>.

⁷ On population, see Donald Quataert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881–1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 8; on the rurality of conflict, see Stephan H. Astourian, “The Silence of the Land,” in *A Question of Genocide: Armenians and Turks at the End of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Ronald Grigor Suny, Norman M. Naimark, and Fatma Müge Göçek (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 59.

⁸ Astourian, “The Silence of the Land,” 56–58; Janet Klein, *Margins of Empire: Kurdish Militias in the Ottoman Tribal Zone* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 134–35; Mehmet Polatel, “Armenians and the Land Question in the Ottoman Empire, 1870–1914” (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2017), 94–95; Nadir Özbek, “The Politics of Taxation and the ‘Armenian Question’ during the Late Ottoman Empire, 1876–1908,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 54, no. 4 (2012): 791–96.

To explain this turning point in 1878 and the emergent power of pan-movements among ordinary people, this article examines the sources surrounding the 1879 famine in the Ottoman East. The famine has long remained “overshadowed” by the later sectarian outbreaks, as Özge Ertem has argued, even though the famine killed an estimated 10,000 people—the same as estimates of Ottoman soldiers who fell there in 1877–78.⁹ This analysis of the 1879 famine adopts the methods of political ecology, linking of environmental, economic, and technological forces, by examining the simultaneous effects of severe weather, a sovereign debt default, and an influx of new weapons in the Ottoman East.¹⁰ These overlapping disjunctures imposed unequal hardships along ethno-religious lines. Neither the war nor the famine—nor any single cause—can explain the rise to ethno-religious divides. Rather, the famine highlights overlapping environmental, financial, and technological disjunctures. Their simultaneous occurrence underscored communal boundaries and provoked competition and conflict across them.

Examining these simultaneous disjunctures is important for shifting the temporality, or pace of the events, that we choose to study. The forces invoked in prevailing explanations for the rise of Ottoman pan-movements—wars, treaties, and political strategies—operate on the familiar temporality of human politics, chains of events comprehensible from the pages of newspapers or history books. This historical time came to dominate history with stories of national development and humanity’s “conquest” of nature.¹¹ We should try to unsettle the hegemony of that temporality and its teleologies, or else we risk re-reproducing the categories of ethnicity, sect, and nation that they have nourished.¹² Looking to the realms of climate, capital, and technology trains our gaze upon forces operating on multiple temporalities.¹³ Famine has long been debated as a confluence of such forces, and for this turning point around 1878, the famine in the Ottoman East highlights the effects of overlapping disjunctures in climatic systems, capital flows, and technologies of violence. Analyzing them together carves a space outside the teleologies of human and national progress, and it provides a more compelling explanation of the climate of lived confessionalization that developed in the Ottoman East after 1878.

The article has four sections. The first shows how ethno-religious calls for mass mobilization achieved only mixed results in this earlier period of the 1840s by examining the cross-confessional coalitions that formed during the Bedirhan Rebellion of 1846–47. The second section turns to the period just after the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78. It shows how climatic conditions during the 1879 famine brought about massive animal mortality, which hit predominantly Kurdish nomadic pastoralists harder than their neighbors. The third shows how the successes of Armenian famine relief agencies eclipsed others and drove a wedge between Armenians and their neighbors. The final section investigates the influx of repeating rifles into

⁹ Özge Ertem, “Considering Famine in the Late Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Framework and Overview,” HELDA, 2017, 167, <https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/179361>; Michael Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts: A Statistical Encyclopedia of Casualty and Other Figures, 1494-2000* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2008), 209–11; for others who have recently disinterred the history of Anatolian famines, see Semih Çelik, “Coping with Famines in Ottoman Anatolia (1650-1850),” in *An Economic History of Famine Resilience*, ed. Jessica Dijkman and Bas van Leeuwen, 1st ed., Routledge Explorations in Economic History 84 (New York: Routledge, 2019), 52–73; and Zozan Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads: Global Climate, Local Environment, and the Crisis of Pastoralism in Late Ottoman Kurdistan,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 63, no. 3 (2020): 316–56, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685209-12341513>.

¹⁰ Richard Peet and Michael Watts, eds., *Liberation Ecologies: Environment, Development, Social Movements* (London: Routledge, 1996), 6; James B. Greenberg and Thomas K. Park, “Political Ecology,” *Journal of Political Ecology* 1, no. 1 (1994): 1, <https://doi.org/10.2458/v1i1.21154>.

¹¹ Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail, eds., *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), 4–15.

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006), 70.

¹³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Climate and Capital: On Conjoined Histories,” *Critical Inquiry* 41, no. 1 (2014): 2–4, <https://doi.org/10.1086/678154>.

the region during the war, and how they highlighted and intensified previous differences between Muslims and non-Muslims based on conscription and permission to bear arms.

Cross-confessional Coalitions in the 1840s

In 1847, reports drew official eyes to the Ottoman East where a rebellion was afoot. Imperial authorities there had been enforcing new methods of taxation, conscription, and territorial division, and a cross-confessional group of notables in the region wanted to halt any changes that might circumscribe their privileges. The most powerful among them was a Kurdish emir named Bedirhan Bey. His Botan emirate covered much of Ottoman Kurdistan, and his modernizing army and network of alliances made him a formidable figure.¹⁴ Despite the participants' repeated pronouncements of loyalty to the sultan, the conflict has been characterized as a rebellion. Indeed, in their correspondence with Istanbul during this period, the Ottoman governors of Erzurum, Diyarbakır, and Baghdad referred to Bedirhan and his allies as "disobedient," "rebellious," and "insolent."¹⁵ In response, the Ottomans dispatched troops to remove them from the region.

During the ensuing conflict, Muslim and Christian spiritual authorities from Istanbul and within the region made faith-based calls to rally support for imperial forces. These religious authorities, Christian and Muslim alike, stood to gain from the expansion of Ottoman rule at the expense of local notables. The Nakşibendi-Halidi brotherhood already had a significant presence in Istanbul and ties to the imperial government, and they had offered their support to the Tanzimat reforms in the past.¹⁶ As for the Armenian Patriarchate of Constantinople, it was trying impose direct control over autonomous holy sees like the Catholicosate of Sis in Cilicia (Adana) and the Catholicosate of Aghtamar in Van. Since clergymen at Aghtamar derived their power in part from their close ties with local Kurdish notables, weakening these local power-holders would in theory make Aghtamar more governable.¹⁷ While both Muslim and Christian spiritual authorities called upon people to rally to the imperial cause, the responses were mixed. Some people did rally in support of the reforms, but others, notables and commoners alike, did not. As a result, the conflict pitted cross-confessional coalitions against one another. Sources left by the Ottoman governor of Diyarbakır, Mehmed Hayreddin Paşa, and the Armenian patriarch of Constantinople, Matteos Izmirlian, offer examples of how this occurred.

Hayreddin Paşa wrote to shaykhs of the Nakşibendi-Halidi Sufi brotherhood, urging them to aid Ottoman forces against Bedirhan.¹⁸ The letter made its appeal by emphasizing their shared faith community. It opens with a reference to the governor's own spiritual qualifications as a Nakşibendi-Halidi shaykh (*icazet*). It also draws on concepts found in the hadith and Qur'an like pious advice (*nasihat*) and evil consequence (*vebal*).¹⁹ Peppered with phrases like "the relation of brotherhood" and "the necessity of the cause of the brotherhood," the text attempts to shore up loyalty to the sultan by calling on a shared faith.²⁰ Some of the shaykhs heeded Hayreddin Paşa's call and brought some 20,000 of their supporters with

¹⁴ Klein, *Margins of Empire*, 57–58; Hagop Shahbazian, *K'iwrtō-Hay Batmut'iwñ* (Istanbul: Araks, 1911), 81–87.

¹⁵ Osmanlı Arşivi (OA), İ.MSM 50/1266, 4/1, 29 Apr 1847 / 13 Cemazeyilevvel 1263; OA, İ.MSM 50/1266, 5/2, 3 May 1847 / 17 Cemazeyilevvel 1263; OA, İ.MSM 50/1266, 6/2, n.d. See also Martin Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State: The Social and Political Structures of Kurdistan* (London: Zed Books, 1992), 179–80.

¹⁶ Abu-Manneh, "Islamic Roots," 183–87; Abu-Manneh, "The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya," 24–31; Halkawt Hakim, "Mawlānā Khālid et Les Pouvoirs," in *Naqshbandis: Cheminements et Situation Actuelle d'un Ordre Mystique Musulman* [Historical developments and present situation of a Muslim mystical order], ed. Marc Gaborieau, Alexandre Popovic, and Thierry Zarconne (Istanbul, Paris: Isis Press, 1990), 367.

¹⁷ Richard E. Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire: Armenians and the Politics of Reform in the Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020), 79–81.

¹⁸ On the Nakşibendi-Halidi in Ottoman Kurdistan, see Butrus Abu-Manneh, "Between Heterodox and Sunni Orthodox Islam: The Bektaşî Order in the Nineteenth Century and Its Opponents," *Turkish Historical Review* 8, no. 2 (2017): 212, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18775462-00802004>.

¹⁹ OA, İ.MSM 50/1266, 2/1, n.d.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

them to the side of the Sublime Porte, according to the report.²¹ While Hayreddin Paşa may have been exaggerating the success of his faith-based call, later Ottoman correspondence from the Grand Vizier's office suggests that Hayreddin's actions had indeed caused some groups to abandon Bedirhan.²²

Still, even as Hayreddin's note tried to conflate the aims of the Sublime Porte with those of the Nakşibendi-Halidi, his call also split members of the brotherhood. Some heeded his appeal, but others like Bedirhan and key contingent of his supporters—also Halidi adherents—refused to lay down their arms. Elsewhere in the region, too, loyalties were divided. In Muş and Van, for instance, the governor of Erzurum reported that people had “fallen into a state of complete division.”²³ When a contingent of rebels went to pillage the home of an Ottoman sympathizer, Topçuzade Şerif Ağa, some people were apparently “armed and ready to defend” him.²⁴ Despite Hayreddin's attempts to rally people with faith-based calls, responses were mixed.

The Armenian patriarch in Istanbul, Matteos Izmirlian, also issued a faith-based call in the form of a bull instructing the Armenian faithful to “supply every type of aid and service to imperial forces.”²⁵ Some responded to the call, and even later claimed that Armenians had captured Bedirhan's key ally, Han Mahmud. The surrender of Bedirhan's forces reportedly sparked celebrations among Armenian church-goers, who sang a special psalm to recognize the imperial victory.²⁶ Izmirlian issued a letter praising Sultan Abdülmecid and suggesting that the demise of the Kurdish emirs, for Armenians, was akin to the biblical emancipation of the Jewish people from Egypt.²⁷ And while these sources may have also been liable to exaggerate the popularity of their success, others also reported that people in the region, especially Armenians and Christians, rejoiced after the removal of Bedirhan and his allies.²⁸

Yet, Izmirlian's call, like Hayreddin's, met with mixed results. Commoners and notables alike could be found supporting the “disobedient” Kurdish emirs. The British consul at Erzurum reported that some Armenians were conscripted alongside Muslims to fight *against* the Ottoman army in cross-confessional rebel forces: “The Armenian peasants carried arms and fought with the Mohammedans.”²⁹ In fact, Bedirhan's personal bodyguard reportedly included Armenians from Çatak (northwestern Iran) and Duhok (northern Iraq), said to be drawn from the vestiges of Armenian nomadic pastoralists (*koch'arner*).³⁰ Just as Armenian commoners could be found among the ranks of the rebel forces, so too could Armenian notables be found among Bedirhan's allies. These notables signed a number of petitions sent to imperial authorities urging them to halt Tanzimat reforms in the region.³¹ One sent by Han

²¹ Ibid.

²² OA, A.MKT.MHM 2/61, 2 Jun 1847 / 17 Cemazeyilahir 1263.

²³ OA, İ.MSM 50/1266, 6/2, n.d.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Avedis Berberian, *Batmut'ıwn Hayots'* (Istanbul: Bōghosi K'irishjian ew Ğng., 1871), 322.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ “A solemn letter of congratulations written under the auspices of the Mother Church of the Holy Mother of God in the Patriarchate of All Armenians in Constantinople,” 9 Dec 1847, quoted in Berberian, *Batmut'ıwn Hayots'*, 322–26.

²⁸ Xavier Hommaire de Hell, *Voyage En Turquie et En Perse, Exécuté Par Ordre Du Gouvernement Français Pendant Les Années 1846–1847 et 1848* (Strasbourg: P. Bertrand, 1855), 493–95.

²⁹ James Brant and A. G. Glascott, “Notes of a Journey through a Part of Kurdistan, in the Summer of 1838,” *The Journal of the Royal Geographical Society of London* 10 (1840): 360. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1797846>; other accounts also suggest Armenian fighters joined Bedirhan Bey's forces. See Shahbazean, *K'ıwrtō-Hay Batmut'ıwn*, 81–87; Arshak Safrastian, *Kurds and Kurdistan* (London: Harvill Press, 1948), 53; and Wadie Jwaideh, *The Kurdish National Movement: Its Origins and Development* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2006), 54–55.

³⁰ Tessa Hofmann and Gerayer Koutcharian, “The History of Armenian-Kurdish Relations in the Ottoman Empire,” *Armenian Review* 30, no. 4 (1986): 11.

³¹ OA, İ.MSM, 50/1266, 3, n.d. For a similar petition with a significant overlap in cross-confessional signatories, see OA, İ.MSM 50/1235, n.d. For an analysis of the latter, see Sinan Hakan, *Osmanlı Arşiv Belgelerinde Kürtler ve Kürt Direnişleri, 1817–1867* (Istanbul: Doz Yayıncılık, 2007), 179–83.

Mahmud emphasized the loyalty of the signatories to the sultan, but it also requested that Istanbul allow them to continue with the old system of fixed tax payments. Armenians made up just over a quarter (fourteen) of the forty-nine signatures on the document, which also included a few dozen muftis, beys, and other Muslim notables.³² Together, Muslim and Armenian notables like these had presumably benefited from their control of administrative appointments, tax collection, and conscription.³³ They were likely hesitant to cede their privileges to newly encroaching Istanbul-based institutions. And so, while these Armenians signed Han Mahmud's petition, others claimed credit for his arrest. Together, these reports of the splits among Armenians, Nakşibendi-Halidi adherents, and other residents of the region show how the Bedirhan conflict pitted cross-confessional coalitions—not sects or ethnic groups—against one another. Even as religious authorities tried to rally people with faith-based calls, notables and commoners alike formed coalitions with other faith communities.

The formation of cross-confessional coalitions was not limited to the Bedirhan conflict. Richard Antaramian offers examples of how Muslim notables and Armenian clergymen formed cross-confessional alliances and even “authentic father-son relationships” in the 1870s.³⁴ Likewise, Dzovinar Derderian presents evidence from the 1860s and 1870s showing how Armenians and their Kurdish, Alevi, and other neighbors shared practices, languages, and sacred spaces, much to the dismay of spiritual and other authorities at the time who envisioned more rigid communal boundaries.³⁵ Sect and ethnicity were no doubt present, but they were not consistent as rallying points for mass mobilization at mid-century.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, however, sect and ethnicity had become major rallying points that could mobilize people across Ottoman regions, including Anatolia and the Balkans. Ussama Makdisi characterizes these two areas as the “Ottoman North,” which he contrasts to the Arabic-speaking Mashriq (“the Ottoman South”), where his work has focused. During the reorganizations of the Tanzimat reforms, both the Ottoman North and South saw a fraying of cross-confessional ties and a hardening of confessional boundaries.³⁶ Makdisi has called this “a breakdown of old regime symbiosis” in Mount Lebanon, and Antaramian has called it the creation of “unmixed the sites of power” in the Ottoman East.³⁷ These similarities, however, do not explain why the Ottoman North and South followed such different trajectories after this moment of confessionalization. In the Mashriq, stubborn if contested notions of cross-confessional or “ecumenical” belonging sutured fractious polities. In Anatolia and the Balkans, the stitches did not hold, and sectarian conflicts brought unprecedented bloodshed.³⁸

What had changed between the 1840s and the 1890s to make sect and ethnicity such powerful tools of mass mobilization in the Ottoman East, in contrast to the empire's Arab lands? The following sections rethink the turning point of 1878 to contribute to our understanding of this divergence. While this moment included a military defeat, a punitive treaty, and an influx of Muslim refugees, it also included simultaneous environmental, financial, and

³² OA, İ.MSM, 50/1266, 3, n.d.

³³ Shahbazeian, *K'iwrtō-Hay Batmut'awn*, 81–87; Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*, 105–10.

³⁴ Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*, 113–15; for an example, see *Ambastanut'awn Vanay Pōghos Vardapetin Vray* (Istanbul, 1874), 24, <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015041471213>.

³⁵ Hōh. V. Muradean, “Namag,” *Arduzig Darōnoy* (Taron Eaglet), no. 45 (July 1, 1865): 81–82; Dzovinar Derderian, “Shaping Subjectivities and Contesting Power through the Image of Kurds, 1860s,” in *The Ottoman East in the Nineteenth Century: Societies, Identities and Politics*, ed. Yaşar Tolga Cora, Dzovinar Derderian, and Ali Sipahi (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016), 100; Abu-Manneh, “The Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya,” 14–15; Christoph Herzog and Barbara Henning, “Derviş İbrahim Paşa: Views on a Late 19th-Century Ottoman Military Commander,” *Occasional Papers in Ottoman Biographies* 1 (2012): 6–7.

³⁶ Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence*, 76–78.

³⁷ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 64–65; Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*, 157.

³⁸ Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence*, 20, 76.

technological dislocations.³⁹ What is more, these dislocations each highlighted the ethno-religious divides upon which pan-movements relied. Examining the unequal outcomes of these disjunctures for the empire's largely rural population sheds light on why, this time, divisive calls found a more sympathetic audience.

Ecological Stress and Unequal Suffering

The Ottoman East is the region immediately to the east of the Anatolian Peninsula, a high plateau where mountains and dormant volcanoes have stood their ground for millennia. Winding and weaving among them, the headwaters of the Tigris and Euphrates make their way south toward Syria and Iraq. In forming the empire's borderlands with Iran and Russia, the region hosted diverse religious communities, languages, and lifeways.⁴⁰ Official estimates around 1878 indicated that Armenian, Syriac, and other Christians made up 20–25 percent of people there, with Armenians inching toward a plurality or even majority in regions like that around Lake Van.⁴¹ Nomadic tribes there, mostly Kurdish, traversed Ottoman, Qajar, and Romanov domains with their flocks, and their relations with settled populations ranged from “benign symbiosis” to enmity and violence.⁴² These diverse groups suffered differently from the 1879 famine. During the 1877–78 Russo-Ottoman War, food production reportedly fell as agricultural labor emigrated or went to fight, while consumption increased as armies requisitioned their needs.⁴³ In addition to these war-related food reductions, many sources underscored abnormal weather in 1879–80. One effect of climatic conditions, animal mortality and epizootics, made famine suffering more acute for predominantly Kurdish pastoralist tribes.

Combining climatological data with voices from the archive suggests that the years following the war (1878–81) were a time of ecological stress in the Ottoman East: a drought struck in 1879, followed by two reportedly frigid and snowy winters. Data available indicate extremes in two global climatic patterns that climatologists argue affect the region: the El Niño/Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and the North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO).⁴⁴ Called atmospheric oscillation patterns, they affect the weather in “teleconnected” regions around the globe, depending on air pressure, trade winds, and sea surface temperatures. Since climatologists often lack reliable instrumental data for historical periods, they reconstruct measurements from a natural archive of proxies, including tree-rings, pollen, and lake sediments. Several data sets indicate that 1879 and 1880 were ENSO years of “extreme” and “very strong” negative measurements, known colloquially as La Niña years.⁴⁵ These conditions

³⁹ On predominantly Muslim refugees and ethno-religious tensions, see Astourian, “The Silence of the Land,” 60.

⁴⁰ Contestations about the region's demographics are without end. See Fuat Dündar, *Crime of Numbers: The Role of Statistics in the Armenian Question (1878–1918)* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction, 2011).

⁴¹ Kemal H. Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 194–95. For tables comparing population estimates from different sources from the time, see British Foreign Office (FO) 424/107, 104/2, Trotter to Goschen, Istanbul, 7 Sep 1880.

⁴² Ronald Grigor Suny, *Looking toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 101.

⁴³ *Deghegakir Sovelots' Khnamadar Getronagan Hantsnazhoghovoy* [Central Famine Commission Report] (Istanbul: Armenian Patriarchate of Istanbul, 1885), 13–15, <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/43513941.html>. British sources indicate stored food was available in Van, Erzurum, and Bitlis. See the FO 424/106, 171/1, 16 Apr 1880; FO 424/106, 209/1, and FO 424/106, 47/5, 16 Dec 1879; and FO 424/106, 243/1, 13 May 1880.

⁴⁴ On NAO's potential effects on the Ottoman East, see Heidi M. Cullen and Peter B. de Menocal, “North Atlantic Influence on Tigris–Euphrates Streamflow,” *International Journal of Climatology* 20, no. 8 (2000): 854–55, [https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0088\(20000630\)20:8<853::AID-JOC497>3.0.CO;2-M](https://doi.org/10.1002/1097-0088(20000630)20:8<853::AID-JOC497>3.0.CO;2-M); on ENSO, see Fatih Tosunoglu, Ibrahim Can, and Ercan Kahya, “Evaluation of Spatial and Temporal Relationships between Large-Scale Atmospheric Oscillations and Meteorological Drought Indexes in Turkey,” *International Journal of Climatology* 38, no. 12 (2018): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joc.5698>.

⁴⁵ Joëlle L. Gergis and Anthony M. Fowler, “A History of ENSO Events since A.D. 1525: Implications for Future Climate Change,” *Climatic Change* 92, no. 3–4 (2009): 367–68, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-008-9476-z>; these data

tend to bring colder and drier conditions to the Ottoman East.⁴⁶ Indeed, throughout 1879, sources reported droughts across the region and adjacent areas.⁴⁷ Proxy data also indicate powerful negative NAO events in the winters of 1879–80 and in 1880–81. In one reconstruction, the winter of 1880–81 was among the top ten most negative NAO events since recordings began in 1822.⁴⁸ Strong negative NAO events have been linked to greater winter precipitation in Anatolia, including parts of the Ottoman East.⁴⁹ Supporting that prediction, in the winter of 1879–80, several sources contained descriptions like “unexampled severity from cold and snow.”⁵⁰ A similarly cold and snowy winter followed in 1880–81.⁵¹

confirm the composite data of previous researchers including George N. Kiladis and Henry F. Diaz, “Global Climatic Anomalies Associated with Extremes in the Southern Oscillation,” *Journal of Climate* 2, no. 9 (1989): 1070, [https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0442\(1989\)002<1069:GCAWE>2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1175/1520-0442(1989)002<1069:GCAWE>2.0.CO;2).

⁴⁶ Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads,” 332–38; Ercan Kahya and M. Çağatay Karabörk, “The Analysis of El Niño and La Niña Signals in Streamflows of Turkey,” *International Journal of Climatology* 21, no. 10 (2001): 1241–42, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joc.663>; M. Çağatay Karabörk, Ercan Kahya, and Mehmet Karaca, “The Influences of the Southern and North Atlantic Oscillations on Climatic Surface Variables in Turkey,” *Hydrological Processes* 19, no. 6 (2005): 1201–5, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.5560>; Tosunoglu, Can, and Kahya, “Evaluation of Spatial and Temporal Relationships,” 4593.

⁴⁷ On drought in Eleşkirt, Karakilise, Erzurum, and Pasin, see *Deghegakir*, 13–15; missionaries Dewey and Thom wrote from Mardin that “The rain-fall for the winter of 1878–79 was very scanty, and the crops of the summer failed,” in “The Distress in Turkey,” *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 6 (June 1880): 214; for an Armenian petition from Van forwarded to the Ottoman Council of State, see OA, İ.ŞD 2868/51, 13 Sep 1880 / 8 Şevval 1297 in Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads,” 342; on droughts in Aleppo see OA, ŞD 2216/6, 1879 Sep 12 / 1296 Ramazan 25.

⁴⁸ Robert Marsh, “Modelling Changes in North Atlantic Circulation under the NAO–Minimum Wind Forcing of 1877–81,” *Atmosphere–Ocean* 38, no. 2 (2000): 368–69, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07055900.2000.9649653>; data updated from P. D. Jones, T. Jonsson, and D. Wheeler, “Extension to the North Atlantic Oscillation Using Early Instrumental Pressure Observations from Gibraltar and South–West Iceland,” *International Journal of Climatology* 17, no. 13 (1997): 1433–50, [https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-0088\(19971115\)17:13<1433::AID-JOC203>3.0.CO;2-P](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-0088(19971115)17:13<1433::AID-JOC203>3.0.CO;2-P). For data updated by the Climatic Research Unit, University of East Anglia, see: <https://crudata.uea.ac.uk/cru/data/nao/values.htm>.

⁴⁹ Some researchers suggest that NAO is more influential in western parts of Turkey, but others have still found significant correlations for winter precipitation and streamflow in parts of the Ottoman East. See Cullen and de Menocal, “North Atlantic Influence,” 861–62; and Murat Türkeş and Ecmel Eralat, “Precipitation Changes and Variability in Turkey Linked to the North Atlantic Oscillation during the Period 1930–2000,” *International Journal of Climatology* 23, no. 14 (2003): 1791–94, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joc.962>. Türkeş and Eralat downplay the effects of NAO in central and eastern Turkey, but they did find widespread correlations between annual precipitation and the anomalous negative NAO year of 1963, a finding useful to consider given that 1962–69 was the first prolonged negative NAO phase since that of 1876–81 recorded in the Hurrell North Atlantic Oscillation Index. They also found significant correlations between NAO and precipitation at stations including Elazığ, Malatya, Adıyaman, and Siverek. Their composite analysis for the negative winter index period of 1963–69 also showed significant correlations at Malatya, Diyarbakır, Urfa, and Cizre; Karabörk et al. found a negative correlation between NAO and precipitation in eastern Turkey, and these findings were later confirmed in a 2018 study, which found wet conditions “across Turkey” during extreme negative NAO winters. See Saeed Vazifekhhah and Ercan Kahya, “Hydrological Drought Associations with Extreme Phases of the North Atlantic and Arctic Oscillations over Turkey and Northern Iran,” *International Journal of Climatology* 38, no. 12 (2018): 4463, 4472, <https://doi.org/10.1002/joc.5680>; Karabörk et al. also say that eastern Turkey showed “less sensitivity” to an NAO winter than western regions, but they still found that precipitation correlated with a negative NAO winter at a majority of the eastern stations in their sample (22/35 stations Adana or eastward). See Karabörk, Kahya, and Karaca, “Influences,” 1195, 1209; Duzenli et al. similarly found that negative NAO winters in particular give rise to widespread responses across Turkey, including eastern regions. See Eren Duzenli et al., “Decadal Variability Analysis of Extreme Precipitation in Turkey and Its Relationship with Teleconnection Patterns,” *Hydrological Processes* 32, no. 23 (2018): 3524, <https://doi.org/10.1002/hyp.13275>.

⁵⁰ For “severe snow,” see *Deghegakir*, 14–15; for “unexampled severity from cold and snow,” see “The Distress in Turkey,” 211–12; for “bad weather and snow,” see British Library (BL), Western Manuscripts, The Layard Papers, Add MS 39032, ff. 73, 273 Clayton to Layard, Van, 9 Mar 1880; for “heavy snow” in Başkale, see FO 424/106, 70/3, Clayton to Trotter, Van, 30 Dec 1878; on the “violence of winter” in Ankara, see OA, DH.MKT 1330/5, 1/1, 29 Feb 1880 / 18 Rebiyülevvel 1297 / 29 Şubat 1880; on “almost unprecedented” snowfall in Mosul, see FO 424/106, 96/1, Diyarbakır, Chermiside to Layard, 2 Feb 1880, and FO 195/1308, Mosul, Miles to Layard 19 Jan 1880, both in Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads,” 343–44. On “snow-drifts” hindering travel in Van, see American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABC) 16.9.7, Vol 3, Part 2, Reel 681, 32, Letter from H.S. Barnum to Dr. Clark, Van, 27 Mar 1880.

⁵¹ On “a winter of unusual severity,” referring to letters from Harput, Erzurum, and Mardin, see “Editorial Paragraphs,” *The Missionary Herald* 77, no. 3 (March 1881): 87–88. For the “unusual severity of an early winter”

Climatologists continue to debate how far-reaching climatic patterns, or teleconnections, affect specific regions and how their effects may be lagged or combined with each other. Extremes in their measurements, however, are a useful invitation for corroborative research in textual archives.⁵² The extremes in both ENSO and NAO in 1879–81 underscore the potential for abnormal weather in the Ottoman East during that period.⁵³ In this case, textual archives do corroborate natural archives to suggest that multiple forces contributed to the 1879 famine: war indeed affected the region, but so too did global climatic forces, which brought drought, severe cold, and fluctuating snows at this precarious moment.

Whatever suffering these forces dealt to the people of the Ottoman East, it was even harsher for the region's livestock. Like their human owners, livestock suffered from food shortages and cold weather. Unlike their owners, livestock were liable to be slaughtered for food. Still, only the truly desperate would have slaughtered their animals, which were both an investment and a crucial source of labor, wool, and even body heat during the winter. Nonetheless, early observations highlighted how rising food prices put livestock on the chopping block. In Van province, "only three or four of the richest households had any bread to eat at all; the remainder had slaughtered and salted their sheep," British Vice-Consul Emilius Clayton wrote in February 1880. Elsewhere, too, people turned to their flocks. Even in a milder famine district, half of the cattle and 70 percent of sheep had died, according to British Vice-Consul William Everett at Erzurum.⁵⁴ He also relayed reports of people slaughtering pack animals for food in the mountainous districts of Nurdud and Çatak, south of Lake Van.⁵⁵ The cold and lingering winter of 1879–80 aggravated scarcity and added to animal mortality. "Normally the flocks go out to forage some weeks before this," an American missionary, Henry S. Barnum, wrote in a March 1880 letter. "To purchase the necessary hay is so expensive, that many...are constrained to kill many of their sheep and goats after keeping them all winter."⁵⁶ Lingering snows delayed the growth of forage, while hay was too expensive for most people. The following April, Clayton remarked that "The greater part of the animals have either been killed for food already, or have died for want of forage."⁵⁷ Even if animals were not slaughtered or starved, malnutrition and cold were enough to make them susceptible to disease. Indeed, the Armenian Famine Commission listed "loss of animals of all species to cold, hunger, and epizootics" as a factor giving rise to famine in some regions.⁵⁸

and the "burying the country in snow," see FO 424/122, 8/1, Richards to Goshen, Sivas, 10 Dec 1880. For the "unusually cold and severe winter," see FO 424/122, 130/1, Richards to Wilson, Sivas, 8 Mar 1881. For a viewpoint from Van, see FO 424/122, 69/1, Clayton to Trotter, Van, 28 Feb 1881.

⁵² On the combination of natural and textual archives to reconstruct a climatic moment in early modern Ottoman history, see Sam White, *The Climate of Rebellion in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 130–37.

⁵³ Recent work has pointed to correlations between the region's weather and other forces like the Arctic Oscillation and North Sea-Caspian Pattern. For a recent study on the Arctic Oscillation's effects in Turkey, see Vazifehkah and Kahya, "Hydrological Drought Associations," 4472; on the North Sea-Caspian Pattern, see H. Kutiel and M. Türkeş, "New Evidence for the Role of the North Sea-Caspian Pattern on the Temperature and Precipitation Regimes in Continental Central Turkey," *Geografiska Annaler* 87, no. 4 (2005): 512–13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3676.2005.00274.x>; although historical data is still scanty for these patterns, their presence raises important questions about their potential roles for shaping the climate of eastern Turkey. For proxy data derived from tree-rings, see Rosanne D. D'Arrigo et al., "Tree-Ring Reconstructions of Temperature and Sea-Level Pressure Variability Associated with the Warm-Season Arctic Oscillation since AD 1650," *Geophysical Research Letters* 30, no. 11 (2003), <https://doi.org/10.1029/2003GL017250>.

⁵⁴ FO 424/106, 213/3, 21 May 1880; FO 424/106, 260, 11 Jun 1880. See also FO 424/107, 148/2, 23 Sep 1880.

⁵⁵ FO 424/106, 186, 21 May 1880.

⁵⁶ ABC 16.9.7, Vol 3, Part 2, Reel 681, 626–32, 26 Mar 1880. See also FO 424/106, 186, 3 Apr 1880: "The lateness of the season adds to the suffering. The country is still covered in snow. A shaded thermometer never rises above the freezing-point, and during the night still descends below the zero of Fahrenheit."

⁵⁷ FO 424/106, 209/1, 20 Apr 1880.

⁵⁸ FO 424/107, 111/5, 1 Aug 1880.

Different segments of the population relied on different strategies for sustaining their livestock. Settled households may have been able to keep animals in sheds or even, for heating purposes, in their homes.⁵⁹ As for nomadic pastoralists, in previous decades they would have been able to move over a broad area to find better pasturage. In the 1850s, subgroups of the predominantly Kurdish Zilan and Celali tribes traversed the borders of the Ottoman, Qajar, and Russian empires. They might winter in one empire and summer in another.⁶⁰ After the 1877–78 War, however, these and other tribes faced increasing border controls, and their movements provoked increasingly tense diplomatic exchanges.⁶¹ These mobility restrictions blocked the search for greener pastures, intensifying pressures on scarce fodder. Under different circumstances, imported livestock might have mitigated shortfalls, but in 1879–80, high animal mortality prevailed elsewhere. Thanks to an “unusually severe” winter and famine, an “enormous number” of sheep and cattle had died in Diyarbakır, according to the British Consul Henry Trotter.⁶² In Ankara, a “violent winter” killed 30–40 percent of the province’s sheep, according to Ottoman correspondence.⁶³ Neighboring areas of Syria and Iraq also witnessed 50–90 percent losses of sheep, cattle, and draught animals, according to a March 1880 missionary report.⁶⁴ In May 1880, the Ottoman sub-provincial governor (*mutasarrıf*) of Süleymaniye sent a request for financial assistance to Istanbul. The sheep tax there had raised so little money, he warned, that it would not cover the costs of burying the famine’s mounting dead, let alone the salaries of local police.⁶⁵

Animal mortality impoverished those who held a larger proportion of their wealth in animals, including nomadic pastoralists. As Zozan Pehlivan has shown in the Ottoman East, and others elsewhere, famine has in a number of cases had more severe effects on pastoralists than cultivators.⁶⁶ Indeed, several reports noted how pastoralist borderland tribes fell into deep poverty. A contingent of 380 families from the Kurdish Cemedanli tribe fled border areas during the 1877–78 War. When Russia annexed their pasturage afterward, the Cemedanli stayed in Ottoman territory.⁶⁷ War and weather decimated the tribe’s flocks, which collapsed from 18,000 to 200 sheep in 1879–80, according to Consul Trotter. Having sold their tents and other possessions to buy food, they had “nothing left but to die.”⁶⁸ Vice-Consul Everett compared the Cemedanli’s abject state to that of two other Kurdish tribes, the Celali and Zilan.⁶⁹ Suffering was widespread, but it appeared most intense for those who held their wealth in livestock, including these predominantly Kurdish tribes.

Other sources suggested that famine suffering was falling unevenly not only upon tribes but also along ethno-religious lines, harming Kurds and Turks more than Armenians. The American missionary Royal M. Cole wrote in an 1879 letter that among the 2,000 dead

⁵⁹ Charles Boswell Norman, *Armenia, and the Campaign of 1877* (London, Paris, and New York: Cassell, Peter, and Galpin, 1878), 31–33.

⁶⁰ Mehmed Hurşîd Paşa, *Seyahât-nâme-i Hudûd*, trans. Alâattin Eser (Istanbul: Simurg, 1997), 262–64.

⁶¹ OA, HR.TH 35/48, 5, 23 Aug 1880; OA, HR.SYS 1231/86, 8 May 1882; OA, HR.SYS 1274/3, 1, 23 May 1883.

⁶² FO 424/106, 73, 7 Jan 1880.

⁶³ OA, DH.MKT 1330/5, 1/1, 29 Feb 1880 / 18 Rebiyülevvel 1297. The phrase was “*şiddet-i şita*.”

⁶⁴ FO 424/106, 177/1, 30 Mar 1880.

⁶⁵ OA, DH.MKT 1331/42, 1, 7 May 1880.

⁶⁶ On the Ottoman East, see Pehlivan, “El Niño and the Nomads,” 339–45, 348–49; on West Africa, see Michael Watts, “Entitlements or Empowerment? Famine and Starvation in Africa,” *Review of African Political Economy* 18, no. 51 (1991): 21–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03056249108703903>; on East Africa, see Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1990), 97–100.

⁶⁷ Yakup Karataş and Eyüp Kul, “XIX. Yüzyılın Sonlarında Bayezid Sancağı’ndaki Aşiretler ve İskân Politikası,” *Journal of Turkish Research Institute* 48 (2012): 358; on the Zilan, who also migrated to Ottoman territory, see Yener Koç, “Nomadic Pastoral Tribes at the Intersection of the Ottoman, Persian and Russian Empires (1820s–1890s)” (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2020), 258. An estimated 500 households migrated from Russian domains, according to official sources. See OA, ŞD 282/24, 24/13, Note from the Kaymakamlar İntihabı Komisyonu, 29 Oct 1879 / 13 Zilkade 1296.

⁶⁸ FO 424/107, 79/1, 23 Jul 1880.

⁶⁹ FO 424/107, 79/2, 1 Aug 1880.

reported in Eleşkirt and Doğubeyazit, “there were some forty Koords to one Christian.”⁷⁰ In February 1880, a missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, Robert Chambers, wrote that “the Turkish villages” of Erzurum’s Pasin plain were “in a worse condition than those inhabited by Christians.”⁷¹ In the same region, a few months later Trotter wrote, “it is the Turks and Kurds who are suffering the most.”⁷² Likewise, outside of Van, Clayton reported that 98 percent of famine deaths were Kurdish.⁷³ Near Ahlat, a town on the northern shore of Lake Van, Armenian villagers were reportedly “keeping alive destitute Kurds.”⁷⁴ In Karakilise (Ağrı), too, Turks were “dependent even for bread on their Armenian brethren.”⁷⁵ These observations are notable coming from observers who tended to focus on the plights of Christians. Mass animal mortality helps explain why pastoralist nomads and tribal Kurds may have appeared to suffer more, but what about settled Kurds and Turks?

The connotations of “Kurd” and “Turk” were more fluid then than they are today. These terms could have distinguished any combination of linguistic communities (Turkish or Kurdish), sects (Hanafi or Shafi’i), or economic classes (cultivator or pastoralist). Still, whatever “Kurd” or “Turk” meant, they nearly always excluded Christians.⁷⁶ So, these observations suggested a sectarian distribution of suffering. Why did it seem so unequal? The observations of Dr. Lanzioni, a member of the Istanbul-based International Board of Health, are useful for answering that question. While accompanying the British Consul Trotter from Van to Eleşkirt, Lanzioni estimated that a nearby death toll of 4,000 was “almost entirely Kurds.” The Armenians have suffered much also, according to his report, but they have received great help from their coreligionists, whereas there was “no one to look after the Kurds.”⁷⁷ Lanzioni’s observation suggests that an effective Armenian relief operation was helping Armenians more than their neighbors.⁷⁸ It is to this relief operation and the financial context of the famine that the next section turns.

Victims of Relief

It was not only the uneven *effects* of famine but also uneven *responses* to famine that made suffering seem so lopsided. The extensive Ottoman telegraph network allowed for news of the famine to spread quickly and for donations from abroad to arrive swiftly.⁷⁹ Railways did not reach the Ottoman East until the 1930s, and with animal mortality so high, beasts of burden would not suffice.⁸⁰ By the 1870s, however, the trans-Ottoman telegraph network had already reached from Istanbul to Basra and connected to key cities in the Ottoman East.⁸¹ The most effective relief agencies, then, imported credit via telegraph and purchased

⁷⁰ Royal M. Cole, “Famine in Harvest Time,” *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 12 (December 1880): 504.

⁷¹ FO 424/106, 186, 21 May 1880.

⁷² FO 424/106, 260, 11 Jun 1880.

⁷³ FO 424/107, 38/1, 21 Jun 1880.

⁷⁴ FO 424/107, 161/1, 20 Sep 1880.

⁷⁵ FO 424/107, 143/1, 7 Sep 1880.

⁷⁶ On the exception of Christian nomadic pastoralists, see Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 118.

⁷⁷ FO 424/107, 79/1, Trotter to Lady Strangford, Erzurum, 23 Jul 1880.

⁷⁸ See also FO 424/106, 70/2, Everett to Trotter, Erzurum, 30 Jan 1880. Everett writes that “the Patriarch is collecting only for the Christians, whereas the Turkish wheat will be distributed amongst all Ottoman subjects irrespective of religion.”

⁷⁹ On changing the speed of information, see Christopher Hoag, “The Atlantic Telegraph Cable and Capital Market Information Flows,” *The Journal of Economic History* 66, no. 2 (2006): 351–52.

⁸⁰ On transportation difficulties linked to animal mortality, see FO 424/106, 47/3, 2 Jan 1880; FO 422/106, 209/1, 20 Apr 1880; and ABC 16.9.7, Vol 3, Part 2, Reel 681, 626–32, 26 Mar 1880.

⁸¹ Yakup Bektas, “The Sultan’s Messenger: Cultural Constructions of Ottoman Telegraphy, 1847–1880,” *Technology and Culture* 41, no. 4 (2000): 669–96; for an example of a lack of telegraph connections aggravating famine suffering, see Özge Ertem, “Eating the Last Seed: Famine, Empire, Survival and Order in Ottoman Anatolia in the Late Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., European University Institute, 2012), 229–39.

grain locally. The observations of uneven suffering mentioned earlier, this section will argue, arose not only from collapsing livestock populations but also from a successful Armenian relief campaign that upstaged the others, including that of the Ottoman government.

Not all famines are the same, and during this one, the Ottoman East suffered from a shortage “more of money than of grain.”⁸² The grain was there; it was just in shorter supply than usual, and in the face of war, severe weather, and animal mortality, prices rose rapidly.⁸³ Still, Ottoman officials anticipated and worked to prevent shortages. Following reports of irregular weather in Anatolia and Syria, they restricted grain exports, banning them from Diyarbakır and Adana in July 1879, from Aleppo the following September, and from the whole of the empire by November.⁸⁴ Moreover, before and during the famine, reports indicated that Ottoman authorities were collecting tithes in grain in and around famine-stricken areas.⁸⁵ In short, food was available, even if it was harder to move and in shorter supply.

Food supplies failed less than Ottoman finances during this period, and the resulting currency devaluations devastated people in the Ottoman East. In October 1875, the Porte paused interest payments on its foreign debt. As a result of this default, the Ottoman financial system fell into disarray, with no solution until December 1881, when Istanbul reached a settlement with its foreign creditors. Starved of money, the government began to distribute paper notes (*kaime*) in August 1876. The paper’s market value sank immediately, and by October 1878, one needed 331 paper piasters to buy a gold lira, the piaster having dropped more than a third of its nominal value (from 1/100 to less than 1/300 of a gold lira).⁸⁶ In the midst of these troubles, the Ottomans negotiated a settlement with their creditors and implemented two major changes as part of their financial overhaul. First, in March 1879, the government announced that it would gradually withdraw the 1.5 billion paper piasters in circulation, and also that it would require 80 percent of taxes be paid in coin, not paper.⁸⁷ Second, in December 1879, Istanbul announced it would shift to gold alone as the standard for the Ottoman currency, ending official bimetallism.⁸⁸ The decision devalued non-gold metals like silver and copper, the mainstay of many poorer classes who did not hold enough wealth to own gold lira.

Together, the repudiation of paper and devaluation of non-gold metals constituted a major financial disjuncture that disrupted commerce and decimated people’s wealth across the empire.⁸⁹ The military had used paper to pay for supplies, however, so eastern border provinces like Erzurum and Trabzon, on the war’s Caucasus Front, were left holding larger

⁸² FO 424/122, 48/1, Everett to Trotter, Erzurum, 18 Feb 1881.

⁸³ Ibid.; FO 424/106, 186/1, Jan 1880.

⁸⁴ On export restrictions following irregular weather reports from Anatolia, see “Gleanings from Letters,” *The Missionary Herald* 75, no. 8 (August 1879): 306–7; see also “The Famine,” *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 5 (May 1880): 180; on Syria, see OA, HR.SYS 406/39, 4 Mar 1879; on grain export restrictions from Diyarbakır and Adana, see FO 78/2979, 57, 31 Jul 1879; on grain export restrictions from Aleppo, see OA, ŞD 2216/6, 12 Sep 1879; on blanket grain export restrictions, see FO 78/2979, 86, 5 Nov 1879.

⁸⁵ OA, A.}MKT.UM 1667/40, 1/1, Grand Vizierate to Bitlis and Erzurum Provinces, 29 Dec 1880 / 17 Kanunuevvel 1296. See also OA, HR.SYS, 78/4, 21/1, 20 Apr 1880, on tithes in grain collected around Doğubeyazıt; see OA, DH.MKT 1331/69, 1/1, 22 Apr 1880 / 12 Cemazeyilevvel 1297, on tithes of grain collected and stored in Van and Erzurum; see FO 424/91, 132/1, 9 Oct 1879, on tithes of grain stored in Van after the drought of 1879; see FO 424/122, 7/1, 16 Dec 1880, on tithes of grain collected in Erzurum and allegedly sold to speculators; see FO 424/122, 130/1, 8 Mar 1881, on the spoilage of excess grain collected as tithes in Sivas in 1880; see FO 424/122, 48/1, 18 Feb 1881, on tithes collected in Van.

⁸⁶ Christopher Clay, *Gold for the Sultan: Western Bankers and Ottoman Finance, 1856–1881* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 344–51 (data from 348).

⁸⁷ Ibid., 408–9; for a copy of the decree, see “Actes Officiels,” *La Turquie* 13, no. 65 (March 20, 1879): 1.

⁸⁸ A. C. Tuncer and Şevket Pamuk, “Ottoman Empire: From 1830 to 1914,” in *South-Eastern European Monetary and Economic Statistics from the Nineteenth Century to World War II*, ed. M. Morys (Vienna: Oesterreichische Nationalbank, 2014), 3–4.

⁸⁹ BL, Western Manuscripts, Add MS 39032, f. 147, Barnum to Layard, 20 Mar 1880. See also Ertem, “Last Seed,” 87–95.

amounts of repudiated paper.⁹⁰ Observations from the famine highlight the devastation: the depreciation worsened the situation of Kurdish tribes near Erzurum, whose poverty the vice-consul attributed to “the loss of their cattle last winter and the depreciation of the metallic currency.”⁹¹ In Arapkir and Eğin on the upper Euphrates, reports emerged of massive losses “by the depreciation of the Government paper,” with “many families reduced from affluence to penury.”⁹² In the Black Sea port city of Trabzon, the British Consul Alfred Biliotti wrote of widespread distress: reports that the poor had lost “no less than 80 percent” of their wealth with the repudiation of paper and devaluation of silver and copper coins. Biliotti also reported the dramatic public suicide of a formerly enslaved, dark-skinned, and presumably African man in Trabzon, who lost his savings of 200 lira: “The withdrawal of the caimés [paper], of the copper coin, and lastly the depreciation of the silver currency, having deprived him of his hard-earned savings, he decided to put an end to his life.” In despair, the man went with a cutlass to the stairs of a government building and “deliberately cut open his belly,” where “his intestines dropped on the ground.”⁹³ Biliotti did not offer a source for this dramatic anecdote, but, whatever its provenance and veracity, he wrote that he relayed it in order to communicate “the despair to which some people have been driven.”⁹⁴ Indeed, along with military defeat, drought, and poor harvests, the repudiation of paper and devaluation of non-gold metals pushed many people beyond the brink.

Other work has shown how imperial infrastructures like railways could aggravate suffering during famine by facilitating profitable grain exports, but in the Ottoman East, it was not railways but this wave of devaluation that stole food off people’s tables.⁹⁵ The shift away from bimetallicism lowered copper to one fifth of its nominal value (500 piasters per gold lira). This devaluation of non-gold metals disrupted tax collection and aggravated losses for the poorer classes, who tended to hold more small denominations: “They will be totally ruined if the taxes are demanded in gold or silver while they are only in possession of the depreciated copper currency,” Vice-Consul Clayton wrote after a trip from Muş to Bitlis and meeting with a village headman on the way.⁹⁶ Tax farmers in areas like Tokat also wrote to Istanbul to express the losses they faced as a result of the declining value of non-gold coins.⁹⁷ What is more, provincial officials were receiving demands to send funds to the cash-strapped capital.⁹⁸ “The drain of money to Constantinople is sapping the life-blood of the Empire,” Trotter wrote in October 1880.⁹⁹ Indeed, reports indicated that officials were hounding

⁹⁰ Clay, *Gold for the Sultan*, 357–58. Citing British sources, Clay indicates that the extent of the circulation is not “entirely clear” but that “in Anatolia, including the regions of Ankara, Kastamonu, Trabzon and Erzurum, they circulated more extensively, and the same was true of many parts of Rumelia, including Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the districts around Preveza and Gallipoli, as well as Crete...in Bosnia alone, the acting British consul reckoned that there were Ps 40 million kaime in circulation by the end of 1877.”

⁹¹ FO 424/107, 148/2, Vice-Consul Everett to Mr. Goschen, Erzurum, 23 Sep 1880.

⁹² FO 424/106, 73, Trotter to the Marquis of Salisbury, Diyarbakır, 7 Jan 1880.

⁹³ FO 424/107, 26, 9 Jul 1880.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* Race may have played into the willingness of Biliotti and his interlocutors to relay such a gruesome anecdote. On violence against enslaved Africans and their bodies, and for more on emerging methods for contending with histories of slavery, race, and blackness in the Ottoman Empire, see Taylor M. Moore, “Betraying Behita: Superstition and the Paralysis of Blackness in Out El Kouloub’s Zanouba,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, no. 1 (February 2022): 156–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S002074382200006X>

⁹⁵ On cash crops and food exports during shortages in colonized areas, see Michael Watts, *Silent Violence: Food, Famine, & Peasantry in Northern Nigeria* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 300–4.

⁹⁶ FO 78/2991, 34/1, 19 Aug 1879.

⁹⁷ OA, A.}MKT.UM, 1649/94, 1/1, Representative of the Tax Farmers of Tokat to the Grand Vizier’s Office, 22 Mar 1880 / 10 Mart 1296.

⁹⁸ OA, A.}MKT.UM 1667/40, 2/1, Grand Vizierate to Bitlis and Erzurum Provinces, 29 Dec 1880 / 17 Kanunuevvel 1296, offers an example of the Grand Vizier upbraiding the provincial assembly of Erzurum for unsatisfactory title incomes, alleged corruption among appointed tax-collectors, and failure to appoint different collectors; see also FO 424/106, 171/1, Apr 1880; FO 424/107, 26, 9 Jul 1880; and FO 424/122, 56/1, 8 Feb 1881.

⁹⁹ FO 424/107, 154/1, 2 Oct 1880.

famished peasants for taxes and selling imperial grain previously collected as tithes to speculators, aid agencies, and others.¹⁰⁰ These reports underscore how the 1879–81 famines cannot be explained by war or weather alone. Istanbul's precarious financial situation was "sapping" provincial "life-blood." The war had devastated the region; the drought had killed off its livestock, agricultural labor, and stores of wealth; and the Ottoman debt fiasco then rendered the savings of most people virtually worthless.

Consequently, relief agencies found stable foreign currencies to buy grain locally. Provincial officials needed sound currency to satisfy Istanbul's demands, and many areas had stocked granaries. Foreign currency was thus a quick and effective way to access that grain: quick, thanks to telegraph lines, and effective, because it avoided the floundering Ottoman lira. The four largest relief agencies were the Ottoman government, the Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate, British consuls, and American missionaries. Armenian, British, and American relief agencies formed earliest. The Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate formed its Central Famine Aid Commission in January 1880 with provincial committees directed by clergymen and notables.¹⁰¹ Unlike Armenian relief efforts, British efforts had no central organization. Philanthropists in Britain raised donations, while British consuls used that money for relief. Disbursements began as early as February 1880.¹⁰² Protestant aid also began in the first months of 1880. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) and Armenian Protestant converts in Istanbul also raised donations. The ABCFM began fundraising in January 1880, and by February 1880, the missionary Robert Chambers was distributing \$250 to villages around Erzurum.¹⁰³

Facing financial collapse and military defeat, the Ottoman government was slower to organize. In October 1879, six months before the formation of the Ottoman Famine Commission, British consuls had warned of impending shortages.¹⁰⁴ The Erzurum governor downplayed the possibility at that time.¹⁰⁵ Perhaps he feared highlighting troubles in the eastern provinces, where Western humanitarians had been demanding European intervention on behalf of Armenians. "Certain ill-disposed foreign Governments might make it [the famine] a pretext for insisting on the immediate formation of the protocols of the Treaty of Berlin," Grand Vizier Said Paşa wrote in an April 1880 statement about founding the Ottoman Famine Commission.¹⁰⁶ Whatever their causes, the delays left little time to distribute money, food, and seed before the planting season, rendering Ottoman aid useless in some areas.¹⁰⁷

In addition to its earlier timing, the Armenian Commission also seems to have raised more money than the Ottomans, British, or Americans. Drawing on predominantly Armenian donors stretching from Manchester to Madras, the commission claimed to have raised 3.84 million piasters in 1880–84. Other relief agencies raised tens or hundreds of thousands of piasters, not millions. Armenian donations arrived from cities including Tbilisi (418,768 piasters), Manchester (142,780), Paris (130,078), Moscow (110,631.50), Alexandria (90,944), and Marseilles (82,109.75).¹⁰⁸ These donations, backed by rubles, pounds, francs,

¹⁰⁰ Buyers included local merchants, aid organizations, and others who could pay. For an example of grain speculation in Trabzon, where over 1,500 bushels of "Indian corn" from imperial granaries containing "tithes collected in kind" were reportedly sold to an Armenian merchant from Ordu, see FO 424/107, 61, Biliotti to Granville, 2 Aug 1880; on grain speculation in Trabzon, see FO 424/107, 120, 11 Sep 1880; on Erzurum, FO 424/106, 29/2, 2 Dec 1879, and FO 424/106, 70/2, 30 Jan 1880; and on Diyarbakır, see Ertem, "Considering Famine," 165–67.

¹⁰¹ *Deghegaker*, 4–5.

¹⁰² FO 424/122, 69/2, 15 Feb 1881; FO 424/107, 79/1, 23 Jul 1880.

¹⁰³ Minas Kevorkian, "Kahtzedegân İçin İlane Komitesi," *Avedaper* 23, no. 11 (March 16, 1880): 3; "The Famine" (May 1880); "The Famine," *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 6 (June 1880): 227–28.

¹⁰⁴ Ertem, "Last Seed," 139.

¹⁰⁵ OA, HR.SYS 78/4, 21/1, 20 Apr 1880.

¹⁰⁶ "The Famine in Asia Minor," *The Times*, May 3, 1880, The Times Digital Archive.

¹⁰⁷ For an example of these delays, see FO 424/106, 260, 11 Jun 1880, and FO 424/107, 79/1, 23 Jul 1880.

¹⁰⁸ *Deghegaker*, 118.

and so on, freed the patriarchate from Ottoman devaluations. British and Protestant efforts operated as a set of cooperating but separate organizations, so it is tricky to pin down their precise numbers. Sources suggest that British efforts raised relief valued at 600,000 and perhaps up to 1 million piasters.¹⁰⁹ As for American aid, by May 1880, it reportedly amounted to 50,000 piasters (\$2,200).¹¹⁰ Additionally, Istanbul-based Armenian Protestants raised 26,446 piasters from their own donation campaign.¹¹¹ Turning to the Ottoman Commission, it did mobilize significant funds, but part of those funds came from officials who donated their unpaid salaries. The commission had created a registry for officials to make voluntary contributions, which initially reached 50,312 piasters, but only 10,000 in gold. The other 40,312 came from donated salary arrears.¹¹² It was not guaranteed that this back pay could be converted to cash. In normal circumstances, arrears could fetch as little as 45 percent of their nominal value.¹¹³

Although its total sums may have been inflated, the Ottoman Famine Commission still distributed significant amounts of aid. An interior ministry dispatch from April 1880 noted that aid payments from the Imperial Ottoman Bank were telegraphed to representatives in Mosul (800 lira), Van, Bitlis, and Diyarbakır (400 lira each), totaling 200,000 piasters. Given that the telegram mentions “Ottoman gold lira,” we can assume that these dispatches were backed by specie.¹¹⁴ Even conservatively assuming that these transfers were arrears-backed credit, at 45 percent of their nominal amounts, they still would have been comparable in size to British aid, if not larger. In the final assessment, then, the Ottoman Commission raised significant funds, but of the four agencies examined here, the Armenian Patriarchate’s aid efforts stood out. Even if the Armenian Commission’s donation estimates were inflated, the number is still an order of magnitude larger than the next-largest organizations. This yawning gap accords with the sources mentioned earlier, which commented on the Armenian relief operation’s palpable success.

Still, Armenian aid did reach non-Armenians, according to sources mentioned earlier.¹¹⁵ Also, it is important to note that Ottoman officials in areas like Başkale said “each nationality” should “look after their own poor,” and that there were precedents that each community should care for its own.¹¹⁶ Some sources also suggested that government aid flowed unevenly toward Muslims.¹¹⁷ Aid was always prone to disputes, and it is difficult to adjudicate those claims today. Still, understanding the scale of Armenian aid relative to others suggests why Armenians were at least perceived to be suffering less from famine. There was more relief earmarked for them, and, outside of the Lake Van region, they were a minority in the region.

¹⁰⁹ For calculations, see FO 424/122, 69/2, 28 Feb 1881, and FO 424/107, 79/1, 23 Jul 1880; BL, Western Manuscripts, Add MS39034, f. 259 William George Abbott, Consul at Tabriz: Letters to Sir A. H. Layard: 1877–1882. For more, see BL, Western Manuscripts, Add MS39033, f. 36–138.

¹¹⁰ “[No Title],” *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 4 (April 1880): 122; “[No Title],” *The Missionary Herald* 76, no. 5 (May 1880): 162; on conversions, see Şevket Pamuk, *Monetary History of the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209.

¹¹¹ “Hankanagut’iwn Hantsnazhoghovoy Langayi Aved. Yegeghets’woyn Vasn Sovelots’ Hayasdani,” *Avedaper* 33, no. 52 (December 28, 1880): 206.

¹¹² OA, İ.DH 802/65028, 15 Apr 1880, quoted in Ertem, “Last Seed,” 141.

¹¹³ On converting these promissory notes, see FO 424/107, 7/1, 3 Jul 1880.

¹¹⁴ OA, DH.MKT 1331/10, 29 Apr 1880.

¹¹⁵ An Armenian school principal in Van wrote that relief funds were “spent indiscriminately on Armenians, Kurds, and Turks.” See H. Yeramian, *Hushartsan*, vol. 1 (Alexandria: Aram Kasabian, 1929), 123; see also Dzovinar Derderian, “Nation-Making and the Language of Colonialism: Voices from Ottoman Van in Armenian Print Media and Handwritten Petitions (1820s to 1870s)” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2019), 248–49; and Antaramian, *Brokers of Faith, Brokers of Empire*, 154–55.

¹¹⁶ On Ottoman officials encouraging “each nationality” to “look after their own poor,” see FO 424/106, 186, 21 May 1880; for previous examples of this attitude, see Yaron Ayalon, *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 110–27.

¹¹⁷ FO 424/106, 13/1, 15 Nov 1879; FO 424/106, 13/2, 22 Nov 1879; FO 424/106, 29/2, 2 Dec 1879; FO 424/106, 207, 4 May 1880.

In addition to its timing and funding, the content of relief may also have contributed to the appearance of uneven suffering. All four agencies focused on purchasing food and seed, activities more helpful for cultivators than pastoralists. That meant it was less useful for predominantly Kurdish tribes. The Armenian Commission, for instance, spent 70–80 percent of its funds for Van and Erzurum on grain or credit intended for grain.¹¹⁸ The commission did devote about 6 percent of its budget (72,513 piasters) to purchasing oxen, but those were intended for cultivators to replace “those that have died, so agriculture may be carried on.”¹¹⁹ Food offered short-term relief for the hungry of any class, but attempts to distribute seed and rehabilitate agriculture were likely more useful in the long term for cultivators than for pastoralists. In this way, relief mechanisms also highlighted the difference between pastoralists and cultivators, a division that overlapped with ethnic and sectarian lines.

Provincial Kurdish leaders aired their discontent with relief agencies in the Ottoman press, showing how perceived inequalities could make their way into discourses of difference and belonging. *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* (*Interpreter of Truth*), the Istanbul-based daily edited by Ottoman literary doyen Ahmed Midhat Efendi, published a series of articles about Kurds, Armenians, and the Ottoman East.¹²⁰ In June 1880, the paper ran an anonymous letter written by Kurdish leaders in Van, claiming that, in discussions of famine aid, someone had said, “Let’s not give aid to Kurds. They are wild and savage...let them taste hunger.”¹²¹ The same article accuses Armenian publications of trying “to make foreigners hear” their plight. The publishing of this letter shows how famine relief provided an opportunity to reverse the trope of Kurds as oppressors and Armenians as victims, a trope that had been recently reified in Article 61 of the 1878 Treaty of Berlin. It also provided an opportunity to question the loyalties of Armenians and their unsavory ties to “foreigners.” These sorts of messages underscore how Ottoman Armenians were, in some sense, victims of the patriarchate’s successful relief operation: whatever the actual distribution of famine aid, merely the optics of the Armenian commission’s outsized funding offered fodder for divisive discourses of difference and belonging.

Modern Weapons and Old Divides

While uneven flows of humanitarian relief highlighted the differences between Armenians and their neighbors, so too did uneven flows of modern weapons. An influx of repeating rifles during the 1877–78 War fueled violence and underscored key sectarian differences in its aftermath. From the abolishment of the janissary corps until 1909, the Ottomans “only rarely” accepted non-Muslims to fight in their land forces.¹²² Thus, the 1877–78 War highlighted the different obligations of different subjects: non-Muslims paid exemption taxes, whereas Muslims fought. A new generation of firearms intensified this preexisting difference. In the 1870s, the Ottoman government had purchased surplus rifles after the US Civil War (1861–65).¹²³ During the Russo-Ottoman War, the Ottomans distributed these

¹¹⁸ Relevant budget items equaled 451,051.12 piasters. A 50,040.75 piaster allocation was for both food and money, so I added half that amount (25,020.37). *Deghegaker*, 119.

¹¹⁹ *Deghegaker*, 120–21; on the uses of oxen purchased as aid, see FO 424/106, 245/1, 7 May 1880.

¹²⁰ “Yine Kürdistan!” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 591 (June 2, 1880): 3; “Kürdistan,” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 661 (August 23, 1880): 1; “Kürtlerin Bir Layihası,” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 591 (June 2, 1880): 3; “[No Title],” *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 674 (September 10, 1880): 3; Ahmed Midhat [Efendi], “Kürdistan Heyet-i Ittihadiyesi,” *Osmanlı*, no. 13 (September 13, 1880): 2.

¹²¹ “Kürtlerin Bir Layihası”; Kamal Soleimani, *Islam and Competing Nationalisms in the Middle East, 1876–1926* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 174–75.

¹²² Erik-Jan Zürcher, “The Ottoman Conscription System, 1844–1914,” *International Review of Social History* 43, no. 3 (1998): 444–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859098000248>.

¹²³ The Providence Tool company had signed contracts with the Ottomans for 600,000 Henry-Martini rifles, about half of which were delivered by the start of the Russo-Ottoman War in January 1877. See Jonathan A. Grant, *Rulers, Guns, and Money: The Global Arms Trade in the Age of Imperialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 23.

and other modern rifles to soldiers and to Kurdish irregulars.¹²⁴ These weapons represented the culmination of several firearms technologies that contributed more portable, faster-shooting firearms with longer effective ranges.¹²⁵ These technological developments were especially deadly in the hands of forces facing foes who lacked them.¹²⁶ Having received modern rifles during the 1877–78 War, many of the Ottoman military's predominantly Muslim conscripts kept them afterward. Sources highlight how increasing the violent potential of non-state actors radicalized the line between Muslims and non-Muslims by enabling banditry and uprisings, which in turn provoked disputes over troop quartering.¹²⁷

Modern weapons like repeating rifles and revolvers continually appeared in descriptions of banditry in the period around 1878. During the war, massacres of Armenians were reported in Van, Eleşkirt, and Doğubeyazıt.¹²⁸ Afterward, rifles and a “plentiful supply of ammunition” appeared in a report about highwaymen who preyed on towns and travelers in Ispir, in Erzurum province.¹²⁹ In Kochannes, Van province, Mar Shimun, the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, spoke sardonically about rifles: “Before, the Kurds killed us unarmed, defenseless people with old six-shooters. Now they descend from the hills like a storm, having been equipped with the Martini and the amazing 16-shooter Winchester rifles.”¹³⁰ Likewise, former patriarch and head of Armenian relief in Van Mkrditch Khrimian wrote that tribes around Van were “in possession of 4,000 Martini rifles.”¹³¹ Reports of modern weapons also appeared in adjacent regions, like Iraq. The British ambassador in Istanbul balked at a shipment of over 21,000 modern rifles to Baghdad in August 1880: “Have they troops enough to require so large a number of rifles?”¹³² The British consul at Tabriz reported that the fighters of the Kurdish leader Shaykh Ubeydullah appeared “to be well supplied with good rifles.”¹³³ In addition, after the war, soldiers and police continually faced pay reductions and unpaid salaries, and in areas like Aleppo province, they were reportedly selling their arms and ammunition to make a living.¹³⁴

Ottoman sources also suggest that rifles were disappearing into the hands of non-state actors and leaving the police outgunned. In October 1881, the Sixth Army in Baghdad sent an investigator to the port of Basra, where stolen six-shooter rifles were suspected of being sold to tribes farther north, according to Commander Izzet Paşa.¹³⁵ In Anatolia,

¹²⁴ Norman, *Armenia*, 27, 48, 114–15, 143, 189, 264–67; compared to previous Russian wars (1806–12, 1828–29, and 1853–56), Kurdish tribes enthusiastically answered the call for fighters in 1877–78. See P. İ. Averyanov, *Osmanlı İnan Rus Savaşlarında Kürtler*, trans. İbrahim Kale (Istanbul: Avesta, 2010), 39, 54, 68, 84.

¹²⁵ Daniel Headrick, *The Tools of Empire: Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1981), 97–99; see also Ramazan Hakkı Öztan, “Tools of Revolution: Global Military Surplus, Arms Dealers and Smugglers in the Late Ottoman Balkans, 1878–1908,” *Past & Present* 237, no. 1 (2017): 172–80, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtx034>.

¹²⁶ Headrick, *The Tools of Empire*, 117–19.

¹²⁷ For a similar combination of famine and war stress driving a “wave of banditry and disorder” in the sixteenth century, see White, *The Climate of Rebellion*, 150.

¹²⁸ United States Department of State, Maynard to Evarts, 181/2, 31 Aug 1877, in *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, Transmitted to Congress, with the Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1877*, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1877/d334>. See also Stephan H. Astourian, “On the Genealogy of the Armenian-Turkish Conflict, Sultan Abdülhamid, and the Armenian Massacres,” *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 21 (2012): 73.

¹²⁹ FO 424/106, No. 29/3, Everett to Trotter, Erzurum, 19 Dec 1879.

¹³⁰ Garo Sasuni, *Kürt Ulusal Hareketleri ve 15. Yüzyıldan Günümüze Ermeni Kürt İlişkileri* (Istanbul: Med Yayınevi, 1992), 155–56.

¹³¹ FO 424/107, 58/3, “Letter from M. Krimian [Khrimian],” Van, 20 Jun 1880.

¹³² FO 424/107, 58, Mr. Goschen to Earl Granville, Tarabya, 17 Aug 1880. See also FO 78/3274, 150, St. John to Granville, 8 Feb 1881.

¹³³ FO 424/91, 39/1, Consul Abbott to Mr. R. Thomson, Tabriz, 25 Sep 1879.

¹³⁴ Norman, *Armenia*, 55, 90; FO 424/91, 45/1, Wilson to Sir A.H. Layard, Sivas, 7 Oct 1879; FO 424/91, 43/1, Everett to Trotter, Erzurum, 11 Oct 1879; FO 424/122, 6/1, Clayton to Trotter, Van, 23 Nov 1880. On sales, see FO 424/91, 21/2, “Report upon the Gendarmerie and Police of Syria by Vice-Consul Jago,” Damascus, 8 Oct 1879.

¹³⁵ OA, Y.PRK.ASK 9/8, 1/1, 4 Oct 1881 / 10 Zilkade 1298.

the presence of repeating rifles appeared in the correspondence of Samih Paşa, the commander of the Fourth Army during the war. He stressed the need for more Henry-Martini rifles for local police. Having sent regular troops from Erzurum to southern Van province to quell an uprising, the remaining police would be ineffective, he wrote, without modern rifles: “Given that the Henry-Martini rifles I requested have not arrived, it is as though there are no police in this area.”¹³⁶ Samih Paşa’s claim that police without rifles were as good as no police at all underscored the perceived importance of these weapons by Ottoman officials.

In neighboring areas, as well, reports indicated an arms imbalance between police and non-state actors. In Sivas, unpaid police with flintlocks were reportedly powerless against bandits with “rifles and revolvers.”¹³⁷ In Erbil, northern Iraq, an American missionary noted the “poorly armed” police were no match for the “more than 1,000 Martini-Peabody rifles in the hands of the Kurds.”¹³⁸ Ottoman forces were stretched thin and out-gunned. Those who had served in the army could have had rifles handy to defend themselves, to sell, or to resort to theft.

The war had distributed these modern arms along sectarian lines: Christians, reports said, “seldom possess any” weapons and were disarmed “whenever found carrying them.”¹³⁹ Thus, long-standing distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims—conscription and bearing arms—manifested more intensely during this period after the war and during the famine. Non-Muslims did not serve as soldiers and faced authorities who tried to disarm them, so they had to rely instead on “poorly armed” and unpaid police.

Considering this uneven flow of arms in the context of the uneven flow of humanitarian aid, some of the patterns of famine violence become clearer. During the famine of 1879–81, attacks targeted cereals and livestock. An earlier section mentioned the Zilan and other frontier tribes who, without their flocks, had “nothing left but to die.”¹⁴⁰ After the war, members of the same tribe reportedly roamed the region “still armed with the rifles,” robbing travelers and stealing livestock.¹⁴¹ In May 1880, Mkrditch Khrimian claimed that Van’s Erciş subdistrict could have fed the entire region if not for the Haydaranlı tribe, who had “grazed their herds insatiably and violently” and “carried off a great quantity of beasts of burden.”¹⁴² In that same month, Armenians in Elbak, bordering Iran, sent a petition to the Istanbul Armenian Patriarchate. The six signatories described how Kurdish tribes attacked five or six villages, “looting the money and grain for the needy, preventing agriculture, and committing violent acts indescribable by pen.”¹⁴³ Bearing in mind the shortage of fodder and rising animal mortality, we can begin to connect the simultaneous disjunctures of this period. Perhaps the produce of Erciş could have fed the entire region, but that was assuming everyone could wait for harvest time. Perhaps the Haydaranlı, Şikak, and others grazed the remnants of their flocks on young crops and stole animals to cover their losses. By the 1880s, Armenians and other settled communities had long reported the problem of continual

¹³⁶ OA, DH.ŞFR 112/89, 2/1, 21 Sep 1879 / 9 Eylül 1295.

¹³⁷ FO 424/91, 45/1, Wilson to Sir A.H. Layard, Sivas, 7 Oct 1879.

¹³⁸ FO 424/106, 177/1, “Tabular Statement on the Famine in the Mosul District, Sent by Andrus, American Missionary in the Region,” 30 Mar 1880.

¹³⁹ FO 78/3279, 431, Plunkett to Granville, 30 May 1881. In later years the arms disparity in the wake of the 1877–78 war was also noted by an Anglican missionary: “The Christians are numerically the weaker, and also worse armed than the Kurds. Since the Russo-Turkish war a large proportion of the Kurds are armed with Martini and other modern rifles; the Christians rarely possess any better weapon than the old flint-lock musket, swords, and light wicker targets or shields,” in FO 424/145, “Memorandum” by Athelstan Riley, 1 Dec 1888.

¹⁴⁰ FO 424/107, 79/2, Trotter to Everett, Erzurum, 1 Aug 1880.

¹⁴¹ FO 424/91, 43/1, Everett to Trotter, Erzurum, 11 Oct 1879 (emphasis added).

¹⁴² OA, Y.PRK.BŞK 3/15, 3, Khrimian to Nerses Varjabedian, Van, 21 May 1880.

¹⁴³ OA, Y.PRK.AZN 1/20, 1, 11 Jun 1880 / 3 Receb 1297. British sources offer similar reports elsewhere. See FO 424/106, 209/1, Clayton to Trotter, Van, 20 Apr 1880; and FO 424/107, 38/1, Note Verbale signed by Goschen, Tarabya, 21 Jun 1880.

exactions of predominantly Kurdish nomadic tribes.¹⁴⁴ Yet, whatever past exactions may have been, an uneven influx of a new arms technology combined with the desperation of famine to make those exactions even more intense during this period of unrest and famine.

In addition to enabling banditry, the influx of arms also facilitated the rise of the Kurdish revolts in the Ottoman East. During the famine, the Nakşibendi Shaykh Ubeydullah raised a revolt that evolved into a complex cross-border event that brought chaos to the famine zone, as well as misery to its Kurdish, Armenian, and Assyrian settlements.¹⁴⁵ In August 1880, Ubeydullah's followers advanced into Iran, but the short-lived campaign ultimately failed in its goal of capturing Urmia. Still, the uprising brought violence and chaos to the borderlands. Thousands of families reportedly fled into Ottoman lands, fearing sectarian reprisals.¹⁴⁶ Violent as they were, Sunni-Shi'a tensions in the region also exacerbated the suffering of settled populations—many of them Christian in this region—who bore the costs of quartering well-armed but poorly paid Ottoman troops.¹⁴⁷ “Poor soldiers, like hungry lions” descended upon villages “almost daily” across Van, an American missionary wrote in December 1880.¹⁴⁸

Petitions from this period also highlighted the sectarian divisions arising from the permission to bear arms: Muslim subjects composed petitions with implicit threats of recourse to violence, while those of non-Muslims lacked such threats. In May 1881, a certain Abdülkadir (perhaps Ubeydullah's son) sent a petition in Persian to Sultan Abdülhamid II concerning the refugees arriving from Iran. The author acknowledged the sultan's order that “not a single person from the tribes of Kurdistan...is allowed to execute attacks on the Iranian side of the border.”¹⁴⁹ Indeed, following Ubeydullah's 1880–81 winter campaign in Iran, the Ottomans forbade any such cross-border actions.¹⁵⁰ Despite these orders, Abdülkadir highlighted the miseries of the Iranian tribes and refugees, stating that “due to a lack of sustenance, after two months they will no longer be patient.”¹⁵¹

This language echoes that of Circassian refugees recently settled near Izmit, where the “rigours of winter” had helped push that region into a state of famine.¹⁵² If not supplied with aid, the Circassians refugee leaders reportedly said, they would have to “help themselves.”¹⁵³ Comparing these sources the aforementioned Armenian petition from Elbak underscores the imbalance of force held by Muslims and non-Muslims. The Armenian petition begged the authorities to pay attention to the “near-annihilation of the community.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁴ *Reports on Provincial Oppressions* (London: Gilbert and Rivington, 1877), 7–8, 29, 47–57.

¹⁴⁵ Owen Robert Miller and Kamal Soleimani, “The Sheikh and the Missionary: Notes on a Conversation on Christianity, Islam and Kurdish Nationalism,” *The Muslim World* 109, no. 3 (2019): 403–7, <https://doi.org/10.1111/muwo.12299>; Sabri Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands: Making a Boundary, 1843–1914* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 215–17; the sons of Bedirhan Bey also raised a significant revolt after leading Ottoman troops in the 1877–78 War. See Van Bruinessen, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*, 181.

¹⁴⁶ Ateş, *Ottoman-Iranian Borderlands*, 219–20.

¹⁴⁷ FO 424/91, 2, Trotter to the Marquis of Salisbury, Erzurum, 27 Sep 1879; FO 424/91, 107/1, Consul Henderson to Layard, Aleppo, 30 Oct 1879; FO 424/106, 258, Clayton to Trotter, Van, 18 May 1880.

¹⁴⁸ FO 424/122, 45/2, Extract from letters received from Rev. R. Wahl, Kochannes, 8 Dec 1880.

¹⁴⁹ OA, Y.PRK.TKM 4/14, 12 Mar 1881.

¹⁵⁰ OA, A.MKT.MHM 486/62, 2/1, 29 May 1881; see also FO 424/122, 95/2, Translation of Proclamation by Governor-General of Van, 10 Apr 1881.

¹⁵¹ OA, Y.PRK.TKM 4/14, 12 Mar 1881.

¹⁵² “The Famine in Asia Minor.” See also OA, DH.MKT 1330/31, 1/1, Telegraph from Interior Ministry to Telegraph Ministry, 17 Aug 1880 / 11 Ramazan 1297. In this correspondence, Yalova, in the South Marmara region, is included alongside areas of the Ottoman East like Van, Doğubeyazıt, Eleşkirt as famine-stricken. In the published budget of the Armenian Central Famine Commission, relief authorities disbursed 119,435 kuruş to Bilecik and 81,788 to Nikomedia (Izmit) accounting for 8 percent of province-specific disbursements. Together, the two western provinces accounted for slightly more than the province-specific expenditures for Diyarbakır (162,862 kuruş). See *Deghegakir*, 68.

¹⁵³ “The Famine in Asia Minor.”

¹⁵⁴ OA, Y.PRK.AZN 1/20, 11 Jun 1880.

Iranian and Circassian refugees, meanwhile, offered veiled threats: without help, they would “no longer be patient” or “help themselves.”

The Ottomans had distributed arms to soldiers and tribes during the war, but those weapons made their way into the hands of bandits and rebels, and the costs of quelling unrest by dispatching yet more soldiers only exacerbated the misery. Though these difficulties were shared across the region’s communities, they also highlighted the difference in violent potential between Muslims and non-Muslims, radicalizing preexisting differences arising from sectarian conscription practices and permission to bear arms.

Conclusion

While 1878 was a diplomatic turning point, it was also a disjuncture across forces operating on multiple temporalities: the seasonal, annual, and decadal shifts of atmospheric oscillation patterns, the rapid credit transfers to the Ottoman East from around the globe, and the seconds it takes to fire and reload a rifle. Transformations taking place on these multiple temporalities had intense and intertwined effects, and their joint results upended all lives in the Ottoman East, human and nonhuman.

As these environmental, financial, and technological disjunctures simultaneously struck, each highlighted communal difference with unequal suffering. A summer drought followed by two severely cold and snowy winters caused widespread hardship, including animal mortality. Loss of livestock devastated everyone, but it was more painful for those whose livelihoods relied more on livestock, including predominantly Kurdish nomadic pastoralists. The Ottoman financial collapse also decimated wealth across the board, but foreign currency mitigated the pain. In the Ottoman East, Armenians were best poised to import that currency, thanks to their diaspora’s donations and patriarchate’s effective organization. The optics of their successful relief, however, fueled accusations that Armenians were hoarding aid—and that they forced their Kurdish neighbors to “taste hunger”—despite evidence to the contrary. Meanwhile, the 1877–78 War, like previous wars, highlighted the differences between Muslims and non-Muslims concerning conscription and permission to bear arms. Yet, 1877–78 brought an influx of a new technology, modern repeating rifles. Muslims and non-Muslims alike referred to these new weapons by brand-name and suggested that their power was unique: police without them would be as good as no police at all. The ensuing chaos of postwar banditry and uprisings harmed many people in the Ottoman East. That chaos, however, was even more burdensome for those who lacked arms and permission to bear them, like the region’s non-Muslims—the same group that was directing the best-funded famine relief operation.

Two years of severe weather, a financial crisis, and an influx of new weapons were all, of course, embedded in longer processes. Extremes in atmospheric oscillation patterns can occur multiple times in a single human lifetime, and the Ottoman financial crisis and rural impoverishment were both long in the making. Arms imbalances had also existed previously, as well. Still, by directing our attention to all of these forces and their simultaneous effects, the sources surrounding the 1879 famine help us understand how, together, they facilitated intensifying ethno-religious divides among ordinary people in rural areas like the Ottoman East. The war alone could not explain this often-cited turning point after 1878, after which ethno-religious categories were increasingly powerful for mobilizing masses. None of these climatic, financial, or technological disjunctures alone could explain it, either. Yet, they all occurred at once. It is only by stepping back from Istanbul and other metropolises to focus on rural life that their multiple consequences for ordinary people come into sharper relief.

Accounting for these overlapping turning points on the different timelines provides an alternative to the “homogenous, empty time” of human history that we have inherited.¹⁵⁵ That temporality, with its narratives of human and national progress, has nourished categories of ethnicity and sect as categories of mass politics. To better understand their contingent

¹⁵⁵ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 70.

development, we ought to account for human and nonhuman forces operating on alternative temporalities. Doing so facilitates a bottom-up explanation for the rise of the power of pan-movements. In rural Anatolia in this period after 1878, the ideas of ethno-religious difference flowing from the pens and pronouncements of officials, newspaper editors, and spiritual authorities were also enacted in everyday life. We can better see how by attending to these forces that compelled snowmelt into streams, credit across the globe, and bullets out the rifle-bored barrel of a gun.

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