On the cold winter day of February 2, 1917, Edward Nickoley sat with his diary to reflect on death. In it, he observed that “one method of destroying life is more spectacular and more sensational than another, it seems more horrifying to send several hundred persons to the bottom of the sea than to subject a community to starvation.” In normal circumstances, this would seem little more than a trivial, if rather morbid judgment, but of course Nickoley’s circumstances were far from ordinary. As he wrote, Allied ships silently patrolled off the coast and hundreds lay dying in the streets outside his home at Beirut’s Syrian Protestant College. He continued: “It seems so, until you have seen actual starvation (emphasis in original).” Given the choice between a swift death at sea or the slow waste of famine, Nickoley concluded: “Give me the torpedo every time and give it quickly.”

Nickoley was one of the dozens of Americans who remained in Beirut and Lebanon throughout the war in spite of the fact that the region had been historically prone to deprivation during times of crisis and that

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2 The term “Lebanon” only referred to the administrative unit of Mount Lebanon until after the war, when it incorporated the Wilaya of Beirut and the coastal and internal districts to form the current geopolitical entity. For the purposes of this paper, Lebanon refers to Mount Lebanon, Beirut to the city, and Syria or western Syria to the collective.
famine was a realistic fear for many before the war even began. Although their diplomatic status and relationship with the Ottoman administrators ensured that the Americans never risked starvation, even in the darkest days of the war, the grind of the wartime crisis and the censorship, security restrictions, and protracted famine profoundly affected the American witnesses, who found these horrors and annoyances seeping inexorably into their daily realities. Both consciously and inadvertently, the Americans left hints about the practical and psychological effects of the crisis in their memoirs, diaries and letters about the wartime experience. The most prominent narrative among them was recorded by Margaret McGilvary in *Dawn of a New Era in Syria* and in her fundraising pamphlet, *Our Syria Mission*, which centered on the extensive relief operations undertaken by the American Mission and the Englishman Arthur Dray (about whom see next page) to combat the devastation of the famine. As important as these activities were for those who would otherwise have perished, McGilvary’s somewhat embellished account hardly scratches the surface of the American experience, which extended beyond what members of the community did, into how they felt, and how they responded to the suffering that surrounded them amid the isolation and impotence that many felt over the course of the apparently unending war. These details emerge from wartime memoirs, letters and diaries, whose writers sought to come to terms with the crisis that surrounded them and to rationalize their own responses to the ennui, depression and horror that the situation evoked. What appears are less the heroic portrayals of McGilvary’s text than snapshots of individuals seeking to accept or shape the crisis according to their abilities, and inevitably suffering in their own way from the burdens of the suffering of others.

However risky the decision to weather the war and its concomitant hazards from within Syria may have seemed, since many of the Americans were born in Syria or had spent significant time in the country as missionaries or teachers, leaving would have been a stranger choice than staying to help. Their decision was bolstered by the fact that, despite their foreign status, the Americans were some of the most privileged individuals in Syria during the war, enjoying both political protection and economic security. The neutrality that was maintained between the Ottomans and Americans (even after official diplomatic ties were broken in June 1917) permitted the American community living in Beirut and Lebanon a qualified measure of independence in their internal matters. Moreover,

because of strong diplomatic and personal influence backing them, most of the American institutions continued to function somewhat normally and even conduct relief operations even after the French and British establishments had been shuttered and their nationals deported to the Ottoman interior. The good name of the Syrian Protestant College (SPC) and American Mission and the wealth of their patrons in America ensured that the Americans had both cash and credit throughout the war, even when direct aid was not available. This occasionally grudging entente between the local Ottoman administrators and the Americans was ensured after 1915 when Jamal Pasha warmed to SPC President Howard Bliss and the college’s talented British dentist, Dr. Arthur Dray, whose technical virtuosity put him in the good graces of both Jamal and Beirut’s Wali, Azmi Bey, the two most powerful Ottoman figures in the region. As a result, the college was actually better provisioned than many Ottoman civil servants, and was granted license to purchase supplies from the state at the same reduced prices paid by the Ottoman military.

As was the case with those among the local population not directly suffering the effects of starvation, the Americans sought some degree of normalcy throughout the war. The American schools and the Syrian Protestant College continued to operate, and the professors and students who were not conscripted and who could afford tuition continued to attend classes. Although none died of malnutrition on campus, the famine nevertheless made its influence felt at the college. The various epidemics that spread across the country as a result of displacement, troop movement and insufficient hygienic practices among the impoverished did not discriminate by nationality or origin, killing a number of Americans and infecting numerous students and staff at the college. Typhus was a greatly feared killer, allegedly taking a (grossly overestimated) 70,000 victims in the 1916 epidemic alone. The daily reports that poured in to the college of the suffering in the mountains drained the college of its pupils, who

4 Dray was secretly called to Palestine to operate on an Ottoman dignitary (perhaps a prince), who had been wounded in an attempt on Jamal’s life; he performed so well that Jamal revoked his deportation to the interior and recommended his services to Azmi Bey for a tooth abscess. Both relations served him well when it came to provisioning his soup kitchen in Brummana or extracting some favor from the authorities for the college or American community.

5 Edward Nickoley listed the price of burghul at sixty piasters per ration on the open market (presumably in coin), for which the college paid a mere nine piasters. Nickoley, “Diary,” 45.

6 Antoine Yammine, Quatre ans de misère (Cairo: Imprimerie Emin Hindie, 1922), 48.
returned to their villages to try to save their families.\textsuperscript{7} As food prices increased and savings diminished, petty theft increased among the students, who were often required to support themselves and offer assistance to their relatives in any way possible. The collapse of foreign trade because of the Allied blockade, high commodity prices and the wild fluctuations of the new Ottoman paper currency left many to scrape by on their diminishing savings, to take out usurious loans or to sell what they could to survive.\textsuperscript{8}

In spite of the crisis, life inevitably continued, and people sought to preserve whatever sort of normalcy their circumstances permitted. The staff and their families maintained a sense of community and continuity throughout the wartime period by hosting Christmas dances, weddings, celebrations of births and sporting events between different classes and colleges.\textsuperscript{9} In his diary, Archie Crawford described relatively normal activities, such as playing with the other children and harassing the campus cats – as well as new wartime hobbies like tracking the movement of the Allied ships off the coast, catching and attaching notes to “messenger locusts” and killing their larvae during the invasion of the dreaded “jirad” in 1915.\textsuperscript{10} Although the American children were for the most part sheltered from the worst sights of the famine, those who encountered it seemed to regard it as a surreal curiosity, and a number of the older children who wrote during and after the famine were clearly attuned to its gravity. It was impossible to entirely escape the influence of tragedy, which even unseen could be registered in the moans of the starving who gathered around the campus. Such exposure worried Edward Nickoley after he observed American babies mimicking the death calls of the starving for their own amusement, and heard the detached and detailed description that young Marie Jessup gave of a boy she had seen dying in the streets.\textsuperscript{11} Many impacts were lasting – Huntington Bliss, a teenager during the period, commented in an interview that “the impression of the

\textsuperscript{7} Nickoley, “Diary,” 3.
\textsuperscript{8} On this, see Mohammad Izzat Darwaza, Mudhakirat Mohammad Izz Darwaza: Sijal ha'l fi masirat al-harika al-arabiyya wa al-qadayya al-filastiniyya khilal qarn min al-zaman: 1305-1404 (1887-1984) (Beirut: Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, 1993), 1: 288; Yammine, Quatre ans de misère, 38.
\textsuperscript{10} See the diary of Archie Crawford, reprinted in Ajay, “Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” Appendix, 122-150.
\textsuperscript{11} Nickoley, “Diary,” 44.
misery of these people is still with me. Even now I finish what is on my plate because I cannot forget that period when food was so precious.”

The missionary ethos of the college and mission and the good credit of the institutions allowed a number of the Americans to organize and effectively run relief efforts across the mountain and in some of the coastal cities. Arthur Dray, Bayard Dodge and a number of other employees of the Syrian Protestant College conducted needs assessments and established charitable programs and soup kitchens, locally known as “mata’im,” in the mountains and other places of need. Others from the college established similar charities in Beirut in collaboration with local leaders like Omar Daouk in order to subvert prohibitions on foreign aid set by Beirut’s Wali, Azmi Bey. In addition, the Presbyterian American Mission ran hospices, orphanages and distribution centers in Sidon, Tripoli, Zahle and Baalbek, and Charles Dana of the American Mission Press engineered a covert system to collect and distribute remittances, funneling over $1 million into Syria from abroad. Moreover, the college’s medical school and hospitals dealt with the waves of starvation and terrible epidemics of typhus, malaria and enteric diseases that struck the country, caring for a large number of patients without payment since those who could not afford to eat could hardly afford treatment for their starvation.

Nevertheless, there were limits to the capacity of the American community to aid the needy in spite of their best intentions. Azmi Bey prohibited non-Ottomans from distributing aid in Beirut, even arresting Mary Dale, head nurse of the college’s hospitals, for her charity work. This significantly limited the opportunities to help those in the city and even curtailed the college’s ability to aid the families of its Syrian employees. Workers were fed daily at the college, but they could not take food outside the campus, even though many had children who were “starving within a block from the college gate” without putting at risk the institution’s privileged relationship with the Ottoman authorities. Moreover, though nurses attempted to treat in volume despite capacity restrictions, the college’s hospitals for women and children were rather small and overwhelmed by demand as a result of the widespread starvation, epidemics, and the increased incidence and virulence of endemic disease as a result of malnutrition and the lack of soap required for typhus prevention. The children admitted to the hospitals presented additional problems since many were homeless or orphans. In his diary,

Nickoley bemoaned the absurdity of healing these patients and then turning them out into the same conditions that put them in the hospital in the first place in order to treat others in their place.\(^\text{16}\) Though it would be wrong to dismiss outright the American relief efforts, which are an important part of the period’s history, it would be equally wrong to define the American wartime experience by these actions alone. Moreover, by participating in these activities, the Americans brought themselves into immediate contact with those suffering most from the famine and epidemics, which took its toll on the aid workers as the crisis progressed.

**Representing the famine**

The horrors of the suffering of the starving and the elevated position of the American writers inevitably affected how the famine was documented. In memoirs, wherein the authors had to reconstruct the state of affairs broadly from memory, writers tended to fall back on metaphor and abstraction for effect, and inadvertently dehumanized their subjects. This was evident in the moralization of the famine by pious writers like Bayard Dodge, Reverend George Doolittle and Margaret McGilvary, who projected the acts of the desperate or opportunistic over society as a whole. When commenting on the increase in property crime, Dodge opined, “the worst of famine is its effect upon the living, rather than its silence upon the dead,” which rang true, though perhaps not as he intended it.\(^\text{17}\) Dodge's perspective was uniquely shaped by his role in the relief efforts, which required him to make life or death decisions about individuals who came seeking assistance. His extensive contributions to the welfare of the communities in Suq al-Gharb and ‘Abeih and his exposure to extreme suffering at his relief centers caused him to vent frustration at the unwillingness of the Lebanese to take responsibility for their neighbors, though in doing so they would have undoubtedly put themselves and their own families at risk. The irrationality of this expectation is such that he even admitted that the magnitude of the crisis made many such efforts impractical or ill advised when prices increased and the famine surged.\(^\text{18}\)

Given the extent of the starvation among the poor in the streets and its ghastly physical manifestations, many American writers could not resist drawing parallels between the physical and figurative state of Syria. The

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{17}\) Bayard Dodge, “Relief Work in Syria During the Period of the War,” (1919), Howard Bliss Collection: AUB President 1902-1920. ARCHIVE AA:2.3.2. Box 18, File 3. American University of Beirut/Library Archives, Beirut, Lebanon, 12.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 11.
Years of Horror

skeletal frames of stripped houses and the equally skeletal physiques of the starving, with their “intense”19 athrepsic expressions and emaciated limbs were turned into metaphors for the general suffering. The physical ravages of starvation robbed its sufferers of their humanity, both physically and literally as the writers reduced the dying poor to “wretches,” “figures,” and other odious euphemisms. The Rev. Doolittle, with his characteristic crassness, described the children housed in one of the municipality’s notorious orphanages as “the waifs” who “were often taken for exercise through the city streets. Many of them could hardly walk, and when the signal for rest was given, they would make for the gutters and greedily devour grass, or peels or anything edible.”20 However abhorrent such a depiction may be, the imagery employed to describe the famished poor was not chosen without reason – the enervating effects of extreme hunger left those close to death in a zombie-like physical and mental state. Nickoley remarked that the scenes on the streets were “like a dream – like a horrible nightmare.”21

Though they were contemporaries to the events of the war, their closeness to the situation and almost complete reliance on hearsay made the Americans rather unreliable sources of information about the period. The frustratingly meager trickle of news of varying quality that reached Beirut turned many Americans into incorrigible rumor mongers, of which Nickoley observed that they could trust a quarter of what they heard (and they never knew which quarter), half of what they saw, and three quarters of what they said themselves.22 Devoid of other reports about the world around them, they took to repeating and spreading the tales of misery that came to them with ghoulish fascination, invariably focusing on the darkest examples. Reports and diaries detailed the grotesque minutia to give life to the horrors of the crisis: cadaverous figures with hollow eyes, children picking barley from donkey dung, animal carcasses devoured in the streets, the consumption of all the dogs in the town of Mansuriyah,23 and of course the inevitable rumors of cannibalism – including one famous case in 1915 wherein two teenage sisters in a village near Tripoli lured

20 George Doolittle, Pathos and Humor of the War Years in Syria (1920). Published in Nicholas Ajay, “Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut,” Appendix, 265.
22 Ibid., 3.
23 Ibid., 4.
local children to their home, where they murdered, butchered and ate them, leaving twenty-four small skeletons in a well. In one of his more morose entries, Nickoley listed off the horrors of a single day’s news: a woman committing suicide because she could no longer bear the sight of her children starving, a girl sent to prison for stealing bread, and one woman who went mad and started beating, biting and mutilating her children.

Though one cannot deny that many of these events may have taken place, they are overrepresented in the source material and paint a hyperbolic picture of the period. Nickoley expressed some skepticism about his own information, noting that “the reports of those who go about the city and the country are appalling, they would be incredible except for the fact that we see enough ourselves in our own part of town to convince us of the truth of the reports that come to us.” Even absurd rumors like that of children being devoured alive by swarms of locusts were spread by those who should have known better (whether even they believed that particular one is questionable). Ultimately, even if one accepts the validity of some of these reports, most of the descriptions were far too extreme to be representations of the general conditions of the country, particularly for those who were not actually in the throes of desperate starvation. In the depths of the crisis, the atypical severity of the suffering of the few easily overshadowed the mere decline in the fortunes of the many.

The inflation of the suffering in American writings was curiously extended to the stylistic depictions of the famine as well, which tended to be more vivid than the prose surrounding them. This can be interpreted as sensationalism to stimulate book sales (or donations to Near East Relief, as in the case of Margaret McGilvary’s short pamphlet *A Story of Our Syria Mission*), but the presence of this trend in both popular and private writings suggests it may have also been a way for writers to portray the suffering with the proper respect. In his report on the soup kitchens of Abeih and Suq al-Gharb, Bayard Dodge drifted into abstraction in order to capture the grand scale of the suffering:

Unless you have heard the wailing of little children in your ears for days at a time and seen weeping mothers clasping their dying babies in their arms; unless you have talked with strong men, whose shoes are worn in a vain

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search for work and whose brows are knit with worry and despair, you can hardly realize what starvation means.27

**Secondhand suffering**

Though those writing on the topic repeatedly emphasized the grisly nature of the crisis, it is difficult to assay the true impact of the famine since the sources have exaggerated the extent that starvation impacted on the general population. Typical famines only directly affect between 5 and 10 percent of a population28 rather than the 25 to 30 percent mortality figures claimed by some sources, and the focus on the aberrant starving sufferers led many to elide the majority who were affected less grotesquely. Nevertheless, it is clear that those who starved did so terribly. The price spikes caused by wartime provisioning, the invasion of locusts in 1915, the poor harvests and disruption to and restrictions on grain production and supply to the mountain and coast caused prices to escalate beyond the means of even the middle classes, eventually forcing many to sell property or engage in crime or prostitution to support themselves.29 Desperation led to displacement and the impoverished poor devoured carcasses, garbage, and discarded scraps in an effort to extend their lives. Gauging the profound psychological impact of the famine on those who witnessed it is generally a matter of interpretation, but an important one given the terrific weight that the extravagant horrors of the starving poor in their throes placed on the daily reality of those who encountered them. As the war dragged on, the flight of the Lebanese to the streets of the coastal cities and the devastating escalation of the alimentary crisis increased the visibility of the suffering in Beirut. In spite of the fact that the Syrian Protestant College was somewhat removed from Beirut proper at the crown of Ras Beirut, it was a magnet for the starving because of the soup kitchen operated by professors across the street from the college's main gate. The perpetual presence of the desperate haunted the Americans in the streets and their anguished cries echoed in their ears. McGilvary described days when her mile long trek from her home to the Mission Press took her past ten or twelve corpses lying in the streets.30 The prose in Nickoley’s diary, which was typically vibrant, grew more laconic as the terrible year of 1917 progressed. He continued detailing rumors, prices,

30 McGilvary, *Dawn of a New Era*, 204.
and politics, as well as making his own personal reflections on the situation and his mental state, but these latter pieces offered little reflection on the suffering around him compared to his earlier entries. His fascination with the rumors of carnage seemed to dissipate as the months progressed, fading to ennui and numbness as the panoply of horrors acquired a dull, aching sense of normalcy.

Sincere as the sympathy and outrage that the writers expressed in their works may have been, the most striking underlying response from even those most closely involved in relief efforts was to close off psychologically and emotionally from those in direst need. Nickoley was the most honest about this effect, and while it distressed him, he clearly viewed it as a necessary coping mechanism. On February 15, 1917 he wrote: "Our helplessness to give relief and our desire to avoid becoming morbid, tends to make us indifferent, to harden us and to make us cynical. It is a terrible sensation to realize that you are losing your power of sympathizing with a fellow man in suffering."\(^{31}\) There was a cold practicality to this response, since it was noted that a charitable giver could not offer to alleviate the suffering of one without drawing a siege of hopeful hands pleading for assistance. One Lebanese writer observed that those who would have rushed to aid a man falling down in the street in 1915 would simply walk past even those on the verge of death a year later.\(^{32}\) By 1917, when the anguished cries from the streets became unbearable, many Americans simply shut their windows to dampen the wailing.\(^{33}\) Those tasked with organizing relief efforts were uniquely impacted by this since it often reduced their perception of the starving to a cold logistical calculus – they more than any knew that they could not afford to help everyone, and they deemed it better to help a few survive the whole crisis than sustain a few for a short period only to have them die.\(^{34}\)

The insuperable crisis left Nickoley in particular drained and hopeless. He wrote on February 15, 1917:

\[^{31}\text{Nickoley, "Diary," 17.}\]
\[^{32}\text{Ajay, "Lebanon and the Wilayah of Beirut," 423.}\]
\[^{33}\text{Nickoley, "Diary," 44.}\]
\[^{34}\text{McGilvary, \textit{Dawn of a New Era}, 214. McGilvary also relates a terrible case wherein a mother approached Dray as he walked from Brummana to Beirut, imploring him to take her children at the kitchen. He absentmindedly remarked that he could take two at most, then realized what he had done when he saw the frantic look on her face as she weighed which two of her children would live, and which three would die. He took all of them, and found their mother dead on the road later (\textit{ibid.}, 220-1).}\]
No description can do justice to the situation … No one who has never seen famine and starvation knows what it looks like in its physical embodiment. It is a ghastly subject. The sights and the sounds haunt us, not only in our waking moments, but they pursue us in our dream. And what can we do? Absolutely nothing. We feel as if we were up against a wall of stones.35

Nickoley’s struggle with his role in the famine is somewhat obscured by his gruff demeanor and pessimistic attitude. In one entry, he quite realistically downplayed the American relief efforts as little more than “a drop in the bucket” given the magnitude of the carnage. He even held those who went to pains to assist the starving in mild contempt, observing that “so many people have lost their heads because their hearts were touched. They worked hard but have accomplished nothing more than to shuffle the people and to change the order in which they are to be taken.”36

But in spite of this apparently callous attitude, his entries often exuded guilt as his denial of his ability to confront the suffering clashed with his humanity and sympathy for the dying. In particular, he found the hardened exterior that he put forward conflicted with the instances of suffering that he could potentially have controlled. His July 14, 1917 entry is perhaps the most poignant expression of this. In the middle of the night he awoke to the death moans of a boy, whom he saw leaning against a fence just outside the halo of the streetlight. After some agonizing contemplation, he fell asleep resigned to the fact that he could do nothing and awoke to see a cart loading the child’s body. Nickoley reasoned that had he helped the boy, he would only have died later – but this rationalization clearly did not relieve his conscience since only he heard the boy’s cries and only he could have saved him.37

The oppressive effect of the immediate presence of starvation and death was compounded by the sense of isolation and powerlessness that pervaded the country, which was essentially trapped under the dual burden of the Allied blockade and Jamal Pasha’s wartime administration which frequently employed shock tactics and collective punishment to establish its credibility. As the years progressed, the lack of concrete information on the progress of the war and the inability to predict its endpoint were all sources of anxiety, particularly given the worsening economic situation. Mary Dale wrote in her diary in 1916: “All news and conditions most

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 50.
depressing – even the beautiful, blue, utterly useless sea."Nickoley frequently included melancholy reflections on the famine in his diary, often apparently in spite of himself. In the wet bitter chill of February 1917, he wrote: “These cold, rainy days are heart-breaking because they serve to intensify the suffering that prevails throughout Syria and Lebanon. It is simply unspeakable and horrible to contemplate.” Although he was himself depressed by the situation and his hopeless impotence, he nevertheless felt compelled to contrast his own experience with that of the starving multitudes, which only added guilt to the bleakness since in his mind the severity of the suffering of the poor invalidated the apparent pettiness of his own distress. As he took in the cool Mediterranean summer breezes in the palatial house of Arthur Dray (who was already in Brummana running his soup kitchen), he dolefully wrote that “there are all about us so many who are suffering so much more intensely that I am ashamed to let anyone know that I too have a regret and a sorrow, that I cherish a hope and a longing the realization and the fulfillment of which is indefinitely deferred.”

**Conclusions and implications**

The three years of escalating crisis and the dull uncertainty of an apparently unending war prompted a variety of responses from those who lived it, varying from person to person and from day to day. Whether they felt pity, compassion, sympathy, anger, impotence, guilt, hopelessness, or depression and despair, these perceptions of the famine inevitably colored how the American writers viewed and ultimately portrayed the crisis and those around them. Though we do not have total access to the intimate thoughts or emotional states of these authors, we do have a tangible record of what they saw fit to preserve and pass on, and through this, evidence of the impact of the famine on the lives and even the psyches of its survivors as they continually renegotiated and responded to the world as it changed around them. Recording this aspect of history is vital since without access to the lived experience of the past we lose contact with its essence.

Ultimately, there must be a conscious and critical reevaluation of the lens through which we view the famine, and a sincere effort to break from the hyperbolic treatment that it has received to this point. The time period was, of course, highlighted by the suffering and death of the famine, but

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40 Ibid., 55.
even against this, the dominant experience was one of survival and endurance. To do this justice, the focus must be redirected onto how the survivors endured and what effect the crisis had upon them. As detached contemporary parties to the suffering and survival alike, the American sources offer greater detail to this end than nearly any other account. Perhaps most importantly, intimate texts like diaries and letters, whose formats tend to encourage reflection and a certain degree of honesty, hint at the psychological and emotional effects produced by such a prolonged and horrific crisis and add subtext and humanity to the grisly narrative. The subjectivity of such sources is immensely valuable, and perhaps even more important for the record than whatever fragmentary and ultimately speculative descriptions of more tangible facts might offer. For a historiography so riddled with politicization and parochial mythology, it is important to pursue a history of the war that extends beyond the well-worn depictions of the physical and the political impacts, and beyond the clumsy traditional narratives that pitted rich against poor, Turk against Lebanese, Muslim against Christian, and so on. In the end, perhaps the most revealing measure of the famine is the impact that it had on its survivors.
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