Allen on Tanielian, 'The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East'

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In 1915 the Ottoman governor of Beirut, ‘Azmi Bey, suspended all foreign relief work in the city, despite the famine that had already reduced thousands of Lebanese to starvation. The previous year his military superior Jamal Pasha had stopped the work of Beirut’s most prominent charity, run by a prosperous merchant. Yet the Ottoman government allowed the Catholic Maronite Church to continue its philanthropy in neighboring Mount Lebanon, despite the Maronites’ close ties to France. It also patronized organizations run by elite women. Melanie S. Tanielian’s book The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East offers a history of both the catastrophic famine in Lebanon during the First World War and the complex power struggles that underlay relief work.

Tanielian adds to a growing scholarship on the Ottoman home front, which has begun to complement literature about the campaigns on the empire’s peripheries, postwar imperialism in the Middle East, and the Armenian genocide. Like other historians working on the Great War’s home fronts, Tanielian shows how total war blurs lines “between soldiers and civilians and introduces violence into the civilian realm” (p. 3). Although armies fought no battles in Lebanon, it nonetheless became a center of the war, here waged by relief workers and the medical establishment against hunger and disease, a war that the Ottomans lost. The Charity of War, however, goes beyond chronicling wartime suffering in the Levant. Tanielian argues that famine redefined the landscape of power in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, turning humanitarianism into an arena through which state, local, and foreign actors staked their claims to political legitimacy in the region. When the Ottoman state could not feed its citizens, it lost its right to rule in their eyes, and this accelerated the empire’s collapse.

Tanielian is forced by Lebanon’s lack of a central archive—and the sad fact that many documents were destroyed in the nation’s civil war—to reckon with a fragmented source base. She does so by using previously neglected records, especially from religious orders. And an admirable amount of footwork has gone into the book, too, due to Tanielian’s use of private family documents. With some awareness to its limitations, The Charity of War’s diverse array of sources will make it especially valuable for scholars interested in the Ottoman civilian experience.

The book is organized into seven chapters, all focusing on Beirut and Mount Lebanon. The first two chapters provide background explaining Lebanon’s vulnerability to famine in 1914 and the
sociopolitical context that structured responses to it. Tanielian repeats the economist Amartya Sen’s claim that famines are caused by humans, not acts of God. Lebanon’s entry into the global economy in the nineteenth century led peasants to grow cash crops instead of grain, making the country vulnerable to trade disruptions and blockade when the First World War began. Government requisitioning for the military sucked up what resources remained and soon turned shortages into starvation.

The reaction to the famine is the focus of the remaining chapters, which look at “the actions of those dealing with the disaster” (p. 77). Tanielian structures her chapters around these actors. Chapter 3 examines the failure of state and municipal leaders to alleviate the crisis. The black market, political friction, and incompetence thwarted their attempts to alleviate the famine, while peasants resisted government policies by hiding crops or dodging conscription. But Tanielian avoids structuring her work as a dichotomy between state and society. She emphasizes instead how government “exists not in isolation but in the context of other formal and informal social organizations, such as families, churches, and philanthropic organizations” (p. 46). Ottoman efforts at relief needed to negotiate provincial networks of power, and local groups in turn needed government sanction or risked being sidelined. It was within these hierarchies of state and local patronage that a battle for political legitimacy took place. Just as the imperial government knew its authority depended on feeding citizens, relief efforts by Beirut’s elected city council were aimed at gaining increased autonomy, through showing themselves to be “a well-functioning provisioning body able to guarantee the well-being of Beirutis” (p. 87).

Other institutions stepped into the vacuum when government failed. Chapter 4 moves to the Catholic Maronite Church, for whom the “famine was a clear opportunity to reassert religious leadership” in Mount Lebanon after years of secular reform (p. 129). By blaming the famine on spiritual failure rather than government failure, the Maronites did not present a threat to the Ottoman state and reclaimed their position as a temporal authority for Lebanese Christians. It was the same with women’s organizations, covered in chapter 6. Pasha did not view women’s groups as a threat to the regime’s legitimacy, as he did male reformers like the Beirut city council. Yet the famine gave women a platform for claiming political and legal rights based on their wartime service in relieving hunger. Feeding people is a way of winning their allegiance. The question in Lebanon during the war, then, was who had the right to provide food.

Several other arguments become clear throughout The Charity of War. Chapter 5 complicates narratives of Ottoman decline. While the state’s failure to stop starvation poisoned its reputation, the chapter shows how the war increased government intervention in daily life through public health campaigns. Another argument is a push to decenter the European battlefronts and to treat World War I as a global event. Half a million people perished in Greater Syria during the course of the famine, which paved the way for Ottoman defeat and French colonialism. When the French army occupied Beirut in October 1918, its commanders made provisioning a priority, eager to establish their own legitimacy through such “benevolence.” Chapter 7 on foreign intervention shows how not only France but also the United States and Germany projected imperial power in the Middle East through humanitarianism. In chapters like this a focus on the wider Ottoman Middle East would have been welcome and helped fill gaps in the Lebanese record. A larger scope would also better explain why the Ottomans failed at provisioning their citizens, for example. Tanielian’s sources blame food shortages on profiteering, which was a common scapegoat on all wartime home fronts but is likely...
The Charity of War is a welcome addition to the history of humanitarianism. It shows how charity was intimately tied to political power in the Ottoman and colonial Middle East, as Rebecca Gill’s Calculating Compassion: Humanity and Relief in War, Britain 1870-1914 (2013) and Bruno Cabanes’s The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918-1924 (2014) have shown in Europe. It also makes an invaluable contribution to historiography on the civilian experience of war in the Ottoman Empire. Tanielian explains that today the famine remains marginalized in official Lebanese memory. Once, Beirut’s national war monument depicted two mourning women, one Muslim, one Christian. But this unheroic scene did not fit with narratives of the war that celebrated patriotic resistance to the Ottomans, so in 1960 it was replaced by a triumphant statue of two male martyrs. In The Charity of War, Tanielian has restored the Lebanese famine to its deserved historical prominence and given it a more fitting memorial.


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