

Rachel Carson Center Perspectives

How to cite:

Ertem, Özge. "British Views on the Indian and Ottoman Famines: Politics, Culture, and Morality." In: "The Imagination of Limits: Exploring Scarcity and Abundance," edited by Frederike Felcht and Katie Ritson, *RCC Perspectives* 2015, no. 2, 17–27.

All issues of *RCC Perspectives* are available online. To view past issues, and to learn more about the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, please visit www.rachelcarsoncenter.de.

Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society
Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

© Copyright is held by the contributing authors.

SPONSORED BY THE



Federal Ministry
of Education
and Research

Deutsches Museum



Özge Ertem

British Views on the Indian and Ottoman Famines: Politics, Culture, and Morality

In 1874, the same disaster befell the people of two lands far distant from the British Isles: famines hit both India and the Ottoman Empire, with a severe impact on the lives of Bengalese and Anatolian peasants. However, compared with the high number of deaths in the Anatolian famine—according to contemporary sources, between 100,000 and 250,000 people¹—few deaths were reported during the famine in Bengal. Unlike the subsequent Indian famine in 1876–79, when millions died because of a new British relief policy of non-intervention, extensive relief and the availability of government-priced rice saved India from mass starvation in 1874. According to Mike Davis, “it was the only truly successful British relief effort in the nineteenth century.”²

The Ottoman Anatolia and India had another feature in common: they were both objects of discourses that defined them as spaces of absence, scarcity, wilderness, or empty land in desperate need of colonial investment and opportunity. These discourses were usually produced in the lands of plenty by powerful statesmen, merchants, consuls, diplomats, and philanthropists who, by underlining the wilderness of nature and the weaknesses of state and culture in those lands of scarcity, expressed their superiority, benevolence, and much needed expertise. The famines helped such discourses gain more power, especially in Britain, the rising land of plenty and abundance in the nineteenth century. During meetings about the famine in Anatolia, British politicians, journalists, and the British Relief Committee—composed of US protestant missionaries, several European diplomats, and British merchants, businessmen, and diplomats—highly praised the British famine relief policies during the Bengali famine a few months prior. They put it forward as a model for the Ottoman Empire in their meetings, reports, letters, and commentaries and suggested that the British government in Bengal had showed the Ottoman government how famine could be handled in the most efficient and responsible way.

Yet famine was not the only theme that connected the Ottoman Empire with India in these accounts. The parallels drawn between Asia Minor and India stemmed from

1 Donald Quataert. “Famine in Turkey, 1873–1875.” *Regional Studies* 201 (March 1968): 1–54.

2 Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (New York: Verso, 2001), 36.

broad political and cultural opinions about these lands and their inhabitants. Underpinning it all was the perception of the political management, economic institutions, and customs of India and the Ottoman Empire as inferior and backward, and hence obstacles to development. Simple droughts easily became disasters in these lands due to this “endemic” backwardness, the British gentlemen deemed.

Comparing news coverage and images of the Indian famine in the *Illustrated London News* between January and March 1874 with the records of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund meeting held on 24 June 1875,³ I examine common discourses and ideas about the nature and culture in these lands. My aim is not to presuppose the existence of an all-encompassing colonial perspective. The Ottoman Empire was not a colonized state, as India was; plus, even in India, a colonized country, the multifaceted experiences of locals cannot be reduced to crude narratives of colonialism that deny their agency or portray them as mere passive victims. Instead, my aim is to explore how famines in India and the Ottoman Empire crystallized similar external political and cultural perceptions of these lands, and to demonstrate the common discourse that made these perceptions evident.

The Indian Famine in the *Illustrated London News*

In 1873, a severe drought struck the Indian provinces of Bihar and Bengal and caused significant losses in the rice crop, the staple food in the peasants’ diet. During the course of the famine, the popular British newspaper the *Illustrated London News* published many illustrations and special editorials informing its readers about British aid to India. Between January and September 1874, these editorials served as an advertising campaign for British famine relief and the more general “civilizing mission” in the colony.

Two illustrations published on 24 January 1874 (figs. 1 and 2) showed “the poor husbandmen of India, and likewise those of China” who “from time immemorial” irrigated their lands in traditional ways. In contrast, thanks to the “great public works of irrigation,” on a visit to the Soane Works at Dehree the Viceroy found “100,000 acres irrigated in a few weeks by the new works in their present unfinished state, not a quarter of the

3 Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting in Aid of the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund Held at Willis’s Rooms June 24th 1875* (London: Woodfall & Kinder, 1875).



Figures 1 and 2:
"The Famine in
Bengal: The Indian
Mode of Irrigation,"
*The Illustrated
London News*, no.
1796, 24 January
1874. © The British
Library Board.

project being yet completed."⁴ The newspaper condemned local methods of survival and at the same time advertised the Viceroy's trip to the disaster area and the modern infrastructure built by the British. Contempt for these local Indian practices became a significant part of the political imagery of British governance and modernity.

4 "The Famine in Bengal," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1796, 24 January 1874, 74.

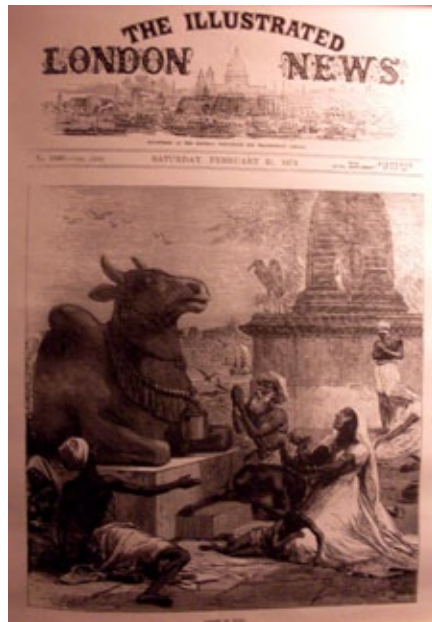


Figure 3:
"Famine in India,"
The Illustrated
London News, no.
1800, 21 February
1874. © The British
Library Board.

Another engraving (fig. 3) showed a Hindu ritual in which several Indian men and women in miserable states asked for aid from deities. The deity in the illustration was named as "Bull Nandi" (the Cow's Mouth), the idol to whom people turned in seasons of drought and famine, praying for rain. The newspaper described the scene thus:

We see people, young and old, before this idol in agonies of prayer. The mother, in despair, holds up her *bucha* or child to Nandi, and begs for *kana*—that is, food. She exclaims, "Hum burrabhookhahai! (We are very hungry!) Humarabuchaburrabhookhahai! (My child is very hungry!) Hum log morghiahai! (Our people are dead!)"⁵

Culture can offer people ways to deal with catastrophic events, as well as reinforcing bonds of solidarity during crises. The editorial, while describing the event in detail, was not interested in the ritual's actual social, cultural, and psychological meaning for the native population. Rather, the editorial presented the ritual as an indicator of premodern irrational habits. The sarcastic language used to point out the remedy to Hindu superstition, however, invoked another deity: "Such are the cries of lamentation that may too soon be heard in India. The Bull Nandi may be deaf to them, but not the English John Bull."⁶

The last engraving (fig. 4) I want to mention was published a couple of weeks later. It showed several native grain-boats with damaged sails sailing on the river Ganges: "Our Illustration of native boats with grain on the Ganges has a certain interest connected with the present deplorable state of that populous country. . . . What strikes one on first going up the Hooghly or the Ganges is the torn condition of the sails of the native boats, and 'Why don't they mend them?' is the natural question."⁷

⁵ "The Famine in India," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1800, 21 February 1874, 167.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ "The Famine in Bengal," *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1804, 21 March 1874, 282.

The author thought the answer to this question was the “custom” of the country that was the reason behind all evils there. However, the author saw the famine as an opportunity to “get quit of some ridiculous habit or caste usage”: “One may often hear the English Government officials, after a calamity of this kind, congratulating themselves



Figure 4:
“The Famine in Bengal: Grain-Boats on the Ganges,” *The Illustrated London News*, no. 1804, 21 March 1874. © The British Library Board.

that some wretched ‘dustoor,’ or custom, which had long stood in the way, has been at length got rid of.”⁸ Casting the blame on the “culture” of their colony, the newspaper authors ignored the political and economic realities of the famine and the responsibility of the British Empire as a colonizer in “the present deplorable state of that populous country.” The language in its editorials and engravings served to underline the geographical, political, and cultural gulf between the native population and the British public.

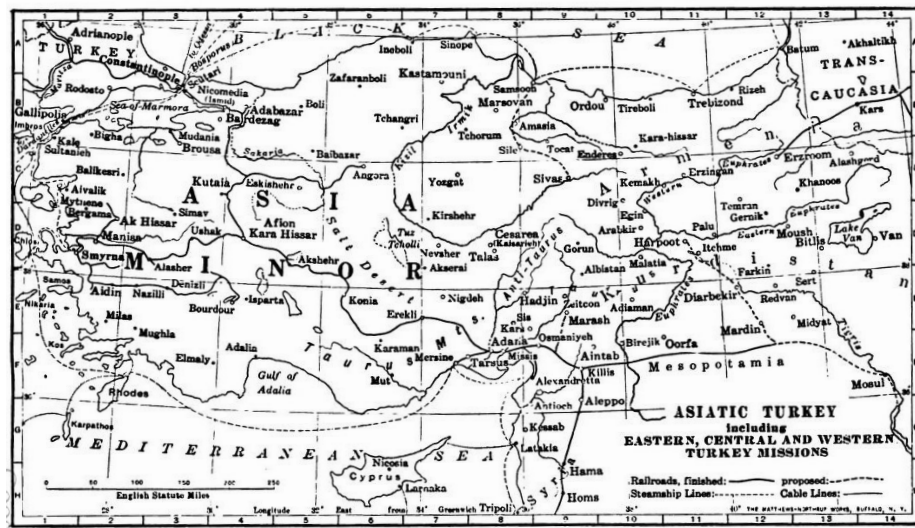
Talking about Anatolia

Meanwhile, thousands of people, marooned in villages isolated from each other during the famine in winter 1874, had died of starvation in central Anatolia. The first warning of the famine was the severe drought in the summer of 1873. Then came the winter: heavy snow that cut off routes between individual villages and the town centers for months on end and aggravated the problem severely. This was a great shock to villagers who (unlike the more advantaged town-dwellers) had no food reserves, but only the seed they had saved for the next sowing season. Those villagers who survived the severe winter had no food left by the spring. Despite several customary measures, such as tax remissions, grain transfer from abundant to scarce regions, and controls on grain and bread prices, organization of state-wide famine relief as a priority was absent. Financial crisis, indebtedness, and weak infrastructure and transportation networks, combined with ignorance, hindered the effective organization of relief by the central state. Instead, it was several Ottoman local governors, private charity initiatives, and foreign charity actors

⁸ Ibid.

who organized local relief networks. Their efforts remained inadequate. At least 100,000 people had died across the whole area by summer 1875.

Figure 5:
Map of Asia
Minor, ca. 1917.
From: Clarence D.
Ussher and Grace
H. Knapp. *An
American Physician
in Turkey: A Narrative
of Adventures
in Peace and War*
(Boston: Houghton
Mifflin Company,
1917), 333.



On 24 June 1875, the Asia Minor Famine Relief Fund Committee, composed of honorable and influential members of British society, held a meeting in London to discuss the current situation in Anatolia and to collect further subscriptions for the famine-stricken population. Even if the meeting had the intention that “all party spirit must be hushed, that all political sympathy and all political discussion is entirely out of place, and that the one feeling which we have, and which we can appeal to, is that of our common humanity,”⁹ the speeches made were mostly built on political and cultural stereotypes about the region and the people living there.

The meeting was opened by the chairman, Major-General Sir Henry Rawlinson, who described Anatolia as “a garden of happiness” turned into “a howling wilderness”:

If you landed on the sea coast you found miles of country fringed with evergreens, with the oleander and the arbutus festooned with the wild hop, and flourishing with the wildest luxuriance of verdure. In other places there were rich plains waving with

9 Henry Alexander Munro Butler-Johnstone, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 41.

crops of corn, and everywhere you saw smiling villages embosomed in orchards, vineyards, olive groves, and gardens. . . . Well, ladies and gentlemen, this garden of happiness has now become almost a howling wilderness.¹⁰

While the chairman presented an idealized vision of traditional rural life, another speaker, Dr. Scherzer, the Austro-Hungarian Consul-General in the Ottoman Empire in the years 1872–75 and “English by sympathy” and “foreign by birth and education” talked about the tormented life of the peasantry in Turkey because of taxation. He entertained the audience with an analogy drawn between the Chinese and Ottoman Empires. The reaction to his words was laughter, which was unsurprising: Scherzer’s opinion was in accordance with many of the British administrators, who perceived both the Chinese and Ottoman Empires as “Oriental Despots”:

I need only mention one fact, that the taxes are not collected by Government officers, but by contractors and those contractors use, I dare say, the Chinese squeezing system. It is the Chinese squeezing system translated into Turkish; and we know that every translation is worse than the original. (Laughter)¹¹

Two MPs, Henry Alexander Munro Butler-Johnstone and J. Reginald Yorke, continued comparing England and western continental Europe with the Ottoman Empire. Butler-Johnstone underlined England’s lack of awareness of the problems abroad, as well as its moral duty to provide aid, by comparing its abundance with the scarcity in the Ottoman Empire: “With our accumulated and accumulating wealth; with ease and luxury at almost every door in England; with pestilence, and famine, and misery so far removed from us . . . that when we hear of their recital, we can scarcely realize them.”¹² According to Butler-Johnstone, the real garden of happiness was England and western continental Europe, which he described as places “immune to misery.”

Yorke agreed, but reminded the audience that this had not always been the case. Once it was England upon which the Ottoman Empire looked “as nothing more than a storm-beaten and remote island somewhere in the Northern Ocean.” However, it was now from that island that “we are collecting gold to send to the country of Croesus, to those who

10 Rawlinson, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 7.

11 Scherzer, the Austro-Hungarian Deputy Consul-General, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 27, 109.

12 Butler-Johnstone, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 42.

dwelt on the banks of the Pactolus, and to what was once one of the richest provinces of Asia Minor,” he continued. Time, he noted, had brought about strange contrasts:

It may be indeed said of England, and the west of Europe generally, that we enjoy a happy immunity from the major calamities of human life. We have our railway accidents and our colliery explosions, and other misfortunes about which we are not slow to grumble, but we have, happily, for some centuries in England, been without any experience of earthquakes, war, plague or famine, and I conceive that our immunity from such great calamities ought to teach us to pity those who are not so favourably circumstanced.¹³

Yorke’s speech recalled British perceptions of the Irish famine of 1845 to 1852, which was seen as a shadow on the ideal of progress and advancement. While England enjoyed prosperity, the neighboring backwater of famine-period Ireland appeared to British citizens as “a land of mass graves, dirt, and destitution; it constituted an affront to their deeply held belief that progress was universal.”¹⁴ By categorizing the misfortunes and calamities as endemic to other lands only, the British narrative of progress in the nineteenth century inserted a temporal and spatial distance between Britain and destitute lands of scarcity and disaster, and also the political and cultural spaces wherein these horrors belonged. This language was abundantly evident in this meeting, as well.

Some did not agree. Scott Russell, for instance, called Anatolia “the veritable garden of Eden in which our original ancestors were placed.” Nevertheless, his emphasis on the beauty and fruitfulness of Anatolia was embedded in a colonial perspective, which envisaged Anatolia as an empty land waiting for economic opportunity and investment:

And I said to myself, Why are all our Englishmen going seeking farms in Australia, and engaging in work on the other side of the world, when here is one of the richest places on the face of the globe, full of excellent agriculturalists, and only waiting [for] intelligence, capital, and modern science, to develop it into one of the richest portions of the Continent.¹⁵

13 J. Reginald Yorke, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Public Meeting*, 30.

14 Kathryn Edgerton Tarpley, *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 123; she is discussing Chris Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 13–16.

15 Scott Russell, in Asia Minor Relief Fund, *Report of the Meeting*, 37–8.

Members of the committee did not always blame the Ottoman government for the famine. Some criticized British unawareness of the situation in Anatolia, suggesting two reasons why citizens should take action: the duties of religion (charity) and the interests of trade. The speakers criticized several British towns for neglecting to collect relief subscriptions; however, they were not only highlighting the importance of charitable acts in these arguments. They were stressing the importance of British trade relations with Asia Minor.

Butler-Johnstone mainly addressed the “large towns and centers of industry and trade in England,” especially Manchester, Hull, and Bristol, asking whether they would “turn away from calamity as if it was no business of [theirs]” while they continued “deriving their riches and wealth from the East and from trading with Asia Minor.”¹⁶ The most striking example was that of Sheffield, a town that produced and exported cutlery both around England and to foreign countries. According to Hanbury’s data, Sheffield had not contributed to the relief fund. However, Hanbury did not “much blame Sheffield.” His explanation of this point elicited the audience’s laughter once more:

Well, I do not much blame Sheffield, because I do not know exactly what interest Sheffield has in Asia Minor. My idea of Sheffield specially is that of a town which supplies us, and foreign countries, with knives and forks. Now if there is one thing which is wanting in the whole of Turkey, it is knives and forks. Every one who has been there knows that a Turk hardly ever touches a knife or a fork for his food—he prefers to use his fingers. (Laughter)¹⁷

The laughter reflected the enduring nature of prejudices regarding Anatolia in the minds of the British gentlemen. Through the example of “knives and forks,” one of the meeting’s final speeches conjured up an uncivilized image of Asia Minor. As the committee members had also underlined frequently in their speeches, however, what was desperately needed in Asia Minor was actual food, not cutlery. Thus, just like in India, helping Anatolia did not prevent these gentlemen from looking down on the region and its people, or putting an insurmountable distance between Anatolia and themselves.

16 Butler-Johnstone, in *Asia Minor Relief Fund, Report of the Meeting*, 41.

17 *Ibid.*

Things are not so different today either. The language of pity and mercy employed in most of the visual footage and press commentaries regarding malnutrition and famines in Africa and aid campaigns, for instance, has fixed Africa as a distant, unfortunate land of disaster and Africans as victims of this land.¹⁸ In this imagination, usually it has been the land or nature which are imagined as guilty, not the political-economic dynamics that have created global social inequalities and poverty in particular places in the world. Humanitarian aid was and is needed, and mercy was and continues to be a value, but only when the importance of politics and the economy, and the dignity of the needy, is recognized with it.

Suggested Reading:

Ayalon, Yaron. *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

Batchen, Geoffrey, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser, eds. *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.

Davis, Diana K., and Edmund Burke III, eds. *Environmental Imaginaries of the Middle East and North Africa*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2011.

Davis, Mike. *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*. New York: Verso, 2001.

Ertem, Özge. *Eating the Last Seed: Famine, Empire, Survival and Order in Ottoman Anatolia in the Late Nineteenth Century*. PhD dissertation, European University Institute, 2012.

Edgerton-Tarpley, Kathryn. *Tears from Iron: Cultural Responses to Famine in Nineteenth-Century China*. California: University of California Press, 2008.

———. “Tough Choices: Grappling with Famine in Qing China, the British Empire, and Beyond.” *Journal of World History* 24, no. 1 (2013): 135–76.

Gratien, Chris, and Graham Pitts, “Towards an Environmental History of World War I: Human and Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Mediterranean.” In *The World during the First World War: Perceptions, Experiences and Consequences*, edited by Helmut Bley and Anorthe Kremers, 237–50. Essen: Klartext, 2014.

18 David Campbell, “The Iconography of Famine,” in *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, ed. Geoffrey Batchen, Mick Gidley, Nancy K. Miller, and Jay Prosser (London: Reaktion Books, 2012): 79–92

Gray, Peter. "Famine and Land in Ireland and India, 1845–1880: James Caird and the Political Economy of Hunger." *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 1 (2006): 193–215.

İslamoğlu, Huri, and Peter C. Purdue, eds. *Shared Histories of Modernity: China, India and the Ottoman Empire*. Oxon and New Delhi: Routledge, 2009.

Quataert, Donald. "Famine in Turkey, 1873–1875." *Regional Studies* 201 (March 1968): 1–54.

Sen, Amartya. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.

Spurr, David. *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993.

Tanielian, Melanie. *The War of Famine: Everyday Life in Wartime Beirut and Mount Lebanon (1914–1918)*. PhD dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2012.