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The Great Famines in Constantine during the Late Ottoman Era and the Beginning of the French Occupation: A Descriptive Historical Analysis

المجاعات الكبرى بقسنطينة خلال أواخر العهد العثماني وبداية عهد الاحتلال الفرنسي: قراءة تاريخية توصيفية

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الملخص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوع المجاعات الكبرى في قسنطينة المعروفة بسنوات البلاء العظيم من خلال المصادر التاريخية، وهي تهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على أهم المجاعات التي ظهرت بقسنطينة ونواحيها مع أواخر العهد العثماني وبداية عهد الاحتلال الفرنسي، وذلك من خلال محاولة الوقوف على أسبابها وآثارها المختلفة على الوضع العام في المنطقة؛ انطلاقا من المصادر التاريخية التي عالجت الموضوع، وفي مقدمتها كتاب "مجاعات قسنطينة" لصالح العنتري، باعتباره من أهم الكتابات التي عالجت موضوع الدراسة بنوع من التفصيل.

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الكلمات المفتاحية: المجاعات، قسنطينة، الجزائر، المصادر التاريخية، الأزمة.

Abstract: This study explores the major famines in Constantine, historically referred to as the years of severe affliction, drawing upon historical sources. It aims to illuminate the major famines that emerged in Constantine and its vicinity during the transition from the late Ottoman era to the early period of French colonial rule. This exploration seeks to identify the causes and diverse impacts of these famines on the regional socio-economic conditions, primarily through an examination of historical documents, with a special focus on "Famines in Constantine" by Saleh Antari. This text stands out for its detailed treatment of the study's subject.

Keywords: Famines, Constantine, Algeria, Historical sources, Ottoman era, French occupation era.

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Introduction:

The Eastern District of Algeria, specifically the Beylik of the East with its capital in Constantine, has been recurrently exposed to various natural crises, notably famines, particularly during the twilight years of the Ottoman rule and the onset of French colonization. These crises were precipitated by a series of relentless disasters.

This study endeavors to chronicle and scrutinize the most significant famines that afflicted Constantine, assessing their repercussions and broader societal impacts based on available historical sources. In adherence to the objectivity required by rigorous scholarly research, this study prominently features the work "Famines in Constantine" by Saleh Antari. This source is lauded for its exclusive and detailed discussion of our research theme. Consequently, this study addresses two critical questions: What were the most significant famines that occurred in Constantine and its surroundings? And what was their extent of influence on the region's overall condition?

1. Defining Famines:

The term "famine" has been designated by various nomenclatures and terminologies, all converging on a singular notion linked to the scarcity or complete absence of food, which disrupts the natural order of society. What, then, constitutes a famine? And what are its linguistic synonyms?

1.1 Famine in Linguistically

Hunger, the antonym of satiation, is fundamentally associated with famine, leading to various derivations such as hunger (al-jou') and famine (al-majā'a), describing the state of being famished. The plural forms, denoting those afflicted by hunger, signify the emptiness of the stomach from food due to hunger (Ibn Manzur, n.d., p. 61). Famine is synonymously referred to as "drought" or "scarcity," with implications of rainfall cessation and the ensuing barrenness. It encapsulates the concept of an earth stricken by drought, where drought is also a descriptor for non-sprouting vegetation, and figuratively, for insatiable consumption (Ibn Manzur, n.d., p. 374).

Additionally, "privation" (al-masghabah) emerges as a synonym, rooted in the experience of famine-induced despair. This term is exemplified in the Quranic verse “Or the giving of food in a day of privation " (Surah Al-Balad, Verse 14), denoting one afflicted by famine. The linguistic richness extends to expressions of hunger accompanied by hardship, and even, in some contexts, to thirst (Ibn Manzur, 1968, p. 368). Further, famine is articulated through "al-alaba," a term derived from the act of gathering, reflecting how communities come together in times of scarcity. This semantic field extends to the descriptors of years marked by famine, highlighting the lexicon's depth in capturing the multifaceted impacts of famine (Al-Jawhari, 1984, p. 123).

The nomenclature for years plagued by famine encompasses a variety of descriptors, such as "Al-Sanah Al-Ghubraa," meaning 'the dusty year', and "Sanah Lizbah," originating from the singular noun "Lizbah," with its plural form "Luzub," signifying a year fraught with severe distress. The term "Lazub" is synonymous with drought, and the phrase "Lizbah shadida al-balaa" characterizes a year dominated by extreme hardships due to drought conditions (Ibn Manzur, n.d., p. 783). Further terms include "Al-Sanah Al-Shadidah Al-Qahmah" (the year of profound scarcity), "Sanah Khada'ah" (the deceitful year), and "Sanah Sanihah" (the barren year), each describing years devoid of vegetation and precipitation, thereby indicative of drought (Al-Fayruz Abadi, n.d., p. 287).

Drought falls under the broader category of calamities, where the term "calamity" in Arabic is derived from "haj," connoting the complete eradication or destruction of something. "Ja'ihah" denotes significant adversity or a major disaster that strikes populations, predominantly affecting agricultural productivity (Ibn Manzur, n.d., p. 338). Some scholars assert a direct correlation between such "calamities" and the causation of famines, referring to them as "Al-Ja'ihah," a feminine active participle of "Al-Ja'ih," with the plural "jawaih," signifying disaster. Specifically, "ja'ihah" is used to describe years of significant depletion or hardship, and the expression "ajaha Allah al-mal" translates as God having annihilated

wealth, suggesting a plague that devastates both crops and financial assets (Qal'ah Ji et al., 1988, p. 157). It is pertinent to note that such calamities are frequently classified as celestial afflictions, ascribed to divine will, and predominantly associated with climatic disruptions (Al-Bayadh, 2008, p. 19).

1.2. Famine in Academic Discourse:

In academic discourse, famine is recognized as a natural disaster affecting specific regions or entire nations, with a notable primary impact on human populations. This phenomenon is intricately linked to environmental factors, particularly climate, which plays a critical role in famine occurrences. Extended periods of drought and elevated temperatures are among the key contributing factors. The ramifications of famines are profound, notably in the significant reduction of population growth (Karimi, 2002, p. 106). Therefore, famine encompasses a myriad of challenges faced by communities, prompting them to seek religious legitimization for certain crisis-induced behaviors to avoid transgressions (Mazdoor, n.d., p. 19).

2. Geographic Scope of the Study:

2.1. Geographic Location:

The Eastern Beylik, during the Ottoman era, was among Algeria's largest beyliks (Abdelkader El Djezairi, 1903, p. 15). Its capital, Constantine, renowned for its formidable fortifications, overlooks extensive plains and rural expanses, boasting sturdy castles. While smaller than Algiers, Constantine is notably larger than Medea, the capital of the Titteri region, by threefold (Nouchi, 1955, p. 171).

The Eastern region stretches from the northern sea to beyond Biskra and Wadi Souf in the south, encompassing the Righ Basin and Aighergher, and from the Tunisian border in the east to beyond the regions of Ouenougha and Bordj Hamza (Bouira), and the slopes of the Djurdjura mountains to the west (Ghattas, n.d., p. 210). This region includes the Bibans mountains, the Soummam Valley, the Babors mountains, Constantine, Annaba, Souk Ahras, the High Plains of Constantine, the Aurès massif, the Nememcha, Tebessa, the Hodna mountains, the Zab and Ziban mountains, the oases of

the Souf in the Righ basin, and the northeastern Saharan oases, notably: Biskra, Touggourt, Ouargla, and the M'zab oases (Antar, n.d., p. 17).

2.2 Constantine: A Focal Point:

Given the study's focus on Constantine, particularly as the epicenter of the famines, a dedicated introduction is warranted. Historically, the foundation of Constantine predates the Christian era, specifically to 203 BC, established by the Romans (Hassani, 2007, p. 130). Initially known as "Sert," its name evolved to "Constantine" by AD 313 (Bernschweig, 1988, p. 418).

Adouani notes the name "Constantine" was derived from a tree prolific in the high mountains, known for its extensive branching, called "Qatantina" (Adouani, 1996, p.280). Built upon a mountain and encircled by large rocks to the south, Constantine's geographical features rendered it a fortified city, traversed by the Rhumel River (Bernschweig, 1988, p. 418). Geographically, Constantine sits at 36°20'N latitude and 6°30'E longitude (Schaller, 1982, p. 36), centrally within Eastern Algeria. It lies 245 km from the Algerian-Tunisian eastern border, about 431 km west of the capital, and 235 km from Biskra to the south, nestled atop an ancient rock overlooking the Rhumel River (Qashwan, 2010, p. 10). In the Ottoman era, Constantine emerged as a significant industrial hub, indicating its economic prominence at the onset of French colonization. It was famed for industries such as embroidery and jewelry (Spencer, 2006, p. 120). By the late Ottoman period, its population reached approximately one hundred thousand, leading historians to describe it as a "kingdom" (Filali, n.d., p. 161).

Economically, Constantine was a hive of activity. Despite political instability contributing to chaos, famines, and economic decline, agriculture had been a hallmark of Eastern Algeria even before Ottoman rule, with agricultural output meeting the local needs throughout their reign. The region's crops, later known as the Constantine prefecture during colonial times, were globally renowned (Zubairi, 1984, p. 60).

Hassan al-Wazzan highlights the presence of several fertile lands in Constantine suitable for agriculture, surrounded by beautiful gardens. This also applies to Annaba, which likewise boasts fertile lands (Al-Wazzan, 1983, p. 58). However, the period's characteristic climate across Algeria generally involved scarce rainfall during summer and poor distribution throughout the agricultural season. Climatic conditions were a primary cause of the absence of agricultural seasons, reduced output, and consequently, the onset of famines (Mujahid Yamina, 2018, p. 10).

3. Major Famines in Constantine:

Algeria, during the late Ottoman period and the onset of colonial rule, was afflicted by numerous famines, characterized by deteriorating conditions, chaos, and skyrocketing prices. These factors significantly undermined the inhabitants' resilience to poverty and the rising cost of living, adversely impacting the socio-economic landscape and leading to demographic decline. Abdelrahman Al-Jilali observed that Algeria, already ravaged by war, was caught off-guard by widespread drought and famine, leading to acute and suffocating hunger and spiraling prices (Al-Jilali, n.d., p. 261).

3.1 The Late 17th Century Drought Crisis in Constantine:

Historical accounts document a drought crisis in Constantine at the close of the 17th century. Although most sources remain silent on its causes, Antari highlighted its widespread effect on the population, resulting in diminished provisions and inflated prices, with a single measure of wheat reaching five Riyals (Antari, 1974, p. 13).

3.2 The Drought and Severe Famine of 1804 – 1808 in Constantine:

Historical sources chronicle a severe famine that struck Constantine in 1804, persisting for four years until 1808. Preceded by the revolt of Sharif Ibn Al-Ahrash in the Wadi Al-Zhur area of Constantine in 1803, the ensuing chaos hindered agricultural activities, leading to grain shortages in the market and significant price increases. At one point, a measure of wheat fetched fifteen Riyals, and barley seven Riyals.

This famine particularly affected the rural population, many of whom migrated to the city of Constantine seeking assistance. Antari describes their dire situation: "Fleeing their homes and villages, they made their way to the city of Constantine in a deplorable and miserable state, seeking aid from government officials and affluent citizens. They received some support from local notables and government personnel. Bey Abdullah, the reigning authority, encouraged tribal leaders to bring grains to the city, and the government facilitated their distribution to the needy" (Antari, 1974, pp. 14-15).

3.3 The 1838 Drought Crisis Leading to Famine in Constantine:

Historical records link a drought crisis in 1838 to a severe famine in Constantine. The drought of 1838 severely affected Constantine's residents, leading to famine. Historical sources attribute the famine's causes to a catastrophic event that destroyed crops that year, discouraging farmers from cultivating their lands amid strife and invasions by some tribes exacerbated by the French occupation of Constantine. Additionally, the heavy rains and snowfall that year contributed to the 1838 famine, particularly as they impeded farming activities (Antari, 1974, p. 16).

3.4 The Drought Crisis Leading to the Three-Year Famine of 1847 – 1850 in Constantine:

Historical narratives also mention a three-year famine from 1847 to 1850 in Constantine, which left the residents facing a severe scarcity of food. This famine's causes are primarily attributed to a locust invasion that devastated crops and vegetation. Notably, French merchants helped alleviate the famine by importing and distributing grains to the needy in Constantine and its surroundings, facilitated by tickets issued by the city's Arab Bureau (Antari, 1974, p. 16).

3.5 The Black Famine; The Three-Year Great Famine of 1866 – 1868 in Constantine:

The Black Famine or the Great Three-Year Famine of 1866 to 1868, which afflicted Algeria generally and Constantine specifically, is detailed in historical sources. This famine, which resulted in widespread death and disease, decimating a fifth of

Algeria's population according to most accounts, was attributed to calamities that destroyed crops and the spread of "Rahmah," a livestock disease in 1867, and a locust invasion in 1868 (Antari, 1974, p. 17).

Kamal Ben Sahraoui describes the famine as "Black" due to its merciless nature, impoverishing the wealthy, annihilating the poor, and transforming societal statuses overnight. The catastrophe began with crop failures, leading to a complete lack of wheat and barley, followed by the decimation of livestock by "Rahmah," culminating in widespread epidemic and mortality. The locust invasion in 1868 further devastated the already stricken lands (Ben Sahraoui, 2017, p. 278).

Antari vividly captures the grim realities of the famine, painting a stark portrait of widespread suffering: "... Individuals teetered on the brink of agonizing death, subjected to calamities of an unprecedented scale. The crisis cast a shadow of despair across all strata of society, affecting both the rural peasantry and the urban elite, driving them to extremes of scavenging and despair... As the rural distress deepened, hordes of emaciated and desperate people flooded the roads to Constantine, seeking refuge. Their gaunt figures a testament to the severity of their plight, they swarmed the city in a desperate quest for deliverance..." (Antari, 1974, pp. 17-18).

The famine resulted in a complete absence of grains in markets, mass livestock deaths, exorbitant grain prices for three years, and the spread of cholera, typhus, and other deadly diseases, erasing fortunes and leaving their owners destitute (Antari, 1974, p. 17).

On the broader impact of this famine in Algeria and specifically Constantine, André Nouchi notes the dire human toll in the Eastern Algerian region, with daily fatalities exceeding a hundred (A. Nouchi, 1960, p. 371). Similarly, Bishop Burzet emphasized the famine's severity, "The terrifying famine posed a grave threat to the Arab tribes in Eastern Algeria, leading to countless deaths. The suffering of the people was greatly exacerbated by the dwindling of springs and wells, leading to a total dearth of vegetation and hardship until 1868" (Burzet, n.d., pp. 75-79).

Conclusion:

In concluding this study, it's evident that famines have been a recurrent phenomenon in the Eastern Algerian region (Constantine) across various epochs, spanning from the late Ottoman period to the early phase of French colonial rule. These famines varied in their intensity and impact on the local populace. The famines that beset Constantine left indelible negative effects on the region's economic conditions of the time, which, in turn, adversely affected the social structure. Historical sources regard these famines among the severest trials the region has encountered, attributed to their persistent recurrence and close temporal proximity.

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