



**Melanie S. Tanielian.- *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), 368p.**

In a classic poem titled “Dead are my people,” the celebrated Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran describes the famine, mourns the dead and condemns nations that stood silent as the population of Mount Lebanon died in the streets of hunger during the Great War. Gibran records the sufferings of men, women and children. The poem partly reads:

My people died on the cross

(...) They died silently,

For humanity had closed its ears to their cry.

Despite the fact that the memory of famine has survived in Lebanese works of literature such as Khalil Gibran’s poem “Dead are my people,” and Toufic Youssef Aouad’s novel *The Bread (al-ragh f)*, the story of famine, as Tanielian shows through her vividly rendered book *The Charity of War*, fell out of the national Lebanese collective social memory and state history. Aware of historical silence and amnesia in Ottoman archival records and unlike works of scholarship on military conflicts and wartime periods where authors tend to prioritize battle fronts, soldiers’ experiences and military tactics of fighting consequently celebrated through victory monuments and memorials in public squares, Tanielian invites her readers in *The Charity of War* to grasp the larger hidden implications of what is known as the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon (1915-1918) through civilians’ memory. The author eloquently expresses the core historical motivation of her historical inquiry as she invites readers and scholars to look at back at this history with a different perspective:

“It is requisite for us to shift our gaze away from the cigar smoke-filled bureaus of European continent and military horrors of the Ottoman battlefields to the streets, municipal and church offices, headquarters of volunteer organizations, and the pages of newspapers and to catch glimpses of dinner tables of ordinary people wherever possible (11).”

*The Charity of War* is about decentering our reading of the Great War in the Ottoman home front and especially in the provincial margins. Tanielian invites us through her history of the Lebanese famine to think about the periphery as interconnected to the center as she places “state in society”

focusing on “provisioning” to understand how many aspects and players negotiate power relationships.

In 1914, the economy of the semi-autonomous Ottoman province of Mount Lebanon was mostly based on the production of silk exported mostly to France. Farmers harvested only a limited amount of crops that met the needs of the local population. Mount Lebanon largely relied for its food supplies on imports. After the Ottoman Empire allied itself with German forces, the Allies led by France and Britain imposed a blockade in the Mediterranean cutting off supplies to Ottoman provinces including Mount Lebanon. The revenues from silk production plummeted adding to the shortage of supply as families could no longer afford the rising price of food. At the same time, soldiers were prioritized and food supplies as grain, crops and animals were confiscated from families to feed the military leaving the civilian population vulnerable to hunger. In 1915 a locust attack exacerbated the propensity of famine in the Lebanese province.

*The Charity of War* is therefore a welcome addition to the works of Lebanese historians such as Christian Taoutel and Isam Khalife on the famine. Writing about the Great War through hunger is part of historical movement that highlights a recent conscious Lebanese archaeology of the social memory of the 1915-1918 famine. While a few Lebanese thinkers put the responsibility of famine on the Ottoman government and especially the tyrannical policies of the Ottoman Fourth Army Corps leader Jamal Pasha, known in the Lebanese popular imagination as *al-Jazzār* (Butcher), Tanielian shies away from making any political judgments and focuses instead on understanding the Lebanese famine as an event that resulted from the complicated circumstances of the wartime and the challenges of food production and distribution. As Lebanon remembers one hundred years since the end of the Great War, Tanielian threads with finesse the thorny path of the narrative of the Lebanese famine intellectually and successfully avoid the politics of famine’s blame, which is usually compared to Armenian genocide. In fact in a 1916 letter to Mary Haskell, Khalil Gibran states that the “famine in Mount Lebanon has been planned and instigated by the Turkish government (...) and thousands are dying every single day. The same process happened with Christian Armenians and applied to the Christians in Mount Lebanon.” The famine affected largely Maronite Christian communities, which the Ottomans suspected of supporting France and the Allies in the conflict. Henceforth, some argue that the deliberate national marginalization of the memory of famine is partly attributed to the fact that it did not affect other ethnic and religious communities in the same scale it impacted Maronite communities.

In her introduction to *The Charity of War*, Tanielian pushes against historiographical schools in general and Ottoman narratives that have prioritized the “high drama of bombs and bullets” and silenced the “violence that defined life on the home front (3).” *The Charity of War* un-silences the narrative of famine’s history and uncovers its social memory despite the archival shortage faced by the author. Relying on archival fragments about the famine, Tanielian proposes a new historical alternative reading of wartime Ottoman state focusing on the impact of the Ottoman government during the war on Lebanon as an Arab province. By focusing on what she calls the home front, *The Charity of War* reclaims the public sphere of memory of the war and partly repositions the older generational memory of the war at the front stage of remembering. Tanielian notes that while the military conflict did not take place in Lebanon, almost one third of Lebanon’s population died during the war which led her informants to refer to the conflict as a war of famine (*ḥarb al-majā’a*).

Equally important, Tanielian highlights in *The Charity of War* the lack of national scholarship on the war period coupled with the Lebanese state policy of historical erasure of the famine and its shame. Nationalism is about pride of masculinity. Therefore death by famine is not only marginalized as story but forgotten because it is not heroic unlike the story of soldiers killed in the trenches defending their country and its honor. Tanielian notes that there was a tension in the historical sources about the war between the description of Jamal Pasha authority, the post-independence Lebanese official history and memory and the generational memory. This tension underlines the argument and historical discussion of *The Charity of War*. Tanielian looks at it through what she dubs as the politics of provisioning on the Ottoman provincial home front. By challenging these official histories and their marginalization of civilian voices, Tanielian rewrites the term “hunger/famine” into the historical text and the historiographical narrative of the Great War.

In *The Charity of War* Tanielian focuses on the efforts of the local, state and international players and institutions to improve the economic situations on the home front. Tanielian contributes to our understanding of local dynamics shaping the everyday experiences of ordinary citizens “on the Ottoman home court.” Tanielian attempts and succeeds in *The Charity of War* to describe the different strategies of the different “agents of benevolence” in mitigating the negative impact of the economic policies of Ottomans toward the population of Mount Lebanon. By ignoring the trenches of the Ottoman military front, Tanielian argues that what took place in the periphery of Mount Lebanon was central to our understanding of the war. The famine is therefore used to connect the global and local dimensions of the Great War. Lebanon like other

Ottoman provinces was part of the larger global market. The Allies blockade made Mount Lebanon vulnerable to famine especially as the Ottoman central authority struggled not only to control its diverse populations but also meet the demands of international economic and political actors. Tanielian sees the war in the provincial Mount Lebanon as “endogenous socioeconomic and political process (11).” One of the most significant theoretical interventions of *The Charity of War* is how the author adopted Nancy Rose Hunt’s “nervous state” to define, describe and analyze how Jamal Pasha as an agent of the Ottoman state polices and expands his authority in the home front and makes sure that its population adhere to the institutions of the state. In this context food provisions are turned into tools to assert and maintain state power in Mount Lebanon. The famine is therefore used as a disciplining measure to police a potential social rebellion and the menace of cooperation with the enemy. Through this framing *The Charity of War* stresses the connection between state and society and how the politics of provisioning explain this dynamic relationship which could lead to famine when the nervous state fears that it could lose its control of society.

Writing about the history of a place whose history is defined by the trauma of war is a historical dilemma. Lebanon epitomizes this impasse. Its political and ethnical conflict made the situation worse as families emigration to different part of the world taking with them their personal memories and family documents. Tanielian highlights the difficulty of writing about a subject like the Lebanese famine when historical material is not archived in central place. She points out how the destruction of archives during the Lebanese Civil War adds to the challenge of the absence of a central archive. While the memoirs of Jesuit Christians, diaries, records of charitable institutions and international relief organizations provide a glimpse of reality that Lebanese faced during the Great War, interviews with Lebanese could also fill some of these gaps of memory even though the author is aware of the changes and contradictions of a potential “Lebanese Archive” of famine.

*The Charity of War* is a well-written account of a significant period of Lebanese history. It offers theoretically as well as thematically engaging views of an over-looked chapter of Ottoman history and contributes to our understanding of it. Overall it is a welcome addition to native and nationalist Lebanese scholarship on the period. This is a well-written and structurally crafted book. Its merit resides in the fact that it provides nuanced arguments and insightful conclusions and moves away from essentialist and ideological debates about the responsibility of famine.

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