



THE NATIONAL
WWI MUSEUM
AND MEMORIAL



Black and white photograph of orphaned children walking on a street in Brumana, Lebanon

Online Collections Database, 2005.31.4.17, www.theworldwar.org/research/database. National WWI Museum and Memorial. Online.

Famine and Disease in the Ottoman Empire during WWI

What if the media told the stories of hard history?

Recommended Grade Levels: 9-12

Course/Content Area: World History, Middle Eastern Studies

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ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- Why did the Ottoman Empire enter WWI?
- To what extent can a war impact civilians and other vulnerable populations that do not partake in the conflict?
- How can war trigger public health crises?
- How can the effects of disease and famine hurt a population decades after the original event subsides?

SUMMARY:	Through explorations of primary and secondary sources detailing the famine and disease that spread through the Ottoman Empire, with focus on Mount Lebanon, students will explore the ways civilian populations are affected by war, how famine and disease are interconnected, and the lasting effects of public health crises on a population. Afterwards, students will design a movie poster that tells the honest story of WWI at home for so many across the globe.
STANDARDS ALIGNMENT:	<p>National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) C3 Framework Standards:</p> <p>D2.His.15.9-12. Distinguish between long-term causes and triggering events in developing a historical argument.</p> <p>D2.His.16.9-12. Integrate evidence from multiple relevant historical sources and interpretations into a reasoned argument about the past.</p> <p>D2.His.8.9-12. Analyze how current interpretations of the past are limited by the extent to which available historical sources represent perspectives of people at the time.</p> <p>Common Core State Standards English Language Arts:</p> <p>CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.3 Evaluate various explanations for actions or events and determine which explanation best accords with textual evidence, acknowledging where the text leaves matters uncertain.</p>
TIME NEEDED:	2-3 50-minute class periods
OBJECTIVES:	<i>Students will...</i>
	<p>Know:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The reasons why the Ottoman Empire joined the war. ● How war affects everyone, not just soldiers ● The history of the Great Famine at Mount Lebanon ● The many infectious diseases that assailed the Ottoman Empire during the war ● The connection between public health and disease <p>Be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Read and analyze primary sources ● Draw evidence from sources presented ● Write a paragraph that contains a Claim, Evidence and Analysis ● Interpret historical cause and effect
INTERDISCIPLINARY:	History, Art and Design
THEMES & CONNECTIONS:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Varied interpretations and retellings of history

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Life in the Ottoman Empire during WWI ● Public health and the responsibility of a nation/empire to its people
MATERIALS NEEDED:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Google Slides (PowerPoint) (PDF) ● Mount Lebanon Poems and Testimonies (Appendix A) ● Crash Course Ottoman Empire ● Why did the Ottoman Empire join the Central Powers? ● BBC: WW1 The Famine of Mount Lebanon ● CEA Paragraph Graphic Organizer (Appendix B) ● Essay Organizer (Appendix C) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Both organizers are tools to help your students write strong paragraphs. If your students are strong writers, they may not need a graphic organizer. ● Movie Poster Project Instructions (Appendix D)

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The lesson assumes basic knowledge of World War I, the Ottoman Empire, nationalism, and European Imperialism. This lesson cannot be an introductory WW1 lesson.

- Students should know that the Ottoman Empire existed and had, at one point, thrived. However, its influence was waning as they lost control of some of their lands due to various nationalist movements.
- Students should know who the Allies vs. Central powers were, and who was victorious in the end. They should be familiar with the Franz Ferdinand narrative.
 - While there is no need to discuss nationalism in-depth for this lesson, students should know that many ethnic groups during this time period were seeking independence from the empires that controlled them. An example would be how Gavrilo Princip, who shot Franz Ferdinand, was a Serbian who wanted independence from Austria Hungary.
 - One of the fears the Ottoman empire had at this time was that its many ethnic groups would try to seek independence.
 - While important, this lesson will not cover the Armenian genocide.
- Students should know that imperialism was a driving force in 20th century Europe, and that many European powers were competing for control of different parts of the world in order to extract resources and other benefits.

LESSON

PREASSESSMENT:

Review with your students the following:

- WWI Allied vs. Central powers
- Nationalism
- Imperialism
- Brief review of the Ottoman Empire
 - If this is your first time introducing the Ottoman Empire, this [Crash Course](#) may be helpful for your students to watch as homework prior to coming to class and starting the lesson.

DIRECTIONS:

Day 1

Introduction to the Famine of Mount Lebanon

- Review with students the basics of WWI:
 - Who participated in World War I? Why?
 - Who won?
 - Once students have these answers, zero in on the Ottoman Empire.
- Review what the students know about the Ottoman Empire
 - This lesson cannot be the first time you introduce the empire. At the very least, please refer your students to the Crash Course linked above.
 - You can begin using the [Slides](#) at this point to guide the lesson.
- Begin by answering the question of why the Ottomans joined WWI.¹
 - This is a great opportunity to discuss the idea of the ‘Sickman of Europe’
 - Explain to students the role that European powers were interested in the Ottoman Empire being abolished in order to colonize its many territories.
 - The Ottoman Empire had been struggling because nationalist movements meant that different populations within its ethnically diverse borders wanted independence.
 - The Ottoman Empire was not as industrialized as Europe, so it did not have the technological and transportation advantages that the rest of the continent had.
 - In order to industrialize, the Ottoman Empire welcomed European powers, but this came at a really high price, as the Ottomans were paying exorbitant sums of money (capitulations) to various European countries for their support in helping them build railroads, among other things.

¹ Mustafa Aksakal, *Why Did the Ottoman Empire Enter WW1?* Lecture at the National World War 1 Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, MO, July 19, 2022.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Show video, Why did the Ottomans join the Central Powers? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discuss with students, at length, that the Ottomans knew that they could not have won this war. They had not recovered from the previous conflicts of independence, which saw the Empire lose a lot of its territories ranging from Greece to the Balkans, and they knew that they didn't have the infrastructure or resources to fight a war. ○ The Ottomans did not know whom they wanted to ally with, but the decision was made, ultimately, based on who would be more likely to help the empire survive. ○ The Ottomans made a very calculated decision, but ultimately lost the war and the Empire was abolished through the Syke-Picot agreement. ● Let the students know that Lebanon saw almost no combat during the war, yet lost the most people.² <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Death rate in Mt. Lebanon was about 30 percent. ○ Death rate in the rest of Syria was about 11 percent.³ ● Introduce the other consequences of War and explain to students that, while you will use Lebanon and World War I as an example, this can, and has, happen to any population at war at any time. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Before you show the video, WWI The Famine of Mount Lebanon, warn students that it is a harrowing video with potentially disturbing images. ○ After watching, emphasize that this is a man-made famine: the French purposely blockaded Lebanon in an attempt to trigger a revolution so that the French could then colonize the country. This was, in many ways, a preventable disaster. ○ The Ottomans, on the other hand, were worried that the Lebanese would try to create an independent state in Lebanon, as they were already managed by both the French and the Ottomans, and they were exempt from paying taxes. The Ottomans, therefore, wanted to end Lebanese authority <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Two of the main grain hoarders--the people who sold the grain that was sent to Lebanon at a very high price--were Ottoman parliamentarians, but this could have been motivated by greed rather than politics, given that the Ottoman government did try to send some aid to Lebanon.⁴ ● After watching the video, introduce the document, Mount Lebanon Poems and Testimonies (Appendix A). <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The instructions say that this should be done in pairs, but it could also work very well as a class discussion. ○ Emphasize that the most vulnerable in this case are the mothers who lost their children, the orphans who were eaten, and the women who had to sell their bodies for food. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ None of these people wanted to be involved in a war, but they
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² Graham Auman Pitts, *Famine and the Making of Lebanon: Blockades, Food and Hunger in WW1*. Lecture at the National World War 1 Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, MO, July 19, 2022.

³ Pitts, *Famine and the Making of Lebanon: Blockades, Food and Hunger in WW1*

⁴ Pitts, *Famine and the Making of Lebanon: Blockades, Food and Hunger in WW1*

	<p>didn't have a choice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ In this case, the war was total, affecting everyone it came into contact with. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● As an exit ticket or for homework, have students answer the paragraph about the importance of using literature to study the effects of war. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This is less meant to be a writing exercise (though I have provided a graphic organizer to write a paragraph), and more as an opportunity to help students process and decompress the horrific events they'll be learning about.
Day 2	<p>War as a Public Health Crisis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Review with students the content of the previous day: what is a famine? Who was suffering from the famine? ● Once you have answered these questions, discuss with students public health crises and ask them: how can a famine trigger a public health crisis? ● Introduce the many diseases that the Ottomans were fighting against during the war, emphasizing that a malnourished population is extremely vulnerable to all sorts of contagious diseases. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Use the information in the slides in order to review the information of diseases and their spread. ○ Information on syphilis, typhus, cholera, etc. is all available in the slides. ○ Emphasize that the empire was already unprepared to fight these diseases prior to the war because they had a weak medical structure and a shortage of doctors. Once the war started these issues were exacerbated with the spread of refugees and diseases. Most civilians didn't have access to healthcare as all doctors were drafted into the army.⁵ ○ One of the effects of the War was that Muslim refugees from Christian parts of the empire were forced into modern-day Turkey. They had nowhere to go, so they settled around Anatolia (Istanbul). This makes it extremely easy for disease to spread, as there are a lot of people crowded around the same place. ○ One of the sources from the day before talks about how women often sold their bodies for bread. Similarly, women in this context were selling their bodies to soldiers and contracted syphilis. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ This is a great opportunity to discuss how women bear the cost of war. ● Long term diseases: most students will not have heard of trachoma or lethargic encephalitis prior to this lesson, but you can emphasize that this was a long-term effect disease in that people who suffered from it could

⁵ Melanie Schulze-Tanielian, *Disease and Public Health (Ottoman Empire/Middle East)*. (1914-1918 Online, 2014). https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/disease_and_public_health_ottoman_empiremiddle_east

	<p>very well be blinded for life.⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ The trachoma problem was so bad, that some provinces were named the ‘Blind Provinces’ because of the high incidence of the disease. Additionally, some military battalions were entirely blind.⁷ ○ Ask students: how are the effects of war felt decades after the conflict subsides? ○ Returning to the idea of vulnerable populations discussed the day prior: how does understanding that there were long-term effects to these diseases help us further understand the concept of total war? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Discussion: Who are the most vulnerable populations in a war? How does War affect all the populations of a country and not just those who fight? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Take some time (~15 minutes) to discuss these questions with your class. ● For the last minutes of class, introduce students to the Movie Poster Project. Allow them to work on it the next class so they have time to ask you questions and discuss with each other.
Day 3	Independent Movie Poster Project Work
POSTASSESSMENT:	
Movie Poster Project - If Movie Posters were Honest: Visual analysis of how war affects all people in a country, not just soldiers, accompanied by a written reflection that meets writing expectations for your students.	
MODIFICATIONS/ACCOMMODATIONS/UNDERSTANDINGS/COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS	
<p>Understandings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● The Ottoman Empire was essentially forced to join WW1 by European powers. ● While most people did not fight in the trenches, all parts of a population are affected by war in different ways. ● The French purposely blockaded food from coming into Lebanon in order to trigger rebellion against the Ottomans for failing to protect them. ● The French wanted the Lebanese to rebel against the Ottomans because the French wanted to keep Lebanon as a colony. If they rebelled, the French would ‘help’ and then eventually colonize. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ This was indeed what happened. ● Hygiene, nutrition and disease are very closely related; a population that cannot keep itself clean and fed is vulnerable to a myriad of infections and diseases. 	

⁶ Source: Yucel Yanikdak, *Contagion and Chaos: Disease, Suffering and Death in the Ottoman Empire during WW1*. Lecture at the National World War 1 Museum and Memorial, Kansas City, MO, July 19, 2022.

⁷ Yucel Yanikdak, *Contagion and Chaos: Disease, Suffering and Death in the Ottoman Empire during WW1*.

- Some diseases have longer lasting impacts, such as trachoma, which makes someone go blind.

Misunderstandings:

- The Ottoman Empire as the ‘Sickman of Europe’
 - While the students may be familiar with this terminology, it is important to explain to them why it is problematic.
- Given that our students grew up in the era of COVID-19, it is worth discussing to them that public health crises are not always sudden and unexpected: the links between the famine and the many diseases assailing Lebanon/the Ottoman Empire are very clear.
- Lebanon was always independent

Modifications/Accommodations

- Provide students with maps of the region to build geographical understanding.
- Give students visual access to the class notes that are discussed after watching videos.
- Provide students with key terms and definitions for reference as needed:
 - **Ottoman Empire** | A vast empire that lasted from the late 13th century until the end of WWI, encompassing territories in Asia, Europe, and Africa. The empire was ruled by the Sunni Muslim Ottomans and fought alongside the Central Powers during WWI.
 - **Sykes-Picot Agreement** | A secret agreement between France and Britain in May 1916 to partition the Ottoman Empire's territories into spheres of influence. The agreement drew arbitrary lines on a map, disregarding the region's ethnic and religious diversity, which left lasting legacies into the 21st century, including ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq.
 - **Famine** | A time of extreme scarcity of food to a large portion of a population, leading to malnutrition, starvation, spread of disease, and large loss of life.

Appendix A

World War 1 in the Middle East: The Famine of Mount Lebanon

There are very few first-person accounts of the famine at Mount Lebanon, but the ones available to us reveal the harrowing experiences of those who lived it.

Source 1: The following poem was written by Mikha'il Nu'aima (1889-1988), a Lebanese poet.

Brother, if when the war is over
The west clamors for glory
And sanctifies its dead and glorifies its heroes,
Do not sing the praises of the victors
Or despise those who lost the war.
Instead, like me, kneel silently
And in reverence
To weep over our dead

...

Brother, if when the war is over
Soldiers go home to shelter in loving arms,
Do not expect home love when you go home,
For hunger has left us no friend to love
Other than the ghosts of our dead

...

Brother, who are we? Without a home, alone
Grab a shovel and follow me,
So we may bury our living.⁸

⁸ Mikha'il Nu'aima, *Hams al-Jufun* (Beirut: Sadir al-Rihani Publishers, 1943), 95-97. Translated by Translated in al-Qattan, Najwa. 2014. "When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (4): 719-36. <https://discovery-ebsco-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=395f5df0-8055-3baf-a65e-8283ef179905>.

Source 2: Poem by Antum Yamin

Cry for a beloved country bereft of its people
Cry for the corpses stacked in roads, squares, plains, and valleys
Cry for the mothers whose children are dying,
Cry for the children who nurse on their mother' tears,
Cry for the virgins who sell themselves for slices of black bread.⁹

Source 3: Testimony from Sulaiman Zahir

With our own eyes we saw the victims of hunger falling down in the streets and alleyways, their groans filling the skies; among them were those who ate the corpses of animals, in some instances fighting over them with others. This situation led many to seek human food and to hunt weak orphaned children as if they were game.¹⁰

⁹ Antun Yamin, *Lubman fin al-Harb: Dhikra al-Hawadith wa-l-Mazalim fi Lubman fi al-Hard al-'Umumiyya, 1914-1918*, 2 vols. (Beirut: al-Matba'a al-Adabiyya, 1919), 1:4. Translated in al-Qattan, Najwa. 2014. "When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (4): 719–36. <https://discovery-ebSCO-com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/linkprocessor/plink?id=395f5df0-8055-3baf-a65e-8283ef179905>.

¹⁰ Sulaiman Zahir, *Jabal cAmil fi al-Harb al-Kawniyya* (Beirut: Dar al-Matbucat al-Sharqiyya, 1986), 44. Cited in al-Qattan, Najwa. 2014. "When Mothers Ate Their Children: Wartime Memory and the Language of Food in Syria and Lebanon." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46 (4): 719–36.

Questions for Analysis

After reading the sources, work in pairs to discuss the following questions. One person should take notes, and the other should be ready to share your observations with the class.

- 1) Which parts of these sources stood out to you the most? Why?
- 2) In **source 1**, how is the West depicted? What historical events may lead the author to have this interpretation of the west?
- 3) While **source 3** is a testimonial, **sources 1 and 2** are poems. What is the value of studying poetry in order to understand the Great Famine at Mount Lebanon?
- 4) What are the common themes shared by **sources 1, 2 and 3**? Which populations are the most vulnerable? Which populations are the most unaffected by the war?

Written Reflection

After reading the sources, use the space below to write a reflection answering the prompt below. Please include evidence from the sources and from the content discussed in class to support your answer.

Official accounts register that about two hundred thousand people died because of the famine, but estimates indicate that the number of fatalities could be much higher. What is the value of studying poetry (sources 1 and 2) and testimonies (source 3) to contextualize the extent to which World War 1 devastated Lebanon and the Ottoman Empire as a whole?

Appendix B: CEA Graphic Organizer

Claim:	
Evidence: (fact that supports your claim)	Analysis: (SO WHAT? Why/How does this evidence support your claim?)

Concluding Statement: (Re-state your main idea for the paragraph):

Appendix C

Graphic Organizer for Essays

Introduction

Background information: What the reader will need to know in order to make sense of your essay. (NO MORE than 3 sentences)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">•••
Claim 1	
Claim 2	
Claim 3	
THESIS: A brief summary of your main claims that you'll then explore in-depth in your essay.	

Body 1

Claim:	
Evidence: (fact that supports your claim) Don't forget to cite!	Analysis: (SO WHAT? Why/How does this evidence support your claim?)
Concluding Statement: (Re-state your main idea for the paragraph):	

Body 2

Claim:	
Evidence: (fact that supports your claim) Don't forget to cite!	Analysis: (SO WHAT? Why/How does this evidence support your claim?)
Concluding Statement: (Re-state your main idea for the paragraph):	

Body 3

Claim:	
Evidence: (fact that supports your claim) Don't forget to cite!	Analysis: (SO WHAT? Why/How does this evidence support your claim?)

Concluding Statement: (Re-state your main idea for the paragraph):

Conclusion

Restate your thesis:	
Relevant connections to a greater historical theme/the present day:	

Appendix D

If Movie Posters Were Honest

In this unit, you have learned about World War I not only from the European side, but also from the perspective of the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, you've studied extensively how the war was a total one, affecting not only soldiers, but also women, men, and children who never saw combat, but were nevertheless affected by famine, disease, and the destruction of their families. Yet most World War I movies focus on the stories of soldiers and the trenches. What would a movie look like if it explored a different story?

What did World War I look like for civilians who did not fight in it?

For this project, you'll create a poster that tells the story of World War I from the perspective of someone who never saw combat. How would they have experienced this time period?

PROJECT COMPONENTS

- **An original movie poster:**
 - Use a design website, such as [Canva.com](https://www.canva.com), to create your poster.
 - Your poster should be rooted in the history we have learned.
 - A black fist, for example, has become synonymous with BLM. While an important movement, this is American history and not World history.
 - Your poster should be aesthetically pleasing and easy to understand.
 - Think of movie posters. What do they generally show? What makes them eye-catching?
 - Your poster should have a title.
 - It should not be something generic, such as "History Movie Poster".
 - Your poster should be organized.
 - If there's too much going on, your audience won't understand it.
 - If there is too little going on, your audience will also not understand it.
 - Your poster should be respectful of the cultures and their histories.

- **A reflection essay:**
 - In what ways do your artistic choices reflect the silenced histories of World War I?
 - Again, this should be rooted in the history we have learned, as well as your own independent research.
 - Specific evidence and citations should be included.
 - Be sure to be descriptive in your explanations and their connections to the artwork in your final poster.
- **Gallery Walk**
 - Share posters with each other.