

“They Died Silently”: Sanctifying Hunger in Lebanon, 1915–1918¹

Taylor McGibbon

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Dr. Tova Benjamin

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¹ Kahlil Gibran, “Dead Are My People,” *All Poetry*, January 1917, Accessed December 9, 2025, <https://allpoetry.com/poem/14326976-Dead-Are-My-People-by-Khalil-Gibran>.

In the spring of 1915, the streets of the Levant were no longer streets—they were open graves. An employee of the Syrian Protestant College, Edward Nickoley, wrote of “men, women, and children” who waited for garbage to be dumped and “seiz[ed] upon it and devour[ed] it” like animals, recording children fighting over orange peels and “numerous cases of cannibalism.”² In Mount Lebanon alone, more than 200,000 people perished as Allied naval blockade, Ottoman requisitioning, wartime conscription, and the locust invasion of 1915 converged to produce one of the highest proportional death tolls of the First World War.³ Yet the famine was not only a humanitarian catastrophe; it was also a crisis of language. To speak of starvation under Ottoman rule was dangerous, and to assign blame was treasonous. Missionaries and relief workers therefore reached for safer vocabularies—biblical, sentimental, and moral—to describe what they witnessed. I treat their pamphlets, correspondence, and chronicles, alongside Lebanese literary responses, as acts of “moral translation”: efforts to render a politically manufactured disaster narratable by recasting it as spiritual trial, virtue, and providence. Their diction and silences converted imperial violence into moral drama, creating a vocabulary that outlived the war and helped transform famine from policy into parable—remembered as the “Year of the Locusts,” a story of endurance rather than indictment.⁴ By tracing this shift, this article shows how humanitarian language sanctified hunger and shaped its afterlife in Lebanese memory.

Much of the existing scholarship has focused on either the political mechanics of the famine or the ways it was later remembered and moralized. Historians such as Graham Pitts, Melanie Tanielian, and Zachary Foster have demonstrated that the famine was not a natural disaster but a product of wartime policy, capitalist dependency, and imperial

² Edward Nickoley, “Historic Diary” (American University of Beirut Archives, 1917), 17.

³ Graham Pitts, “Was Capitalism the Crisis? Mount Lebanon’s World War I Famine,” *Environment & Society Portal* (Arcadia, 2021), 1.

⁴ Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locusts: A Soldier’s Diary and the Erasure of Palestine’s Ottoman Past* (University of California Press, 2011) 5.

governance, reframing hunger as engineered rather than accidental.⁵ Other scholars, including Michael Barnett, Janice Gross Stein, Keith Watenpaugh, and Davide Rodogno, have examined the moral and representational work of humanitarianism, showing how relief discourse translated suffering into compassion, virtue, and civilizational duty.⁶ A third body of scholarship, represented by Najwa al-Qattan, Tylor Brand, and Youssef Mouawad, has explored the famine's afterlife in Lebanese cultural memory, tracing how shame, sectarian politics, and nationalist historiography rendered it unevenly commemorated and often silent. Yet these strands rarely speak to one another. We know how famine was produced and we know how it was remembered, but we know far less about the rhetorical shift that connects the two—how the moral language that shaped later memory first took form during the famine itself. This article locates itself in that gap by examining missionary and relief narratives as acts of moral translation that rendered political catastrophe narratable through the idioms of faith, virtue, and providence, thereby shaping the vocabulary through which the famine entered Lebanese memory.

Humanitarianism and the Depoliticization of Hunger

From the moment famine relief first arrived in Lebanon, missionary and humanitarian narratives reshaped the Mount Lebanon catastrophe into a moral drama, one where virtue, pity, and divine testing eclipsed political responsibility. In the process, they developed a language of humanitarian feeling that made suffering legible to American donors but safe from Ottoman

⁵ Pitts, "Was Capitalism the Crisis?," 2; Melanie Tanielian, *The Charity of War: Famine, Humanitarian Aid, and World War I in the Middle East* (Stanford University Press, 2017), 76; and Zachary Foster, "Why Are Modern Famines So Deadly? The First World War in Syria and Palestine," *Environmental Histories of the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), 192.

⁶ Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 13; Keith Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (University of California Press, 2015), 92, 149; and Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815-1914* (Princeton University Press, 2012), 34.

reprisal. Though these missions addressed audiences abroad, the West itself was implicated: the Allied naval blockade, led by France and Britain, severed the region's silk exports and helped create the very deprivation Americans described. Many survivors later recalled that hunger began "when the sea was sealed."⁷ Caught between requisition and blockade, with one empire taking grain, the other sealing its ports, Lebanon starved in the crossfire of moralized modernity.

Writers who documented the famine navigated that political reality while avoiding the Ottoman censors patrolling speech. This pressure shaped not only American relief publications but also French Jesuit accounts from Lebanon. Their reports consistently shifted responsibility onto nature, fate, or "misery itself."⁸ One unnamed Jesuit chronicler described Mount Lebanon as a "primitive society steeped in ignorance," its peasants crushed by oppressive local notables; another insisted that "the famine continues its ravages...the country is in ruins."⁹ These formulations animate famine as an autonomous force and erase the policies that produced it. Missionaries used this language to describe suffering without naming those who engineered it. They also cast themselves as powerless spectators, morally wounded yet politically mute. "Nothing piercing the heart of the missionary more deeply," one Jesuit wrote, than being "powerless to alleviate misery and condemned to witness so much calamity. Death is more desirable to him."¹⁰ His narrative foregrounds moral torment while pushing political context out of view. Even when missionaries intervened materially, their rhetoric preserved this moral frame. Father Augustin Jeanni re established an orphanage for "victims of the Great Famine," but he still portrayed the crisis as a humanitarian tragedy rather than human-made atrocity.¹¹ In his

⁷ Brand, *Famine Worlds*, 90.

⁸ Karam and Matta, *La mission J suite de Ghazir*, 108.

⁹ Ibid, 25, 110.

¹⁰ Ibid, 108.

¹¹ Ibid, 62.

telling, the orphan's body is evidence of missionary virtue, not imperial violence. Each of these descriptions displaces human agency, making famine appear inevitable rather than engineered.

The double logic is visible in a 1916 pamphlet produced by the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR). The authors warned that some reports were "intended only to deepen the conviction" of relief speakers, American clergy and volunteers gathering donations, while they withheld other details because "their publication would bring disaster upon the writers."¹² The threat targeted not the pamphlet's compilers in the United States but the missionaries inside Ottoman territory who supplied the information and faced potential reprisal. These reports reveal that silence functioned as strategy, not omission. Because the United States remained officially neutral until 1917, American missionaries and relief agents operated under Ottoman oversight even as the Allied blockade quietly starved the very coasts they described. Naming the Ottoman state as the cause of famine risked diplomatic fallout and jeopardized Americans on the ground. Within those constraints, missionaries adopted a moral vocabulary, casting famine as a "test" of Christian duty and endurance, because it offered the safest and most persuasive idiom available.¹³

Instead of naming Ottoman policy as the cause of famine, the pamphlet recast the crisis in a theological and ecological idiom where only nature could act. It declared that "the blockade has killed the silkworm industry...the locusts have put the finishing touch to the work of desolation," a formulation that assigns agency to abstractions while obscuring the governments—Allied and Ottoman—who engineered scarcity.¹⁴ The pamphlet then reoriented the narrative toward American virtue. George Doolittle, an American missionary in Sidon, made this logic explicit

¹² American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, *A National Test of Brotherhood: America's Opportunity to Relieve Suffering in Armenia, Syria, Persia, and Palestine* (American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, 1916), 2, 19.

¹³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid, 15.

when he described the crisis as a “nation’s crucifixion on the cross of military absolutism,” set against “the resplendent altruism of the American people.”¹⁵ This juxtaposition cast Lebanese suffering as sacred sacrifice and American charity as divine light, transforming famine into moral drama rather than political reckoning. Echoing this framework, the pamphlet praised “faithful commissioners...disregarding all hardship and personal dangers” who “devote themselves to ministry to the sick, destitute and dying.”¹⁶ In these lines, the authors turn suffering into a stage for Western virtue, a measure of the nation’s moral vitality. “How shall America save her own soul,” they ask, “unless this cry breaks through her soddenness and selfishness?”¹⁷ The pamphlet’s language actively substitutes moral grammar for political causation. Its verbs of destruction (“killed,” “desolation”) assign agency to nature, while its human actors appear only as moral exemplars: “faithful commissioners.” Its nouns moralize deprivation (“test,” “opportunity,” “deliverance,” “sacrifice”) so that hunger becomes virtue.¹⁸ Its syntax completes the erasure: passive constructions (“was brought low,” “was visited by want”) conceal perpetrators, while hortatory imperatives (“America can,” “A call to America,” “May God use you as such,”) re-center the Western self.¹⁹ Through these linguistic choices, the pamphlet transforms politics into piety and turns responsibility into redemption.

American missionaries who documented the famine did more than describe suffering; they also fought to preserve a religious institution under threat. By 1915, open evangelism no longer anchored their work, yet missions still measured success through the spiritual condition and numerical growth of Protestant congregations in Lebanon. The famine directly endangered that work and jeopardized decades of missionizing progress

¹⁵ George Doolittle, “Report of Sidon Station, Syria Mission, Summer 1915, to Summer 1916,” Presbyterian Historical Society Archives, RG 115-17-19: Sidon Station Reports 1907–35, 2.

¹⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁷ Ibid, 32.

¹⁸ Ibid, 17, 23, 24.

¹⁹ Ibid, 32, 20.

overseas. Reports from the mountain warned of empty churches, collapsed congregations, and dwindling conversion rates as hunger spread.²⁰ One annual Presbyterian report noted this collapse with alarm: “the usual growth of the churches during the year has been arrested,” listing only “24 new communicants,” and detailing “9 churches with a membership of 845” and “2,148 adherents,” even as tens of thousands starved.²¹ Other observers corroborated this spiritual evacuation. In 1917, the British writer William Canton wrote that “Moselm and Christian alike had ceased to pray; no one went to church.”²² These scenes reveal how famine hollowed out not only bodies but institutions through which missionaries understood their purpose. As instability deepened, Presbyterian reports increasingly moralized the violence surrounding them. One theological seminary graduate, forcibly conscripted into the Ottoman army, was praised for having “served the cause of Christ manfully...until he died of typhus,” a narrative that turned coercion and disease into Christian heroism.²³ Another report thanked God that “our Allies are here,” recasting geopolitical intervention as divine deliverance.²⁴ In each case, missionaries transformed political realities—famine, conscription, occupation—into spiritual narratives. This rhetorical shift allowed them to protect their work and their safety by turning structural catastrophe into moral trial, ensuring that later generations would remember the famine as spiritual drama rather than political indictment.

Missionary correspondence sustained this idiom of moralized suffering. Writing from Beirut in 1916, Archie Crawford, son of a Syrian Protestant College professor, wrote in his diary

²⁰ Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Board of Foreign Missions, *Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church* (University of Chicago, 1915), 418.

²¹ Ibid.

²² William Canton, *Dawn in Palestine* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1918), 77.

²³ Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. Board of Foreign Missions, *Annual Report of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church* (University of Chicago, 1919), 369.

²⁴ Ibid.

that many in “Lebanon feared that their coasts and mountains would become a battlefield,” a line that treats the crisis as a drifting, impersonal threat and, again, avoids naming any human agent.²⁵ Edward Nickoley, principal at the Syrian Protestant College and later its acting president, pushed this logic further by describing death itself as “a mercy” for those trapped in long-term semistarvation.²⁶ In one diary entry, he listened all night to a starving boy crying outside and convinced himself that “there is no saving them,” only to watch the child’s body being carried away in the morning.²⁷ When missionaries did mention Ottoman violence, they immediately absorbed it back into redemptive language. A 1915 Presbyterian mission report, for instance, claimed that the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the war created an “occasion for ministry to the suffering people in the name of Christ,” treating devastation as an “evangelistic advantage.”²⁸ A relief bulletin likewise framed American workers as joining a “new crusade” to “fight the hosts of famine, pestilence, and destitution,” substituting supernatural enemies for political ones.²⁹ Across these writings, culpability disappears. Missionaries consistently elevate personal virtue instead of identifying those who engineered starvation. A 1919 Presbyterian mission report, for example, venerates Aneese Fayyach, a colporteur who “sold a few Scriptures and divided the money with two starving companions,” and praises “his self-denial for Christ’s sake” as “without parallel.”³⁰ In such portrayals, structural violence gives way to individual sanctity and famine becomes a stage on which missionaries perform Christian virtue.

Fear sustained this posture as much as faith did. When Ottoman authorities hanged the Maronite priest Youssef al-Hayek in 1915 in Damascus for correspondence with France, they

²⁵ “The Wartime Diaries of Archibald S. Crawford,” 29 March 1916, as cited in Nicholas Ajay, “Mount Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut, 1914-1918: The War Years,” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 1973), 122.

²⁶ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 3.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁸ Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., *Annual Report*, viii.

²⁹ American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, “News Bulletin,” March, 1919, 6.

³⁰ Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., *Annual Report*, 369.

signaled that blaming the state could be fatal.³¹ Under that threat, missionaries and local Christians framed starvation as providence not only out of piety but out of prudence. The clearest evidence of this dynamic comes from Lebanese voices themselves. By 1915, mission schools in Beirut and Mount Lebanon treated the social collapse around them as a venue for moral formation. Teachers presented the breakdown of daily life as an “opportunity for moral growth,” inviting students to read catastrophe through the language of Christian duty rather than political violence.³² The American School for Girls in Beirut, for example, reported proudly that students had given up fruit from their daily snacks and forfeited their annual Christmas treat so the savings could be donated to famine relief—gestures the school celebrated not as responses to imperial policy but as acts of spiritual refinement.³³ Administrators later “permitted a brush with real suffering” by sending girls into the city to distribute bread or read Bible verses to the starving, transforming exposure to mass death into a lesson in charity.³⁴ These practices trained students to read political catastrophe as a moral lesson, reinforcing the same depoliticized idiom missionaries used in their own writing. In this setting, silence became righteous. As one relief appeal insisted, “the measure of Christ’s suffering for us is the only true measure of our devotion.”³⁵ Political neutrality thus hardened into moral law. Together, missionary and Lebanese writers constructed a shared representational framework that celebrated benevolence while leaving Ottoman culpability unspoken.

Taken together, these texts show how humanitarian language functioned as both shield and script. Missionaries and relief writers used moral idioms shaped by censorship, neutrality,

³¹ Ferdinand Tyan, *France et Liban: Défense des intérêts français en Syrie* (Perrin & Co., 1917) 67-68.

³² Tylor Brand, “Childhood and Children in the Lebanese Famine of World War I” in *In the Steps of the Sultan*, eds. Tylor Brand and Bilal Orfali (American University of Beirut Press, 2024), 236.

³³ “Annual Report: American School for Girls, Beirut, Syria, December 1914–December 1915,” Presbyterian Historical Society Archives RG-115-3-1 American School for Girls, reports, 1838–1955, 1.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, *A National Test of Brotherhood*, 26.

and faith to avoid political speech while satisfying the sentimental expectations of Western donors. These choices did more than soften rhetoric; they reshaped how Lebanese communities later remembered the famine. Missionary portrayals of suffering as moral trial quickly entered local institutions, from girls' schools that framed charity as spiritual refinement to churches that interpreted hunger as divine testing. Even as Ottoman requisition and Allied blockade engineered starvation, the circulating idiom emphasized virtue, sacrifice, and providence. Writers and educators reframed famine not as the outcome of imperial policy but as a universal moral ordeal that demanded endurance. This fusion of humanitarian sentiment and political silence, first produced in missionary writing and then internalized in Lebanese Christian communities, created the moral vocabulary that later underpinned the famine's biblical framing, rendering it narratable as tragedy but not indictable as atrocity. As Tylor Brand notes, such vocabularies "sensationalized the situation" and softened its political edge by casting hunger as a timeless, almost allegorical catastrophe rather than the product of wartime decisions.³⁶

Biblical Metaphors and Cultural Reframing of the "Year of the Locusts"

The moral language missionaries forged did not stay theirs alone. As the war continued, the idiom of "testing" and "faith" migrated into explicitly biblical interpretations of the famine. Relief writers first cast starvation as humanitarian virtue, and that moral grammar opened easily onto scripture. This shift crystallized in the expression that historian Salim Tamari identifies as the famine's enduring epitaph: "'*Am al-Jarad*,'" or the "Year of the Locusts."³⁷ Rooted in both scripture and the devastating swarms of 1915, the locust became the famine's governing metaphor, one that offered spiritual coherence while quietly effacing its human causes.

³⁶ Brand, *Famine Worlds*, 56.

³⁷ Tamari, *Year of the Locusts*, 5.

Even before scripture appeared explicitly in famine narratives, missionary writers had already begun to cast deprivation as spiritual testing. Edward Nickoley routinely described starvation as a divine trial that refined the faithful; in their accounts, hunger proved devotion and endurance signaled grace. This moral grammar encouraged readers to imagine famine as a passion story, interpreting the deprivation through the language of piety rather than through the structures that produced it. Relief publications extended this idiom. The ACASR circulated pamphlets that likened the devastation in Lebanon and Syria to the prophet Joel's lament that "the land is as the garden of Eden before them, and behind them a desolate wilderness."³⁸ Scripture made suffering legible without naming perpetrators, turning famine into prophetic spectacle rather than political indictment.

Scriptural language entered Lebanese memory with remarkable ease. In popular retellings, the phrase "the Year of the Locust" came to stand for the famine itself, collapsing "natural disasters" and "man-made devastation" into a single narrative of divine visitation.³⁹ The locust offered a politically and religiously neutral explanation for mass death, one that enabled shared mourning without provoking sectarian conflict or Ottoman retaliation.⁴⁰ However, that neutrality stripped the famine of its political causes.

Kahlil Gibran stands at the center of this transformation. Writing from Boston in May 1916, he told his lover Mary Haskell that the famine was "planned by the Turkish government," a direct accusation of state violence.⁴¹ Yet by January 1917, when he published "Dead Are My People," that clarity had dissolved into spiritual lament. "My people died on the cross," he

³⁸ Alexander Aaronsohn, *With the Turks in Palestine* (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1916), 51.

³⁹ Tamari, *Year of the Locusts*, 5.

⁴⁰ Melanie Tanielian, *The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914-1918)* (University of California, 2012), 20.

⁴¹ Kahlil Gibran to Mary Haskell, May 26, 1916, Accessed December 9, 2025, <https://lebanesestudies.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/items/show/79134#?c=&m=&s=&cv=>.

declares; “they died because they did not oppress the oppressors.”⁴² In one haunting moment, Gibran nears naming guilt—calling the famine “a crime conceived by the heads of the unseen serpents”—but he quickly retreats into allegory, calling it “a sceneless tragedy.”⁴³ His private bluntness gives way to the cadence of prophecy in his public writing. He turns his people into Christlike martyrs and casts their suffering in the imagery of Isaiah’s Suffering Servant and Lamentations.⁴⁴ Through crucifixion and redemption, Gibran turns starvation into cosmic tragedy—one that condemns humanity’s indifference (“they died silently, for humanity had closed its ears to their cry”) but does not confront the Ottoman state.⁴⁵ His shift captures the article’s larger movement: political knowledge survives privately, while public language drifts toward sacred form.

This broader shift became visible in how Lebanese communities narrated the famine. In his diary entry from 1917 in Lebanon, written during the final year of the war and around the same time Gibran composed “Dead Are My People,” Edward Nickoley recorded circulating rumors that “Jamal Pasha had intentionally refrained from aiding the mountain” and that this was part of a “grand plan to Turkify the region.”⁴⁶ Yet such accusations rarely survived into public remembrance. They circulated privately, in diaries and family stories, but rarely appeared in textbooks or official commemorations. As Najwa al-Qattan notes, the famine endures in Lebanese memory as “historical lore,” recalled through sensory fragments—“bread, grass, carcasses, and children”—rather than through the blockade and requisition policies that produced the catastrophe.⁴⁷ Biblical metaphor offered emotional coherence at a time where political speech

⁴² Gibran, “Dead Are My People.”

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Isaiah 53; Lamentations 1-5 (NIV).

⁴⁵ Gibran, “Dead Are My People.”

⁴⁶ Nickoley, “Historic Diary,” 6-7.

⁴⁷ Najwa al-Qattan, “When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 4 (2014): 732.

was dangerous, but that coherence remained fragile. Lebanese families mourned the famine as a private apocalypse rather than a public atrocity.

These texts reveal how the famine's meaning migrated from political to the theological. Missionaries and poets framed catastrophe in moral and spiritual terms, making it legible as sacred trial rather than political violence. Their biblical language—shaped by censorship, faith, and fear—encouraged Lebanese communities to describe the famine in holy imagery even as that language obscured its human causes. By sanctifying suffering, missionary and literary narratives redirected remembrance toward endurance rather than accountability.

Shame, Silence, and Forgetting

A variety of factors shaped the famine's disappearance from public memory, beginning with the fact that it did not devastate post-war Lebanon evenly. Because famine mortality fell most heavily in Maronite mountain districts, while many Muslim and Druze regions suffered far less, the catastrophe entered the post-Ottoman period not as a shared national trauma but as a confessional wound. Different communities manipulated famine memory according to their political interests. Maronite leaders, eager to secure French tutelage and legitimize the creation of a Christian-leaning "Greater Lebanon," strategically highlighted Mount Lebanon's suffering while downplaying the role of the Allied blockade in producing it.⁴⁸ Muslim and Druze opponents of the Mandate, by contrast, often invoked the famine as evidence of the dangers of foreign intervention, advocating for Arab unity.⁴⁹ In each case, actors mobilized or muted the famine not to seek accountability but to bolster competing visions of Lebanon's future after empire. This dynamic mattered profoundly in the years immediately following the Ottoman

⁴⁸ Tarek Abou Jaoude, "The Desires of the People: Post-war Nationalism in 1919 Lebanon," *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 15, no. 4 (2024): 413.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 406.

Empire's collapse. The new political order that emerged with the French Mandate's creation of Greater Lebanon in 1920 required a narrative of cross-sectarian unity under French oversight. That story presented the new state as the natural culmination of Lebanon's history rather than a contested post-war creation. Famine memory, however, pointed in the opposite direction. It exposed uneven vulnerability, revived sectarian resentments, and highlighted the failures of both Ottoman governance and Allied wartime policy. It also pointed, awkwardly, towards French complicity, since France helped enforce the Allied naval blockade that starved the very population it now claimed to protect. For Mandate officials and the emerging Lebanese state, it was far easier to elevate more usable pasts—especially stories of heroic resistance to Ottoman rule—than to confront a catastrophe that divided communities instead of binding them together.

Kahlil Gibran captured the difficulty of commemorating the famine when he wrote that it produced only “a painful and shameful death,” a death with “no witnesses” and “no stage for heroism.”⁵⁰ Starvation offered no agency, spectacle, or honor. His idea of a “sceneless tragedy” explains why famine proved so difficult to commemorate: unlike the public executions of May 1916, commemorated in Beirut's Martyrs' Square, famine deaths created no martyrs and no usable story of heroism. In a political culture that prized dignity and public honor, hunger appeared humiliating rather than unifying. Families could grieve privately, but the nation lacked a framework through which it could mourn collectively.

That shame haunted the generation that survived. Two wartime poems capture how grief collapsed into self-reproach. In “Shroud Them,” Amin Arida urges his countrymen to “bury them...erase this tale of weakness and disgrace,” rejecting any public mourning of famine deaths.⁵¹ In “Safar Barlik,” Yusuf Al-Birri depicts villages “where starvation kills young and old,

⁵⁰ Gibran, “Dead Are My People.”

⁵¹ Amin Arida, “Shroud Them,” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 1916. <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/literature-middle-east/>.

where children roam the streets like prey,” only to conclude that “a people without courage reaps only death as its reward.”⁵² Both poets refuse pity and redirect anger inward, turning humiliation into silence. As Camilla Orjuela observes, famine deaths often appear “humiliating rather than heroic” and in Lebanon, that humiliation laid the groundwork for forgetting.⁵³

Sectarian geography deepened the silence, both during the famine and long after it. Mortality fell heaviest in Maronite mountain villages, while many Muslim and Druze areas such as Tripoli and Rashaya endured far lower death rates. Any public commemoration would therefore have highlighted Christian suffering on a national stage and reopened fraught sectarian debates about belonging, vulnerability, and the future of Lebanon after Ottoman rule. The issue was especially sensitive in a society where Christians had long occupied an ambiguous position—protected and marginalized under the Ottoman “millet system” and, in the empire’s final years, subjected to repression and mass violence.⁵⁴ After 1920, the new Lebanese state under the French Mandate needed myths of unity rather than reminders of uneven loss. Those May 1916 executions offered exactly that, with Muslim and Christians hanged together. The state elevated them as martyrs of the nation (“*shuhada’ al-watan*”), commemorated annually in Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square as symbols of cross-sectarian cohesion.⁵⁵ As al-Qattan notes, the civilian victims of the famine are “mourned but not memorialized” and against the heroic frame of the 1916 martyrs, the famine’s dead appeared passive and unredeemable.⁵⁶ Commemoration demanded figures who embodied agency and sacrifice; starving bodies, by contrast, threatened the fragile sectarian equilibrium the Mandate and early Lebanese state struggled to maintain.

⁵² Yusuf Al-Birri, “Safar Barlik,” *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, 1917.
<https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/literature-middle-east/>.

⁵³ Camilla Orjuela, “Remembering/Forgetting Hunger: Towards an Understanding of Famine Memorialisation,” *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2023): 263-264.

⁵⁴ Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (Pluto Press, 2012), 3.

⁵⁵ Tanielian, “The War of Famine,” 206-207.

⁵⁶ al-Qattan, “When Mothers Ate Their Children,” 722.

Early modern historians of Lebanon, most notably Kamal Salibi, likewise bypassed the famine, not because the state instructed them to, but because the catastrophe simply did not fit the national narrative they aimed to build. Writing in the early 1960s as an independent scholar at the American University of Beirut, Salibi was hardly shy about recounting rupture as he detailed the Druze-Maronite conflict, the sectarian tensions of the nineteenth century, and the political ambitions of competing confessional elites. But even as he details these fractures, *The Modern History of Lebanon* presents Mount Lebanon under the Mutesarrifate as “the best governed, most prosperous, peaceful and contented country in the Near East,” and insists that by 1917, the Mutesarrif could “feel justly proud of what the Mutesarrifate had achieved.”⁵⁷ The famine—the death of a third of the population, the collapse of rural society, the destruction of the mountain economy—appears nowhere in his account. Salibi organizes modern Lebanese history around political continuity, with the Mutesarrifate as the embryo of the modern state and the French Mandate as the fulfillment of Christian nationalist aspirations.⁵⁸ Recognizing the famine would shatter that arc, exposing mass death instead of continuity.

Education deepened that divide. Today, roughly sixty percent of Lebanese schools operate under religious authorities, and their curricula reproduce the state’s sectarian logic by teaching competing versions of the past. Christian schools often embed the famine within a broader narrative of Ottoman persecution of Christian populations, linking it to the Armenian and Assyrian genocides.⁵⁹ Muslim schools, by contrast, often minimize or omit the famine, framing it as a Western exaggeration deployed to justify imperial intervention under the guise of

⁵⁷ Kamal Salibi, *The Modern History of Lebanon* (Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 116, 117.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 119.

⁵⁹ Yeghia Tashjian, “Sectarianism and the Armenian Genocide: The Politics of the Absence of Genocide Education in Lebanon.” *Armenian Weekly*. May 24, 2023.
<https://armenianweekly.com/2023/05/24/sectarianism-and-the-armenian-genocide-the-politics-of-the-absence-of-genocide-education-in-lebanon/>

protecting Christians.⁶⁰ These divergent narratives ensure that the famine remains a confessional story rather than a national one. One recent newspaper observed that the famine “fell out of Lebanon’s collective memory...because it affected Christians more than Muslims and so did not serve as a unifying force.”⁶¹ In this educational landscape, even tragedy becomes communal property. Owain Lawson describes this fragmentation as “institutionalized amnesia,” a system that preserves the famine only as a statistic, not as a shared moral inheritance.⁶²

That amnesia also served the political stability of a post-Ottoman Lebanon navigating new regional and international pressures. Under the French Mandate, officials avoided emphasizing Ottoman culpability, knowing that doing so risked antagonizing Turkey, alienating Muslim constituencies, and unsettling an already fragile sectarian order. After independence in 1943, Lebanese politicians inherited and preserved these cautions. By the late 1940s, Lebanon pursued pragmatic foreign policy aimed at regional stability and commercial expansion, culminating in trade agreements with the Turkish Republic in 1955.⁶³ A state built on delicate confessional compromise and cautious diplomacy had little incentive to commemorate an atrocity that devastated one community far more than others. Forgetting became a form of governance. This political quietude reshaped the famine’s emotional vocabulary. As Orjuela notes, the catastrophe entered memory through “feminized” images of domestic suffering—starving mothers and broken households—that rendered the famine intimate and apolitical.⁶⁴ Such imagery pushed remembrance inward. Families preserved stories as private lessons in endurance rather than public claims on the state. al-Qattan captures this dynamic well,

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ “Harrowing Accounts Emerge As Lebanon Rediscovered Devastating Famine,” *Arab Weekly*, January 5, 2015.

⁶² Owain Lawson, “Organised Abandonment in Lebanon’s Litani River Basin,” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*, (2024): 4, <https://doi-org.proxy048.nclive.org/10.1177/25148486241291942>

⁶³ Nicolas Salha, “Trade Agreements of Lebanon,” Master’s thesis, (American University of Beirut, 1957), 92.

⁶⁴ Orjuela, “Remembering/Forgetting Hunger,” 264.

observing that the famine survives only as “stories my father told me.”⁶⁵ The famine remained present in Lebanese life yet unavailable as national history.

When Lebanon finally attempted to remember the famine, it stumbled. In 2015, a group of artists and historians unveiled plans for the “Memory Tree,” a monument honoring the roughly 200,000 people who starved between 1915 and 1918. The project immediately exposed a deeper problem: Lebanon does not do national monuments. As artist Yazan Halwani explained, “each person within their small group—whether sect, area, or religion—has their own narrative. There’s no national conversation.”⁶⁶ His remark cuts to the heart of a century-old dilemma. After the First World War, French officials drew the borders of Greater Lebanon over a multi-religious society that never shared a unified historical canon, and the Mandate authorities promoted a national identity without reconciling its rival memories. The designers placed the “Memory Tree” on the former civil-war front line dividing Muslim West and Christian East Beirut, “a point of war but also connection,” hoping to perform the reconciliation the state never achieved.⁶⁷ Instead, the monument revealed the fractures it aimed to mend. Three years after its quiet installation, a torn tarp sagged over the structure, its copper leaves piercing through. Political deadlock and disputes over “when, how, and with whom” to inaugurate the monument have stalled every attempt at an official ceremony.⁶⁸ As Halwani lamented, “the conversation is overdue.”⁶⁹ The “Memory Tree” stands as an emblem of Lebanon’s impasse; the state wants to mourn the famine but it cannot agree on what the tragedy means. It offers public remembrance without public consensus; a monument in search of a nation.

⁶⁵ al-Qattan, “Literature (Middle East),” 2018.

⁶⁶ Akerman, “Yazan Halwani Unveils the ‘Memory Tree.’”

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Forgetting, then, did not arise from absence but from choice. The same moral language that once made suffering intelligible as divine trial later helped translate it into silence. Naming the famine's human causes would have required Lebanon to confront several layers of complicity, Ottoman, Allied, and Lebanese alike. Moral language did more than obscure Ottoman policy; it also concealed internal profiteering. Beirut's merchant elites hoarded grain and sold it at ruinous prices, and the rhetoric of divine testing shielded their actions as effectively as it absolved the empire.⁷⁰ Calling the catastrophe God's will was easier than exposing the political and economic systems that produced it. By allowing a theological frame to dominate, Lebanon preserved a fragile sense of unity but surrendered historical truth. The "Year of the Locusts" survived as a story of endurance rather than a record of engineered deprivation. In that shift, moral comfort triumphed over history, and shame became the price of peace.

Conclusion: Sanctified Suffering and the Afterlife of Silence

Historians, like the missionaries and poets they study, still struggle to end the famine. Closing the story of 1915–18 means forcing coherence onto a catastrophe that resists it. Any attempt to conclude the famine risks repeating the very process this paper has traced: translating political violence into parable. The archive pushes us in that direction. Missionaries and poets framed the famine through virtue, prophecy, and spiritual trial, and that framing continues to shape how historians can write about it. Historians do not redeem the famine, but they inherit the language that once did.

Early modern historians of Lebanon reinforced this pattern by bypassing the famine altogether. Writers like Kamal Salibi built modern Lebanese history around confessional balance and state formation, not rupture or mass death. Their omission was structural; it aligned with a

⁷⁰ Pitts, "A Hungry Population," 219.

historiography—and a post-Mandate state—invested in projecting cohesion rather than exposing wounds. Later writers like Fawwaz Traboulsi restored the famine to the national narrative, yet still faced the difficulty Brand identifies: a calamity of this magnitude resists tidy endings, and any narrative risks simplifying what cannot be morally or politically constrained.⁷¹

This study has approached the famine not as an event to resolve but as a field of language shaped by censorship, piety, imperial geopolitics, and the emotional need of survival. Missionary and relief writers rendered atrocity legible through virtue; Lebanese writers inherited that idiom, transforming it into theology, metaphor, and eventually silence. Their words did not merely forget the famine; they organized its erasure. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us, silences emerge not after history is written but in the very processes that produce it.⁷² Here, the moral language that once protected witnesses also constrained what could be remembered. Humanitarian rhetoric offered compassion without critique; nationalist historiography offered unity without grief. Between them, the famine became sacred, and, therefore, untouchable.

Perhaps the only adequate ending is to acknowledge that the famine has no moral resolution. Like Brand's environmental data or Tanielian's humanitarian archives, the moral rhetoric examined here belongs to a larger ecology of empire, faith, and fear. To read it critically is not to reject belief, but to recover the politics that belief obscured. If earlier generations made the famine sacred, then re-examining its language may allow us, finally, to make it human.

⁷¹ Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*.

⁷² Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 2015), 25.

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