Considering Famine in the Late Nineteenth Century Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Framework and Overview

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This article analyzes the Ottoman famines of the 1870s – that killed tens of thousands of people in Anatolia due to starvation and disease – from a global comparative perspective. It focuses on two famines in particular that struck the central and eastern provinces of the empire in 1873-75 and 1879-1881 (just following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78), respectively. They were triggered by climatic causes, yet their devastating effects were also a product of the global and domestic economic and political environment of the decade. Local, imperial and global man-made reasons exacerbated the severe impacts of nature and climate. The article addresses these famines as significant traumatic disasters, the memories of which were overshadowed by later catastrophic events in Ottoman history and historiography, and which have been almost invisible in European and global famine historiography of the nineteenth century. It summarizes the political-economic environment of the decade, attempts to investigate Ottoman famines in a global historical context and outline a comparative research agenda for an Ottoman history of famine and empire in the late nineteenth century.

(…)I have found, in many places, many persons who did not so much as know that there was a famine in Asia Minor, who had no knowledge of it before, who were not aware that a struggle against death from starvation had been going on in Asia Minor for the last twenty months, and that the whole population of that country had been decimated, enfeebled by disease, and so scattered and dispersed, that the whole of its social system had been utterly disorganized.¹

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¹ Whitaker, 1875, 15–6. See Ertem, 2015, 17–27 for a critical analysis of the meeting report.
Edgar Whitaker, the British proprietor and editor of the Istanbul-based English-French language newspaper *Levant Herald*, addressed the crowd composed of British and several other European businessmen, diplomats, statesmen and merchants at Willis’s Rooms in London with the above sentences on June 24, 1875. It was the meeting of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund established with the purpose of collecting relief subscriptions from the British public for the starving population in the central Anatolian provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The members of the auxiliary committee seemed to listen with the self-confidence and pride of just having “saved” the starving Indians from the pangs of hunger during the famine in Bihar and Bengal in 1873-74. Then was the turn of the starving Ottomans. One year earlier, in May 1874, A.A. Low, a prominent member and the previous president of the New York Chamber of Commerce, had responded to a toast for *commerce* at the annual dinner of the organization in New York, saying that commerce’s virtue lay in its ability to bring human societies together. “From populous provinces of India and from Asia Minor, wo[e]ful tales are brought us of wide-spread famine,” he stated; yet it was by “virtue of commerce” that the people of those countries were being saved from starvation. He had praised the railways, and electric wires which permitted “neither land nor water, however lofty or deep, to arrest the work that makes of one great family all the nations of the earth.”

Railways and electric wires did not always necessarily save people and relieve suffering as claimed by the British and American merchants, businessmen and administrators at the time. As Mike Davis has discussed thoroughly, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they were used also for exactly opposite interests or the interests of a privileged few as well. Yet, the same technology has also generated historical evidence about the connected elements of modern human experiences of people living within a “coeval modernity.” Famines in different parts of the world in the nineteenth century have been significant events mutually shaping this modernity, and thus they offer us insights into diverse interrelated imperial hi(stories) of the modern world.

This article analyzes the Ottoman famines of the 1870s that killed tens of thousands of people in Anatolia due to starvation and disease, from a global

2 Unlike the catastrophic death of millions during the next famine in India in 1876–79 under strict British *laissez-faire* policies—which had not occurred yet by the time of the above mentioned meeting—the efficient famine intervention policies of the colonial British administration during the previous famine in Bihar and Bengal in 1873–74 had proved successful. Davis, 2000, 36.


4 The same means would soon be used for exporting grain from India to London while millions in India were dying of hunger. Asian and African perception(s) of “imperial glory” were different from those of the British colonial masters. Davis, 2001, 7. Not just food and welfare—and not always to the appropriate destination—but also guns and violence have been transported and disseminated through these networks.

5 Harry D. Harootunian, a prominent historian of inter-war Japan, describes “coeval modernity” as shared by global actors in the same temporality against linear understandings of modernization that scaled and measured countries based on their levels of development and progress in that linearity. See Harootunian, 2002.
comparative perspective. It focuses on two famines in particular that struck the central and eastern provinces of the empire in 1873-75 and 1879-1881 (just following the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78), respectively. They were triggered by climatic causes, yet their devastating effects were also a product of the global and domestic economic and political environment of the decade. Local, imperial and global man-made reasons combined with the heavy impacts of nature and climate. The article addresses these famines as significant traumatic disasters, whose memories were overshadowed by later catastrophic events in Ottoman history and historiography, and which have been almost invisible in European and global famine historiography of the nineteenth century. It summarizes the political-economic environment of the decade, attempts to investigate Ottoman famines in a global historical context and outline a comparative research agenda for an Ottoman history of famine and empire in the late nineteenth century.

The 1870s: Famine and Empire in Dire Straits

While European and global famine historiography were not interested in Ottoman famines of the nineteenth century, the historiography of the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has, for the most part, told either variations of an elite-bureaucrat-led modernization story, or rising religious/ethnic tensions, wars, decline and dissolution. The few studies on famines in Ottoman historiography made significant contributions in Turkish, especially by drawing attention to rich archival materials. However, they also treated the topic usually from the perspective of state institution(s), employing solely logistical and administrative-chronological approaches. Due to the emphasis put on Ottoman successes, and the paucity of historical sources on ordinary people’s voices, the political-ideological dimensions of the famines, and local perspectives were mostly overlooked. There is still a lot of room for research on the political, environmental, social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of the famines. Today, however, encouraged by the emerging field of Ottoman environmental history, future studies on the comparative socio-cultural and political impact of famines can find a more solid background.

6 According to contemporary records, in the first famine no fewer than 100,000 people, and in the second famine no fewer than 10,000 people, lost their lives.

7 Among these studies, the only monograph in Turkish on famines in the nineteenth century is Erler, 2010. For a general bibliography on the subject, see Ertem, 2012a.

Famines in the Ottoman Empire are smaller scale famines, compared with the other great famines of the nineteenth century, but the intensity of their impacts on the daily life of local populations was similar. Both famines in central and eastern provinces were triggered by harsh droughts followed by extremely cold winter conditions. Yet, the general environment of political and economic crisis of that decade played a crucial role. Class mattered extensively, and although there was general impoverishment across all classes, religions, and sects during the famines, local merchants and grain-holders in particular localities profited from the situation. Usually, poor peasants and townspeople paid the highest price.

The central Anatolian famine started with the drought in the summer of 1873. Following the exhaustion of all supplies—including the grain saved as seed after the 1873 round of taxation—during the extremely cold winter of 1874-75, the disaster reached intolerable levels in isolated villages. The center was the province of Angora [Ankara] but it effected a region covering an area of about 40,000 square miles. In his tour in the region, Cesarea [Kayseri] station missionary Wilson Farnsworth observed that in the whole district, the inhabitants had fled searching for food, and leaving behind their starved. Their flocks and herds had perished, their fields and vineyards were ruined and they had burned their own houses for fuel, he observed. The collection of the autumn tax in 1873, which had occurred despite previous warnings from locals about the expected bad harvest, had left the peasants with few resources when winter arrived. In Ankara and Konya, due to contemporary records, 40 per cent of all herds died, and each and every community, especially the poor Turks, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews were effected. Around 100,000 people alone died because of diseases related to hunger. Once winter was over and roads were opened, villagers had no choice but walk for hours at first to neighbouring villages. However, the neighbouring villages were as devastated as theirs. Then they started walking to cities without any calories to subsist them. Many people died on the road. Roads, towns, and cities as far afield as Istanbul filled with famine refugees. British businessmen, merchants, journalists, and Protestant American missionaries each established separate relief commissions both in Istanbul and the Anatolian provinces. The Ottoman government also established its own commission. However, most people seem to have died during the winter and early spring of 1874, before there was any awareness of the true magnitude of the disaster, and any official efficient relief organization corresponding to it.

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9 In his classical work, Roderic H. Davison calls the years 1871-5 a “period of chaos.” Davison, 1963, 301–5.
10 Farnsworth, 1904, 56.
12 Ottoman state’s taxation practices in the provinces did not exclude the use of force as Nadir Özbek has shown. Özbek, 2009.
14 Erler has written in detail in Turkish about the Ottoman government’s and local officials’ famine relief initiatives, committees, and actions. Erler, 2010, 193–202.
total number of casualties of starvation, hunger, and disease was estimated to be around 100,000-150,000.\textsuperscript{15}

**Ottoman Provisioning Policies**

In order to discuss the continuities and discontinuities in official famine relief policies in the 1870s, one needs to remember earlier provisioning policies. The administrative measures the Ottoman government took against earlier famines were in keeping with the provisionist legal and moral tradition that survived until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which required the state intervene to control prices in each phase of the production, trade, transportation, and distribution of grains. The rationale behind regulatory policies of provisioning, as Seven Ağır underlined, was “redistribution of grain in order to ensure an affordable and abundant supply in the cities”. Price controls such as price ceilings (\textit{narh}) were “justified by a rhetoric of welfare, that identified public good with ensuring the subsistence of all.”\textsuperscript{16} Rhoads Murphey summarized the pattern of early modern

\textsuperscript{15} Naumann, 1893 (in Kuniholm, 1990); Quataert, 1968.

\textsuperscript{16} Ağır, 2009, 202.
Ottoman measures in response to crop failures in the following manner: “[...] partial rebates or full waivers of taxes [while] in times of prosperity it sought to compensate for temporary and local shortages by enforcement of resource sharing between better-off and less fortunate districts.” In her Ph.D. dissertation, Ağır argued convincingly that increasing international competition, political, and financial losses in wars and the narrowing of the grain supply zone in the Ottoman Empire in the late eighteenth century paved the way for “a shift of focus in political economy... away from a moral ideology that emphasized welfare and justice towards an ideology that emphasized wealth and development in the grain sector.” While the establishment of a central Grain Administration [Zahire Nezareti] in Istanbul in 1793 may give one the impression that grain provisioning for the capital city was becoming more centralized, regularized, and protectionist, the centralizing attempt in fact, took place simultaneously with “a more flexible attitude towards price controls.” The Grain Administration was abolished in 1839. Bilateral free trade agreements between the Ottoman Empire and foreign powers in 1838-41 led to a further loosening of state control over the grain trade. Bilateral commercial agreements upheld the principle of free trade in relation to the major European powers, beginning with the Anglo-British Treaty of 1838. Thus, they led to the end of state monopolies in trade and provided easy, open access to Ottoman markets for British merchants. At the same time, local merchants were still bound by rules that limited their mobility in trade transactions. Eventually, along with the abolishment of the internal custom dues on local trade in 1874, prospects for local merchants engaged in grain in Anatolian towns improved. Grain merchants began to act relatively more flexibly once freed from state control on their mobility.

Despite these relaxations, due to the absence of railways until the late 1880s and the uneven commercialization of agriculture in the Anatolian provinces, a small number of local notable families continued to dominate grain trade in several towns. Grain hoarding and consequent class conflicts deepened in the countryside during both famines, yet the former’s impact remained local and regional. Only after the 1890s did the once famine-stricken regions of central Anatolia become the breadbaskets of the capital city. Unlike the relationship between India and London, before 1890, the amount of Anatolian grain consumed in Istanbul was low; it amounted to only 2 per cent of all Anatolian grain in 1889. Thus, while London consumed Indian grain during the famine in India, it was not Anatolian grain that

17 Murphey, 1988, 218.
19 Ağır, 2009, 117. See also Salzmann, 1993.
20 See Kütükoğlu, 1976.
21 Local perceptions of corruption, tyranny, justice and moral economy could transform into significant expressions and actions of discontent and resistance to grain hoarders and state officials. For an excellent example of local points of view on state intervention and local perceptions of justice in an Ottoman Balkan province in the 1840s, see Kirli, 2015.
22 Quataert, 1993.
fed the imperial center in Istanbul. As Pamuk noted, only after the establishment of the Anatolian railroad that linked Eskişehir, Konya and Ankara to Istanbul, "as many as 400,000 tons of cereals were being shipped annually on the railroad" in the 1890s.23

One cannot discern a clear-cut departure from a provisionist 'ancien-regime' in state famine relief of the late nineteenth century. As Mehmet Genç underlines, long-established provisionist practices and customs were not abandoned wholly in the provisioning of food and basic requirements for subsistence.24 The relief policies the Ottoman government implemented to address agricultural distress and famine in 1873-75 still included some of the older measures, such as strict bans on exports and black-marketing. During both famines, the state organized relief initiatives, loosened its taxation policies and ordered tax remissions for particular periods of time until peasants could get better yields from the fields in 1875 and in 1881, respectively. They were temporary solutions. Sometimes the policy brought short-term relief; usually, however, it was not sufficient and daily survival of the poor was still at stake. The outcomes and influences of these policies were neither even nor coherent, but varied due to local circumstances, the role of local intermediaries in their implementation, the hegemony of grain-holders in a region and the financial and political strains that the country faced at the time. The sources of those strains were both local and global. Climate, socio-spatial geographies of vulnerability, regional political-economic dynamics, political inaction and infrastructural problems combined with the international political-economic context that imposed its harsh conditions on the Ottoman government. The droughts transformed to catastrophes within this context. The Ottoman polity was an actor in the world of modern empires, and the quiet famines in isolated villages in Ottoman Anatolia in 1870s were strongly related to the developments in the world around them in the same temporality. During the famines, the non-colonial Ottoman imperial realm—with all its particularities intact—shared a lot with both the "colonizers" and the "colonized" of the nineteenth century, despite being technically neither.25

23 Pamuk, 1987, 104.
25 In his article (Gölbaşı, 2011), Edip Gölbaşı demonstrates the problems of overemphasizing the ‘colonialism debate’ in the Ottoman context and instead focuses on modern state practices, elements of social control, and Ottoman understandings of citizenship to define and discuss the particularities of Ottoman imperialism in the nineteenth century. Regarding Ottoman particularities, Thomas Kuhn’s study (Kuhn, 2007) of Ottoman policies in Yemen in the late nineteenth century suggests that “in marked contrast to the example of Britain, Ottoman politics of difference were not meant to separate those who came under the purview of an official nationalism from those who did not.” Therefore, in a political-institutional sense, the Ottomans did not establish their policies on the basis of “colonial difference,” but on political “negotiation” and “integration” because of their own survival needs.
Politics and Economy – Context, Comparison and Historiography

Until the publication of a special section of the journal *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* in 2007, analysis of the British and Ottoman Empires within the same historical and analytical framework had been confined to studies of the early modern era. The articles in the volume were significant contributions to the historiography of empires in the nineteenth century. They helped interrogate the historiographical problems embedded in the perception that “the two empires [British and Ottoman] inhabited what were for all intents and purposes quite different realms of temporality.” Khoury and Kennedy underline that the above conviction, which had its origins in European works of the nineteenth century and earlier, functioned to make a distinction between “progressive, liberal and modern” states and societies vis-a-vis the “static, oppressive, and archaic” ones. The articles in the above-mentioned volume challenged these assumptions and pointed to the need of putting the two empires into the same analytical framework of comparison:

Both empires ruled vast territories that were inhabited by peoples of widely different faith, customs, ethnicities, and more; both made accommodations to these differences even as they sought to erase them; both advanced a universalizing mission while acknowledging its limits; both asserted authoritarian powers and conceded local autonomy.

However, the emphasis Peter Gray places on Ireland’s and India’s differences in order to escape from “crude analytical models" of colonialism is valid for the Ottoman context as well. In a similar vein, in their quest to historicize studies in Ottoman history that have used comparison as a tool since the 1990s, Alan Mikhail and Christine Phillou underline that the particularities of the Ottoman Empire should not be overlooked for comparison’s sake. Instead, referring to Sanjay Subrahmanyan’s useful concept, they suggest doing “connected histories” which preserve the specifics of each historical experience while showing the connections and “struggle, tension, mutuality and contestation” in the space “between”:

The Ottoman Empire was an elaborate and changing power formation where the structures and mentalities of empire met more abstract ideologies of early modern

26 Khoury and Kennedy, 2007. For a significant analysis of literature on comparative political history of the early modern Ottoman Empire, see Salzmann, 1998. The ‘Mediterranean’ became also a prominent category of analysis for the early modern Ottoman world thanks to the notable work by the Ottoman historian, Faruk Tabak (Tabak, 2008). For the early history of the Ottomans within “the larger story of medieval Asia Minor,” thus in the history of the broader world surrounding them and having a counterpart in the Iberian peninsula, see Kafadar, 1995.
sovereignty, then nationalism and the exigencies of imperial rivalry, and then colonialist contestation. It is in the interaction among all of these forces that the dynamism of this empire takes center stage.\textsuperscript{30}

The decade of the 1870s was one of the most difficult periods for both the Ottoman state and its subjects, making evident the interplay and contestation of such forces both in the global and in the local arenas. The two famines took place at a time of Ottoman preoccupation with the survival of empire / state in a decade of imperialist rivalry and internal economic and political turmoil. In 1876, following the fiscal bankruptcy of the Ottoman state, social and political uprisings in Bosnia and Bulgaria, and consequent protests of Muslim religious school (medrese) students in Istanbul, Sultan Abdülaziz was dethroned by a pro-constitutional and pro-parliamentary government faction. It was only a year after the agricultural yields in central Anatolia had started to improve and the previous famine disaster was on its way out. The opposition promoted liberal and Islamic patriotic discourses denouncing the financial and political weaknesses of the state, and the increasing financial and political intervention of foreign powers in the affairs of the Empire by way of the turmoil in the Balkans. After Abdülaziz, Murad V ascended the throne for only three months until being replaced by Sultan Abdülhamid II. The latter was enthroned by the liberal faction in 1876, on the condition that he would order the promulgation of the first Ottoman constitution and opening of a parliament. The constitution was promulgated the same year, and parliament was opened in 1877. However, Sultan Abdülhamid II dissolved it once the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78 started.\textsuperscript{31} Subsequently, he would rule the country without a parliament for more than thirty years.

Looking at the Ottoman state under Sultan Abdülhamid II’s rule (1876-1909) in the context of world changes, and taking issue with those perspectives which either orientalized the empire as the “Terrible Turk” and “Oriental Despot” or glorified it, Selim Deringil, a notable historian of the late Ottoman Empire and Abdülhamid era, defines the period with the legitimacy crisis of the Ottoman state. Since the last quarter of the eighteenth century, likewise their contemporaries in Europe, the Ottoman rulers and administrators had developed reforms and policies aimed at political, fiscal, judicial, and military centralization of the Ottoman state. In 1839, the Tanzimat-i Hayriye or the Gülhane Reform Edict set the stage for the establishment of a modern state apparatus in the Ottoman Empire. The Edict prepared by the Minister of Foreign affairs Mustafa Reşid Pasha in 1839, promised reform in four main areas: it guaranteed the lives, honour and property of all Ottoman subjects, and promised the equality of all subjects before the law, thereby introducing an egalitarian concept of “Ottoman” citizenship. In addition, it promised a centralized and rationalized military conscription system as well as the establishment of a

\textsuperscript{31} Somel, 2003, lx–lxi.
new, centralized tax system to replace the old system of tax-farming. As Deringil stated, the modern state with its “mass schooling, a postal service, railways, lighthouses, clock towers, lifeboats, museums, censuses, and birth certificates, passports, as well as parliaments, bureaucracies, and armies was only constituted in the Ottoman Empire after the Reform Edict of 1839.” These developments all paved the way for an intense bureaucratization and centralization of the state in the Ottoman lands. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire shared the same ambitions as other empires in seeking centralized political, administrative, military power, state fiscality and economic growth; the “inseparable features of nineteenth century historical environments.”

After the Crimean War (1853-56), the challenges brought by global change on both the rulers and the ruled became even more tangible:

[...]just as the state was permeating levels of society it had never reached before, making unprecedented demands on its people, it created new strains on society, leading to what Jurgen Habermas has called a “legitimacy crisis” or “legitimation deficit.” Nor was this legitimacy crisis confined to the relationship of the Ottoman center with its own society. In the international arena also, the Ottomans found themselves increasingly obliged to assert and reassert their legitimate right to existence as a recognized member of the Concert of Europe, as recognized after the Treaty of Paris which ended the Crimean War in 1856.

The legitimacy crisis in question was situated both in the political/ideological and the economic realm/sphere. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) Protestant missionary accounts, reports, correspondences, diaries, and the British consulate archives have been some of the most crucial sources showing the political implications of the crisis during the famines in Ottoman Anatolia. These global actors provided famine relief to thousands of Turkish, Armenian, Kurdish, Greek, Jewish, Syriac, Nestorian, Arab, and Chaldean communities in central and eastern provinces. During the famine years, the ABCFM missionaries and the British consuls stationed in Asia Minor tried to fill the void left by the Ottoman state in many provinces by way of relief networks, which in many instances became influential. They helped save thousands from starvation in central and eastern provinces and Mosul. Yet, in addition to humanitarian purposes, the missions had their own religious and political agendas. In accounting for both famines, they produced discourses about the Ottoman Empire that were embedded in particular ideologies and regimes of government. The missionaries

32 Zürcher, 2002, 7. In 1842, the old system of tax-farming was reapplied due to the difficulties of maintaining the system of centralized tax-collection.
34 İslamoğlu & Purdue, 2009, 112.
36 Ertem, 2012b.
laid stronger emphasis on the decay of “Mohammedanism” and “Islam”, whereas British relief agents pointed to corruption and the lack of railways, reform, laissez-faire economics, and overall faith in trade and science. Individual accounts written by missionaries and consuls were much more nuanced and complex, yet, as institutional representatives, they had the motive of increasing their religious and political influence in Asia Minor by claims on moral, political, economic, and religious superiority.

The British and foreign language press also took the famines as occasions to condemn the Ottoman Empire for being a “corrupt despotism,” a backward polity with bad government. In Istanbul, Edgar Whitaker’s *Levant Herald* blamed the local Ottoman authorities for “entirely ignoring the inexorable laws of supply and demand,” by forcing “the importers to sell their grain at unremunerative rates.” The paper went on to state: “The laws of economy triumphed, the door was opened to famine, and starvation stalked in.”  

British actors continued to underline the “corruption” of the Ottoman government and its misrule as the real cause of the famine. Likewise, the Shaghai-based *North China Herald* condemned the Chinese government’s intervention in the “natural laws of supply and demand,” during the Chinese famine (1876-79). A decade earlier, the London-based British press had used similar discourses to “humiliate the Russian Empire” and condemn “Russian rule and indifference” during the Finnish Famine in the 1860s: “The Finns were presented as a people who had endured ‘the most cruel sufferings in the defence of national independence’ during the Russian-Swedish war of 1808-9, a people for whom the ‘burden’ of Russian rule was ‘too heavy to be any longer endured.’”

Such publications and official voices identified Ottomans, Chinese, Russians and Indians pretty much by the same words.

Not surprisingly, the British short-term and long-term policies regarding famine and government in India were considered in British accounts to be the best example of government. They saw laissez-faire economies and free trade to be the real, modern path to development and reform in the famine-stricken regions of Asia Minor, in accordance with British policies in India. They advised the same path for China. This belief also served their own political interests: famine relief and charity gave the British consuls and the American Protestant missionaries the grounds on which to challenge the legitimacy of the Ottoman government during both famines. They were effective in the majority of famine localities; but their role became more crucial in places where the Ottoman government intervened late, or where governors applied coercive taxation policies and policing, such as Mutasarrıf [District Governor] İbrahim Kamil Pasha in Erzurum during the second famine.

38 Edgerton-Tarpley, 2013, 140.
Regarding the latter realm (the economic dimensions of the crisis), the Crimean War had already born significant consequences for Ottoman fiscality. It started the long-term borrowing of the Ottoman governments from European markets and creditors in 1856, and caused a quasi-dependence of the Ottoman state on European financial sources for several decades. In his work on the Ottoman budgets during Abdülhamid II’s rule, Engin Akarli states: “Money, the reformers did find. They borrowed it liberally from wealthy West European countries for the principal purpose of covering budget deficits”, adding, “but not to improve the productive capacity of the country. Thus, they put a burden on future generations without bequeathing equivalent benefits.” Yet, as Akarli, Deringil and several other Ottoman historians also cautioned, this story of dependence has been imagined far too easily within an “Ottoman decline” paradigm for decades in Ottoman historiography. Several groups of Ottoman reformist statesmen constantly negotiated the terms of the Ottoman state despite prevailing domestic and international challenges, and unlike the dependent conditions that many of their counterparts in colonized India and Africa had to face, they “were nonetheless able to carve out a critical space for manoeuvre” within the international scene. They were also acutely aware of the political, financial, and infrastructural problems the empire faced, and especially during the years of Abdülhamid II’s reign, they attached special importance to raising agricultural production, social welfare policies, and infrastructural development. Isa Blumi, developing solid arguments of modernization narratives in late-nineteenth century Ottoman historiography, writes: “To some crucial outside interests, the Ottoman capacity to produce wealth proved both a long-term threat to their own expansionist aims and at the same time an attractive source of potential revenues if properly harnessed.” Thus, in contrast to accounts interpreting Ottoman imperial collapse as a product of a premodern, backward, “oriental” social order and violent sectarian rivalry, he focuses on the “emergent Euro-American financial oligarchy,” and “private banks that were extensions of vast family networks” as critical forces shaping the terms on which “Ottoman demise” took place. Their role is crucial for understanding the imperial challenges of 1870s.

41 Akarli, 1992, 443.
42 For a critical analysis of declinist and Eurocentric tendencies in Ottoman historiography, see Faroqhi, 2010.
43 Deringil, 1999, 3.
44 Akarli, 1992, 443; see also Akarli, 2010.Nevertheless, the “public good” was not necessarily the priority; they deemed these necessary in order to survive in both domestic and international arenas. For the relationship between power, legitimacy and welfare, Özbek, 2005.Their projects and solutions did not prevent / exclude the accelerating violence, the loss of legitimacy, and the eventual deposition of Abdülhamid II by the Young Turks in 1908.
45 Blumi, 2013, 19.
46 Blumi, 2013, 19: “In other words, Ottoman collapse was contingent on a number of factors that as much reflect a variety of indigenous actors’ interests informed by local processes as those of the banking houses in Paris, London, Frankfurt, Vienna, and Milan.”
British India experienced similar developments within a colonial context. While comparing British and Ottoman Empires, Christopher Bayly suggests that they had parallel trajectories of “distorted development”, albeit for varying reasons. He explains the concept in relation to British India thus: “…the British government did “develop” India through infrastructural and social investment, but only to limited degree and only to an extent that was compatible with British strategic and commercial aims”.  

He found a parallel for this “distorted development” in the reform attempts of the Tanzimat and the Hamidian eras. He claimed that these attempts, which “were driven by a desire to save the dynasty,” were constrained by two factors. The first one was “the external regimes of free trade, capitulations, and Ottoman debt repayments.” Bayly suggests the system created by these constraints was “remarkably similar in its outlines to the more direct imperial economic pressures that were felt in India.” He notes that the difference between British India and the Ottoman Empire lay in that fact that European resident commercial interests did not have a direct effect on government policy in the Ottoman Empire. However, their similarity was more striking: “During the age of capitalist imperialism after 1860 it is noteworthy that the drain of ‘home charges’ and debt repayments on the Ottoman and Indian exchequers amounted to about the same, 2.5 percent per annum.”

The second constraint that laid the ground for a ‘distorted modernization’ was the “internal social structure” based on the use of intermediary groups such as “tribal” headships and religious millet [the system of religious communities—Muslims, Christians, Jews—having legal identities] divisions as a tool of local government and cooption. According to Bayly, “old religious, millet and tribal distinctions remained lines of fracture that could widen in the case of external enticement and local opportunism.”

The famines did indeed strike the empire during such a period of compounded vulnerabilities. In the Balkans, the Serbs had gained autonomy and the Greeks had become independent. Egypt also gained wider autonomy from the Ottoman state in 1873. There was civil strife in Herzegovina between 1874 and 1876, and intellectual groups such as the Young Ottomans, who stood for Ottoman patriotism and liberal constitutionalism, were gaining influence and would contribute to the deposition of Sultan Abdülaziz in 1876.

Throughout these years, besides military spending, further borrowing increased at ever higher interest rates in order to manage the existing debt. The “Great Depression” of 1873 in Europe and the United States triggered a world financial

48 Bayly, 2007, 339. Richard Horowitz develops similar arguments while comparing China, Siam and the Ottoman Empire. He writes, international law based on diplomacy and free trade agreements in the nineteenth century was an agent in the transformation of these states as “semi-colonial political systems.” Horowitz, 2004, 446–7.
crisis that put Ottoman state finances in great trouble because of the difficulty of obtaining new credit and capital flight. The government managed to sign a new contract for loans in October 1874, an act, which prompted the following commentary on the pages of the Chicago Daily Tribune:

[…] it may be doubted whether this loan, or indeed any financial measure will materially improve the desperate condition of the Turkish finances. Her national debt amounts to more than 700,000,000 dollars, the interest on which is 50,000,000 dollars or more than half of her last year’s revenue…In view of the famine in Asia Minor and other districts, the really collectable taxes will hardly be increased by one-fourth the amount anticipated.

When the Ottoman government declared partial insolvency in 1875, inhabitants were still struggling with the severe consequences of the famine disaster in central Anatolia. Not long after, another drought followed by a harsh winter in 1879 hit this time eastern provinces, and aggravated the devastation caused by the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877–78 in the region, especially in Erzurum, Van, and Diyarbekir. In 1880, just like in 1874, grain prices increased, bread was inadequate, peasants had to migrate to towns, and many lives were lost. The war had already made the lives of populations in north-eastern and eastern provinces miserable, especially in Erzurum, a major battlefield province. The Ottoman Empire lost much in terms of land and manpower. After diplomatic negotiations between the European powers, article 16 of the San Stefano Treaty was integrated into the Berlin Treaty (signed on 13 July 1878). This clause put pressure on Abdülhamid II and the Ottoman government to “carry into effect, without further delay, the improvements and reforms demanded by local requirements in the provinces inhabited by the Armenians, and to guarantee their security from Kurds and Circassians.” The Berlin Treaty pointed to the emergence of the politically comparable ‘Armenian’ and ‘Reform’ Questions regarding the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire. The intensity of the political and financial crises increased as the Empire faced three major issues: the re-settlement of Circassian and Muslim refugees arriving in these provinces from lands lost in the war, the burden of paying war indemnities, and the challenge of controlling the plunders committed by the Kurdish tribes especially in villages inhabited by Armenian peasants in eastern provinces. These acts intensified with the famine.

52 Pamuk, 1984, 114.
54 Around 10,000 people in the eastern provinces and 25,000 in Mosul died according to contemporary records. Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives [BOA], Ministry of Internal Affairs Correspondence Registers [DH.MKT], 1331/42, 9 May 1880; Duguid, 1973.
55 Rolin-Jaquémyens, 1891, 34.
An Overshadowed Memory: War and Famine

When famine hit the Ottoman east in 1880, it marked the beginning of a new configuration of circumstances. Unlike the previous famine in central Anatolia, this one closely related to war. The resultant loss of agricultural produce, as well as the scarcity, and high price of bread raised the intensity of violence and plundering in the eastern and north-eastern provinces. Conflicts over land and food deepened with the arrival of the first Muslim refugees in a period of general scarcity. As paper currency continued to depreciate, the price of bread increased even further. Several imperial decrees were issued to “maintain peace and order” through attempted stabilizations of bread prices, the provision of bread rations for the poor, and the assigned supervision of bakeries by zaptieh (police) and municipal authorities in order to prevent anyone from buying extra amounts of bread. The bakeries, however, usually refused to distribute free bread to the refugees. These events alerted the government to the fact that it needed new measures to curtail the rising cost of bread. Despite several attempts to relieve the distress, conflict over bread and small-scale bread riots (mostly initiated by Muslim refugees) persisted in Istanbul. Scarcity and the devaluation of currency by order of the Ottoman government triggered discontent in the rest of Anatolian provinces as well. Another serious unrest in the Malatya district of Diyarbekir in March 1880 by Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants alarmed the central authorities. An imperial fiscal crisis could translate into a severe political crisis in a province already struggling with famine and scarcity.

On 24 August 1879, Thomas Boyacıyan, Acting British Vice Consul in Diyarbekir, reported the first signs of famine:

The price of provisions is getting very high, and already the signs of poverty and famine are appearing. Hundreds of Arab families are located in the neighborhood of Diarbekir [sic]. Farmers are demanding seed for next year, but the Government does not care much about it. I pointed out, both to the Vali [Provincial Governor] and to the Commission [Local administration] the other day, the danger of neglecting an affair like this. They promised to consider the matter.

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56 Terzibaşoğlu, 2004, 102; Chochiev & Koç, 2006. See also Blumi, 2013, 43–66.
58 In the Beşiktaş neighbourhood of Istanbul, the bakeries refused to supply the refugees with free bread despite the coupons allocated to these refugees by the government. BOA. Y.PRK. ŞH 1–19, 29 June 1879.
59 For example, almost a year later, in the Çemberlitaş area of the capital city, refugees attempted to plunder a bakery. BOA. Y.PRK.ŞH 1–30, 11 Mar. 1880.
60 Stephen Duguid was the first to mention this unrest, referring to foreign accounts of these events in his unpublished thesis from 1970. According to Duguid, it was “one of the few instances of civil protest during this period.” Duguid, 1970, 145.
Villages and towns on the Erzurum Plateau and in the area of Diyarbekir, provinces which had been ordered to provide relief to famine-stricken districts a couple of years earlier, were themselves hit by famine and scarcity in 1879–81. Messrs. Dewey and Thom, Protestant American missionaries stationed at Mardin, reported that the famine extended from Diyarbekir to the Persian Gulf.62 The scanty rainfall during the winter of 1878–79 resulted in the loss of summer crops and a rapid rise of prices. As it had occurred a couple of years earlier, the region experienced “[…] a winter of almost unexampled severity from cold and snow, so that not only did food and fuel rapidly vanish, but thousands of cattle and sheep perished […]”63 In the countryside, the loss of cattle and other means of subsistence triggered increased plundering by starving Kurdish nomadic tribes in frontier villages mainly composed of sedentary Armenian, Kurdish, Turkish, Syriac and Arab communities.

In urban areas, scarcity and high prices aggravated pre-existing economic hardships. In Diyarbekir, in June 1880, a bread riot directed at two local council members, one of them a Catholic Armenian grain merchant, the other a Muslim notable, took place. The crowd, including many women and children, according to contemporary sources, was also composed of both Muslim and non-Muslim inhabitants (including Armenians and Turks).64 Economic problems cut across religious-ethnic lines, and when merged with famine, the former were expressed as communal conflicts as well as united actions against political and economic authorities by poor and deprived inhabitants. The problems in Diyarbekir, and news of violence against Armenian villages in the district of Van posed serious threats to political legitimacy and the heritage of the Tanzimat reforms in the first years of Abdülhamid II’s reign. Before it could address the financial crisis and the aftermath of war, the new Ottoman government had to cope with famine.65 While the legitimacy of the Ottoman state was being strongly undermined in the eastern provinces during the famine, its financial independence was also on the wane. In 1881, the Public Debt Commission (Düyun-u Umumiye), consisting of the representatives of Ottoman bondholders, was established in Istanbul. The duty of the commission was to administer and collect most of the taxes and revenues that would repay the foreign debt, as well as the recently added war indemnity to Russia.66 With the establishment of this institution, the Ottoman government placed about one third of its revenue under the control of foreign creditors, thus rendering it more vulnerable to the interventions of foreign powers. These developments in

64 Ertem, 2010.
65 In order to fight the famine in the eastern provinces, an Ottoman Famine Commission was established in Istanbul in the last week of April 1880. BOA. I–DH 802–65028, 8 April 1880. It had two main duties: (1) to procure grain from neighboring provinces, either as gratuitous relief, or to purchase and transport it to famine-stricken provinces; (2) to encourage the organization of public and private charity through diverse campaigns and newspaper announcements in Istanbul.
66 Shaw & Shaw, 1995, 224.
the 1870s and the early 1880s forced the Ottoman administrators to re-evaluate the limits of Tanzimat reforms in the region, and search alternative methods of integration and order for these provinces.

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Abdülmahid II managed to consolidate his modern autocratic rule in the empire throughout the 1880s and 1890s and several Kurdish tribes became his prominent political and economic allies in maintaining “security” and “order” in the Anatolian countryside. After the Armenian massacres of the 1890s in the eastern provinces of the empire, memories of the latest famine became subsumed under this new heavy trauma much in the same way memories of the previous famine had dissolved into the trauma of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, and the hunger experience during the First World War. The Russo-Ottoman War (1877–78) erupted only a few years after the great central Anatolian famine. Thus, the intensity of war suffering overcame the painful memories of the previous famine period (1873–75). The famine that struck eastern provinces in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War, on the other hand, was overshadowed by the emergence of the “Armenian Question” as an international political issue. The mainstream historiography of the Ottoman east has ignored the famine that killed at least 10,000 people in 1879–81 for two main reasons: 1) the number of the deceased was not deemed significant to be analyzed separately; 2) the violent bloodshed during the Armenian massacres of 1895–96 and 1915 was a more powerful upheaval. It has dominated memory and historiography of the Ottoman east during the Ottoman era.

In her excellent book on the cultural history of the Great Chinese famine [Dingwu qihuang, 1876–79], Kathryn Edgerton-Tarpley stated that “few Chinese people outside the scholarly community have even heard the term Dingwu qihuang.” She explained why:

Both local and national discussions of the disaster were … rapidly buried under layer upon layer of new upheavals – China’s loss to Japan in the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, the invasion by eight allied armies after the Boxer Rebellion, the 1911 Revolution, the May 4th Movement, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and then of China proper, civil war between the Communists and the Nationalists, and the Communist Revolution. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Chinese history was marked by one enormous disaster after another, and the horror of mass starvation was repeatedly ignored in favor of focusing on disasters with clearer-cut heroes and villains.

67 Klein, 2011.
68 Maksudyan, 2014.
69 The latest volume on the Ottoman East is a significant contribution to the historiography of Ottoman Anatolia, that goes beyond conventional paradigms and building on the previous literature, takes into account the perspectives of the locals. Sipahi, Derderian & Cora, 2016.
The Ottoman famine history and historiography had similar problems. Hunger accounts in 1870s soon mixed with the succeeding traumas in Ottoman Anatolia and became ordinary details within stories of violence, bloodshed and misery in 1890s. The daily struggles, pains, clashes, hopes, and frustrations of ordinary children, women, men, and already quiet stories of starved animals in the region were silenced under the weight of ensuing wars, massacres, political, religious, ethnic upheavals in collective memory.

The trauma of famine was one which affected numerous regions and peoples during the nineteenth century, including Ireland, British India, China, Brazil, Iran, Europe, and Russia. Global, imperial, and colonial economic relations, consequent financial straits, repercussions of modern statehood, taxation policies, impoverishment, infrastructural problems, domestic political chaos, wars, violence, corruption, and political recklessness all compounded the devastating impact of climate and natural disasters. States and private actors took certain relief measures and actions, and international humanitarian agents developed relief missions and initiatives. However, millions of people still died of hunger and disease unnoticed in places whose rulers had been relying extensively upon discourses of science, physical and moral superiority, and modernization. Disease due to hunger, immigration, rising bread prices, grain hoarding, riots, theft, plunder, violence, moral corruption, transformation of values, dissolving of family and community bonds became widespread phenomena in the very same century of prevalent reform, progress, centralization, state power and development discourses. Starving men, women, and children could not make their true agony be heard. Notwithstanding their individual contexts, stories, and differences, the Ottoman famines were at the same time part of this broader history. The ordinary Ottomans had their share from nineteenth-century hunger(s) with all peculiarities intact. Its memory might have remained dim; but it is not non-existent.

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