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Insights from the Ottoman Empire's climate challenges of 1911

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My research project on the disruptive weather of 1911 and how Ottoman society and government coped with it aims to address the exigent climate crisis by extracting salient insights from this historical case study. I had the opportunity to present my initial findings in July, drawing on the theme of the BRISMES conference, 'Ecology, crisis, and power in the Middle East'. Like my other projects supported by BIAA grants over the past two years, the overarching motivation has been to leverage historical insights in addressing contemporary challenges and to connect my research with public discourse to underscore the significance and relevance of the humanities.

In 1911, the Ottoman capital and its provinces were confronted with significant climatic anomalies manifested as extreme cold, substantial snowfall, frosty periods in late winter and spring, and concurrent heatwaves in the summer. These unusual weather patterns had a far-reaching impact across a vast area extending from the Aegean coast to Mardin and from the Black Sea region to the Mutasarrifate of Jerusalem, as corroborated by numerous documents in the Ottoman Imperial Archive. These weather conditions precipitated floods, crop failures, famine and epidemic outbreaks that resulted in the devastation of lives, livelihoods, properties and infrastructure. To navigate this intricate web of factors and their far-reaching consequences, I embarked on an exploration of the confluence of environmental history, consumption and agricultural history, disease history, and governance through the nexus of weather within the context of the Ottoman Empire in the year 1911. Drawing on archival documents, Ottoman government records, diplomatic papers, historical newspapers, and other literature, I employed an event-based political ecology approach. While the breadth of the subject precluded an exhaustive account, I focused on curating a selection of microhistorical cases that offer valuable insights into the various ways in which extreme weather events and subsequent crises disrupted both society and governance, shedding light on the broader societal implications of these events. These cases included the flooding of the Melendiz River in Aksaray and Armenian spiritual leader Mesrob's intervention with the government for aid; the 1911 cholera epidemic's broad-reaching impact across Ottoman territories; the widespread drought affecting William Sligh's magnetic observations in Tripolitania, revealing the government's image management efforts; as well as potato cultivation in the drought-affected areas of the Empire.

Reeling from a succession of harsh weather conditions which had strained its infrastructure, financial resources and public health, in 1911, the Empire was also engaged in war efforts to quell an Albanian uprising from March, then was thrust into a further military conflict, this time with the Kingdom of Italy over Tripolitania, on 29 September. Although the government attempted to standardise vaccinations as a preventative measure against epidemics, it was hampered by inadequate health infrastructure. Its response to the crisis involved tax reductions, agricultural incentives, financial aid and public health measures. One pivotal approach involved reducing taxes on essential heating materials, specifically firewood and coal. Concurrently, the government shifted its focus to agriculture, emphasising crops that could withstand harsh weather. Potatoes emerged as a focal point, and the government, historically using tax incentives to promote potato cultivation, specifically extended fiscal reprieves in 1911 to address drought challenges. In addition, free seeds were distributed to farmers to bolster agricultural output further. Alongside these measures, efforts were made to address the immediate needs of those most affected by the harsh weather through financial assistance.

Although the weather events experienced in the Ottoman Empire in 1911 may have been influenced by factors specific to the era, the lessons derived from them remain relevant today. They highlight the persistent challenges associated with sufficient resource allocation and adequate budgeting, which can significantly impede disaster preparedness and response efforts. The Empire's lack of appropriate infrastructure undermined its ability to promptly respond to the crisis and recover from it. Effective disaster management entails undertaking practical preparations that are frequently disregarded or undervalued. Proactive disaster preparedness strategies and comprehensive contingency planning, rather than reactive responses after a disaster occurs, are essential to avoid prolonged recovery periods and the exorbitant costs associated with post-disaster reconstruction. Acknowledging the role of climate change in amplifying the frequency and intensity of certain extreme weather events is crucial in formulating effective strategies for adaptation. Consequently, embracing sustainable practices, fostering resilient infrastructure, and implementing disaster risk reduction initiatives assumes even greater significance. The recent earthquakes in Turkey serve as a stark reminder of the repercussions of not implementing essential precautions and the considerably higher costs associated with mitigating the resulting damage.

These initial findings serve as the foundation for a broader project that I aim to expand into a transdisciplinary collaboration involving experts in environmental science, GIS, and public-health and military history. This collaborative approach offers the potential for a more comprehensive understanding of the short-term and long-term effects of weather anomalies, extending beyond the Ottoman Empire into a global context.