

Famines in Kurdistan: A History of Crisis and Vulnerability in the 19th and 20th Centuries

I. Introduction: Defining Famine in the Kurdish Historical Context (19th-20th Centuries)

A. Kurdistan's Geopolitical Landscape

The historical region of Kurdistan, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, remained a territory without sovereign statehood, its lands divided primarily between the Ottoman and Persian Empires, and subsequently among the modern nation-states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria.¹ This persistent geopolitical fragmentation and often peripheral status within larger state structures profoundly shaped the Kurdish experience of famine. Positioned frequently at the contested peripheries of these empires and states, Kurdish regions were often subject to administrative neglect, economic exploitation, or became zones of conflict. This peripherality was not merely a geographic attribute but a structural condition that amplified vulnerability. Limited state access sometimes resulted in periods of de facto Kurdish autonomy but more often translated into delayed or inadequate responses during crises, easier resource extraction by central authorities or occupying forces, and a heightened susceptibility to the devastating impacts of border conflicts and blockades.² The Anfal campaign in northern Iraq, for instance, targeted a region peripheral to Baghdad, underscoring this pattern of vulnerability.⁶

B. The Nature and Recurrence of Famine

Famine in Kurdistan during this period was not a monolithic phenomenon. It manifested in various forms, ranging from chronic food shortages and localized hunger to acute, widespread mass starvation events that led to demographic catastrophes.⁸ The 19th and 20th centuries were punctuated by multiple such episodes, driven by a complex interplay of environmental, political, military, and socio-economic factors. The historical record suggests that the memory of some of these famines has been obscured or "overshadowed by later catastrophic events"³, indicating a historical silence that this report seeks to address. The

concept of famine in this context extends beyond a simple absence of food to include what Amartya Sen has termed "entitlement failure," where populations lose their capacity to access available food due to economic collapse, social disruption, or political disenfranchisement.⁵

C. Historiographical Challenges

Reconstructing the history of famines in Kurdistan is fraught with historiographical challenges. There is often a "paucity of historical sources on ordinary people's voices," and the political and ideological dimensions of famines have, at times, been overlooked in broader historical narratives, particularly within Ottoman historiography, which has sometimes prioritized "elite-bureaucrat-led modernization" or narratives of "rising ethnic tensions".³ Furthermore, some major famines, such as the Great Persian Famine of 1917-1919, have been described as "silenced memories" ⁵, with ongoing debates surrounding casualty figures and the attribution of culpability. This "silencing" is not necessarily accidental but can reflect dominant political narratives, the overwhelming trauma of subsequent events, or the lack of socio-political power among the affected communities to ensure their suffering is officially acknowledged and commemorated. Famine thus becomes not merely a historical occurrence but a site of contested memory and interpretation.

D. Scope and Structure of the Report

This report examines significant famines that afflicted Kurdish populations across the 19th and 20th centuries, encompassing regions within the former Ottoman and Persian Empires and the successor states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It adopts a chronological and thematic approach, analyzing the causes, characteristics, and consequences of these crises, drawing upon available historical evidence to illuminate these often-neglected tragedies.

Table 1: Overview of Major Famines in Kurdistan (19th-20th Centuries)

Period/Years	Primary Affected Kurdish Region(s) (Ottoman/Persian/Iraqi/Syrian)	Key Causal Factors	Estimated Scale/Impact (e.g., death tolls if available, nature of crisis)	Key Source Snippets
1873-1875	Ottoman Anatolia (Central & Eastern Provinces, incl. Kurdish areas)	Climatic causes, global/domestic economic & political environment, man-made factors	No fewer than 100,000 deaths from starvation and disease	³
1879-1881	Ottoman Kurdistan (Erzurum, Van, Diyarbakir), Mosul	Climatic causes (severe cold, drought), aftermath of	No fewer than 10,000 deaths in Eastern Anatolia; tens of thousands	³

		Russo-Ottoman War, economic policies	in Diyarbakir and environs; widespread social disruption, inter-communal violence	
1917-1919	Persian Kurdistan (Kermanshah, Hamadan, general Kurdish areas), Ottoman Kurdistan (e.g., Diyarbakir)	WWI (occupying armies: British, Russian, Ottoman), drought, hoarding, speculation, transport disruption, disease	2 to 10 million deaths in Persia (estimates vary); severe impact on Kurdish provinces; forced displacement of Kurds in Ottoman lands leading to 350,000-400,000 deaths	⁴
Post-WWI (early 1920s)	Iraqi Kurdistan	Previous devastation by Turkish/Russian rule, ongoing instability	Villages desolate, state of famine requiring British aid	¹⁹
1988 (Anfal Campaign)	Iraqi Kurdistan	Genocidal Iraqi state policy: systematic village destruction, agricultural sabotage, mass displacement, internment, chemical warfare, economic blockade	50,000 to over 182,000 Kurds killed/disappeared; widespread starvation and disease in camps; destruction of 90% of Kurdish villages	⁶

II. Famines in Ottoman Kurdistan During the 19th Century

A. The Anatolian Famines of the 1870s: Climatic and Systemic Crises

The decade of the 1870s was marked by severe famines across Anatolia, including its eastern provinces largely inhabited by Kurds. These crises resulted in the deaths of "tens of thousands of people...due to starvation and disease".³ While triggered by adverse climatic conditions, their devastating impact was significantly amplified by the prevailing "global and domestic economic and political environment" and a combination of "local, imperial and global man-made reasons".³ One particularly catastrophic famine struck the central and eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire between 1873 and 1875, claiming no fewer than 100,000 lives.³ This was followed by another major famine from 1879 to 1881, occurring in the aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-78, which led to at least another 10,000 deaths.³ These events constituted profound traumatic disasters for the affected populations. However, their historical significance has often been muted, "overshadowed by later catastrophic events," and they remain "almost invisible in European and global famine historiography of the nineteenth century".³ This historiographical silence may be linked to the Ottoman state's own declining capacity. The Empire faced a dire financial situation, culminating in a sovereign default on its foreign loan repayments declared on October 30, 1875.¹⁰ This economic collapse was partly precipitated by severe drought in Anatolia in 1873 and extensive flooding in 1874, which crippled agricultural output and, consequently, the collection of necessary taxes.²² Such profound imperial weakness likely constrained the state's ability to implement effective famine relief measures or even to comprehensively document the crises in its peripheral regions. The social consequences of these famines were far-reaching. In rural areas like Central Anatolia, the crises dramatically impacted child-rearing practices and prevailing concepts of childhood. Desperate conditions forced families to resort to extreme measures: children consumed inappropriate and often harmful substances, were sometimes reportedly traded for bread, abandoned during migrations, or subjected to various forms of exploitation and domestic servitude.²⁵ This grim reality stood in stark contrast to the emerging modern ideals of childhood, which emphasized protection and education, then taking root among urban middle and upper-class Ottoman families.²⁵ In Diyarbakir and its surrounding regions, the famine that followed the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), compounded by the drought of 1879 and the exceptionally harsh winter of 1880, resulted in tens of thousands of deaths. Contemporary accounts describe bread prices soaring to sixteen times their normal level and streets teeming with beggars, many perishing from hunger.¹¹ These dire conditions also ignited social unrest; bread riots erupted in Diyarbakir, directly challenging the authority of local officials and alarming the central government about the potential for famine-induced political instability. Notably, these protests sometimes saw participation from both Muslim and non-Muslim communities, suggesting that shared socio-economic deprivation could, at times, foster common struggles that transcended prevailing ethnic or religious divisions.¹² This indicates that while famine could exacerbate communal tensions, it could also generate class-based or justice-oriented grievances against those perceived as responsible for the crisis, thereby challenging state legitimacy from a different axis.

B. The Great Famine of 1879-1881 in Ottoman Kurdistan: Deepening

Crisis and Social Disruption

The famine of 1879-1881 had a particularly acute impact on the eastern provinces of the Ottoman Empire, including the Kurdish-inhabited regions of Erzurum, Van, and Diyarbakir, with its effects extending as far south as Mosul.¹² This crisis was intrinsically linked to severe climatic conditions—including extreme cold, heavy snowfall, and drought—as well as the destabilizing aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War.¹⁰ The famine acted as a powerful catalyst, dramatically altering practices of accessing food and other limited natural resources within Ottoman Kurdistan, and in doing so, it reshaped and often hardened ethno-religious divisions.⁹ The severe cold of the winter of 1879-80 decimated livestock populations, which were the primary source of caloric energy for pastoralist communities. Consequently, starving pastoralists began to desperately search for grain, making peasants' granaries the first targets in a bitter struggle for survival.⁹ For instance, in early April 1880, during the thirteenth month of the famine, mills belonging to the Aghtamar, Surp Nişan, and Nareg monasteries in Van province were plundered.⁹ Reports of animal theft became increasingly common. What may have begun as individual acts of desperation soon escalated in scale and organization. Oxen that had been distributed to villagers in the district of Başkale by the Armenian Charitable Commission were reportedly taken by Kurds.⁹ Over the following years, animal rustling continued to intensify. By the late 1880s, it had become a principal cause of what is termed "slow violence" and profound socio-economic disorder in the region.⁹ From 1890 onwards, the nature of this animal theft shifted further, with the involvement of organized armed forces, notably the Hamidiye regiments. These state-sanctioned militias, often composed of Kurdish tribesmen, were implicated in large-scale plundering. For example, in 1895, Hamidiye officers and their collaborators raided Armenian villages in the fertile plain of Bulanık, carrying off significant numbers of livestock, raiding harvests, and burning vegetable gardens.⁹ This marked a transformation from opportunistic theft to a more systematic and "accelerated violence" that appeared to target the agrarian modes of subsistence, predominantly affecting Armenian peasants. This period coincided with the broader rise of ethnic and sectarian categories as potent mobilizing forces in the Ottoman East.¹⁰ The famine, occurring alongside other critical disjunctures—environmental stress, the empire's sovereign debt default, and an influx of modern weapons—imposed unequal hardships along ethno-religious lines. These overlapping crises served to underscore and inflame communal boundaries, provoking competition and conflict across them, rather than being solely attributable to any single cause.¹⁰

III. Famines in Persian Kurdistan: Late 19th Century and the Turmoil of World War I

A. The Great Persian Famine (1917-1919): A Multi-Causal Catastrophe

The Great Persian Famine of 1917-1919 stands as one of the most devastating calamities in modern Iranian history, a period of mass starvation and disease that had a profound impact on its population, including those in Kurdish-inhabited western provinces. Estimates of the death toll vary significantly: mainstream scholarship suggests approximately 2 million fatalities⁴, while Mohammad Gholi Majd's more controversial research posits a staggering 8-10 million deaths, which would equate to 40-50% of Iran's then-population of 18-20 million.⁴ Regardless of the precise figure, the scale of the tragedy was immense. This famine was not the result of a single cause but rather a complex interplay of environmental, military, political, and socio-economic factors, a catastrophic outcome of Persia's entanglement in World War I imperial rivalries despite its declared neutrality, combined with severe internal weaknesses of the Qajar state.

Table 2: The Great Persian Famine (1917-1919) – Contributing Factors and Impact on Kurdish Regions

Factor	Specific Actions/Details	Impact on Kurdish Regions (Kermanshah, Hamadan, etc.)	Population Impact (Mortality, Displacement)	Key Source Snippets
Drought & Pest Infestation	Successive seasonal droughts from 1916 depleted agricultural supplies. Pest infestations (e.g., <i>sen-zadegi</i>) affected stored grains and crops.	Worsened existing food shortages across western Iran, including Kurdistan.	Contributed to overall agricultural failure and reduced food availability.	⁴
Occupying Armies (British, Russian, Ottoman)	Despite Iran's neutrality, foreign armies occupied parts of the country. They requisitioned and confiscated foodstuffs, sometimes more than needed. Grain-producing areas became battlefields. British troops bought Sistan's granary; Russians blockaded	Kermanshah and Hamadan (key grain areas) became battlefields and sites of heavy requisitioning. Severe hardship in all Kurdish areas affected by military presence.	Massive depletion of local food supplies, direct contribution to starvation. Displacement of populations.	⁴

	Khorasan roads.			
Hoarding & Speculation	Widespread hoarding by landlords, dealers, officials. Ahmad Shah Qajar himself was a major hoarder, refusing to sell grain at fair prices. Bakers in Tehran engaged in short-selling.	Increased food prices and reduced availability for ordinary people in Kurdish towns and rural areas.	Exacerbated shortages, drove vulnerable populations into starvation. Fueled social unrest.	4
Transport Disruption	War disrupted normal trade and agricultural production. Requisitioning of pack animals (mules, camels) by occupying forces crippled the internal transport network. Cost of transporting grain often exceeded cost of growing it.	Hampered movement of any available food supplies into or within Kurdish regions. Isolated communities further.	Prevented relief efforts and equitable distribution of scarce resources.	4
Financial Policies & State Weakness	British financial policies (e.g., refusal to pay oil revenues) worsened the crisis. Weak Qajar government unable to manage the situation or provide relief.	Reduced overall economic capacity of Iran, impacting all regions including Kurdistan.	Limited state's ability to intervene or import food.	5
Disease Outbreaks	Cholera, typhus, and the 1918 Spanish Flu spread rapidly due to food crisis,	High mortality from disease in already weakened Kurdish populations in	Significantly increased the overall death toll of the famine period.	4

	malnutrition, and movement of people (soldiers, refugees).	Kermanshah, Hamadan, and other areas.		
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The occupying powers—British, Russian, and Ottoman—effectively treated Persia as a strategic chessboard and a resource pool for their war efforts, with devastating consequences for the food security of its populace.⁴ For instance, in November 1915, the entire granary of the southeastern province of Sistan was sold off to British troops, causing wheat prices to skyrocket. Russian troops blockaded roads in the northeastern province of Khorasan, preventing grain transfers except those destined for the Russian army.⁴ These foreign forces were reported to have intentionally collected grains and other necessities, often in excess of their needs, from the Iranian population to supply their troops.¹⁵ The requisitioning of pack animals for the oil industry in Khuzestan and for the British and Russian armies severely disrupted the country's transport network, making the distribution of foodstuffs disastrously difficult.⁴ Simultaneously, internal factors within Persia compounded the crisis. Widespread hoarding by landlords, grain dealers, and corrupt officials became rampant.⁴ Even the Qajar monarch, Ahmad Shah, was implicated as a major hoarder of grains, reportedly refusing to sell large quantities of wheat and barley from his warehouses at fair prices, even when urged by his own prime minister to alleviate the suffering of the starving population.¹⁵ Some analyses also point to a longer-term agricultural shift towards cash crops like opium, potentially at the expense of staple food production, which might have increased the vulnerability of rural communities to food shortages.³⁰ Kurdish provinces in western Iran, such as Kermanshah and Hamadan, were particularly hard-hit. These regions, being significant grain producers and strategically located along military routes, experienced acute suffering due to direct military operations, intensive requisitioning, and the general breakdown of the local economy.⁴ By early February 1918, the famine had spread throughout the country, and in Kermanshah, panicked crowds began to loot bakeries and food stores, leading to violent confrontations with the police and casualties.⁴ Both Kermanshah and Hamadan served as battlefields between Ottoman and Russian forces, further devastating agricultural production and civilian life.⁴ Accounts from Hamadan describe people resorting to eating grass, the flesh of dead animals, and, in extreme cases, human flesh.¹⁵ The general suffering in Kurdistan is also indicated by reports of refugees from these areas seeking shelter in other parts of Iran, such as Gilan.⁴ Archival references from SanadIran mention the dire situation in Urmia, with movements of Assyrian refugees and the need for aid, reflecting the broader regional distress during this period.³² The famine was accompanied by deadly outbreaks of diseases like cholera, typhus, and the 1918 Spanish Flu, which spread rapidly among the malnourished and displaced populations, significantly adding to the mortality.⁴ Scholars like Touraj Atabaki and Mohammad Gholi Majd have characterized this catastrophe as a "human-made famine," emphasizing the culpability of occupying forces and internal Iranian actors.⁵ The term "Holomine" was even coined by one researcher to describe the event as a deliberate, large-scale starvation.⁵ Despite its immense scale and severity, the Great Persian Famine has not been prominently reflected in public memory or official historiography in Iran, remaining a "silenced memory".⁵ The immense suffering and the perceived betrayal by both foreign powers and domestic elites during this period likely contributed to a profound erosion of Qajar legitimacy. While direct links to specific Kurdish political movements in the immediate aftermath are not detailed in the provided sources, such widespread devastation inevitably

sows seeds of discontent and can act as a catalyst for significant socio-political transformations, as was seen in early 20th-century Iran.

IV. World War I: A Nexus of Conflict, Displacement, and Starvation for Kurds

World War I represented a period of unparalleled catastrophe for Kurdish populations, caught as they were in the maelstrom of collapsing empires, warring armies, and deliberate policies of displacement and resource extraction. For Kurds, the war was not a singular crisis but a convergence of multiple devastating factors that decimated food security across their territories in both the Ottoman and Persian spheres.

A. Ottoman Policies, Allied Blockades, and the Collapse of Regional Food Security

The Great War saw hunger employed as a devastating weapon. A British and French naval blockade was imposed on the Ottoman Empire, preventing vital supplies, including food and armaments, from reaching its territories until 1919. This blockade caused widespread malnutrition and starvation that persisted for years even after the official end of hostilities.³³ The Ottoman state, in its desperate war effort, prioritized all available resources for its military, requisitioning homes, animals, tools, and food supplies from the civilian population, often with little regard for their survival.³⁴ This policy severely impacted all communities within the empire, including Kurds. The Allied blockade had a crippling effect on regional economies, particularly those reliant on export markets or remittances from abroad. For instance, the silk trade of Mount Lebanon, a crucial source of income, was devastated, and the ability to receive remittances was severely hampered, leading to a collapse in local purchasing power and a dramatic increase in food prices.³⁴ While Mount Lebanon is distinct from Kurdistan, the economic mechanisms of collapse—blockade, loss of export markets, disruption of remittances, and wartime inflation—would have had analogous impacts on Kurdish regions that had specialized local economies or relied on external trade and financial inflows. The influx of refugees from various conflict zones into different parts of the empire further strained already meagre food supplies, and the mass conscription of men into the army drastically reduced the agricultural labor force, further diminishing food production.³⁴ Across southeastern Anatolia, including the province of Diyarbakir with its significant Kurdish population, famine and interethnic conflict wrought havoc during these years.¹⁷

B. Forced Displacement and Famine among Kurdish Populations in Ottoman Territories

A particularly brutal aspect of Ottoman policy during World War I was the forced displacement of vast numbers of Kurdish civilians. Starting in 1916, Ottoman authorities initiated mass deportations of Kurds, primarily from eastern and southeastern Anatolia, moving them westward into other parts of the empire. An estimated 700,000 Kurds were forcibly removed from their homes.¹³ The conditions endured during these forced marches and in the often-barren resettlement areas were horrific, leading to mass death. It is estimated that between 350,000 and 400,000 of these displaced Kurds perished from a combination of hunger, exposure to the elements, and disease.¹³ This policy of displacement was not an accidental consequence of war but a deliberate strategy aimed at removing Kurdish populations from strategically sensitive areas, areas of actual or potential rebellion, or regions coveted for other purposes. The scale and outcome of these deportations suggest a pattern of using displacement as a tool that inevitably led to famine-like conditions and mass death for the targeted group, mirroring in some respects the methodologies employed against Armenian and Assyrian populations during the same period. Even before the full impact of World War I, conditions in parts of what would become Iraqi Kurdistan were dire. Previous Turkish and Russian military actions and administrative neglect had left many villages desolate and in a state of famine.¹⁹ When British forces assumed control in the aftermath of the war, they found it necessary to work with local tribal elders to distribute food and aid in rebuilding these devastated communities, highlighting the severity of pre-existing hunger.¹⁹ The "Hunger Map of Europe," published in December 1918, starkly illustrated the widespread food crisis, indicating serious food shortages across most Ottoman territories and outright famine in its eastern parts¹³, regions which encompassed significant Kurdish populations.

C. The Devastation in Persian Kurdistan Amidst Imperial Rivalries

As detailed in the preceding section, Persian Kurdistan suffered immensely during the Great Persian Famine of 1917-1919, a catastrophe inextricably linked to the dynamics of World War I. Despite Iran's declared neutrality, its territory became a battleground and a resource base for Ottoman, Russian, and British armies. Kurdish-inhabited regions like Kermanshah and Hamadan, important agricultural centers, were subjected to intense military operations, systematic requisitioning of food and livestock, and the widespread disruption of agricultural activities.⁴ This external exploitation, combined with severe drought, internal hoarding by elites, and the collapse of transportation networks, created a perfect storm for mass starvation.⁴

The collapse of the Ottoman and Qajar empires and the subsequent redrawing of Middle Eastern borders in the war's aftermath left Kurdish regions in a state of prolonged instability and heightened vulnerability. The immediate post-war period saw continued food insecurity, underscoring how the macro-political shifts of World War I had direct, devastating, and lasting impacts on the ability of Kurdish communities to sustain themselves.

Table 3: World War I – Drivers of Famine in Kurdish Territories

Driver	Specific Manifestation/Event	Affected Kurdish Area(s)	Consequence for Food Security	Key Source Snippets

Ottoman Forced Displacement of Kurds	Deportation of ~700,000 Kurds westward from 1916.	Eastern/Southeastern Anatolia (Ottoman Kurdistan)	Mass death (350,000-400,000) from hunger, exposure, disease during marches and in resettlement. Destruction of livelihoods.	¹³
Allied Blockade of Ottoman Empire	British/French naval blockade preventing food/goods imports until 1919.	All Ottoman territories, including Kurdish regions.	Widespread malnutrition, starvation, economic collapse, inflation, reduced purchasing power.	³³
Military Requisitions in Persia	Occupying armies (British, Russian, Ottoman) seized grain, livestock, and transport animals.	Persian Kurdistan (Kermanshah, Hamadan, etc.)	Depletion of local food stocks, disruption of agriculture and trade, direct starvation.	⁴
Military Requisitions & Scorched Earth in Ottoman East	Ottoman army prioritized all resources for war; requisitioned food, animals, tools. Some armies used scorched-earth tactics.	Ottoman Kurdistan (e.g., Diyarbakir, Van)	Severe civilian deprivation, destruction of crops and food stores.	¹¹
Destruction of Agriculture & Disruption of Trade	Battlefields in agricultural areas, conscription of manpower, breakdown of transport networks.	Both Persian and Ottoman Kurdistan.	Reduced food production, inability to move available food, localized and widespread shortages.	⁴
General Wartime Devastation & Imperial Collapse	Breakdown of governance, widespread instability, looting.	Entire Kurdish region.	Pre-existing famines worsened, new famines triggered,	¹⁴

			long-term food insecurity.	
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V. The Anfal Campaign: Famine as a Weapon of Genocide in Iraqi Kurdistan (Late 20th Century)

The Anfal campaign, conducted by the Iraqi Ba'athist regime under Saddam Hussein between February and September 1988, represents one of the most brutal episodes in modern Kurdish history. It was not merely a counter-insurgency operation but a systematic, genocidal assault on the Kurdish population of northern Iraq. Within this campaign, the deliberate creation of famine conditions through the destruction of livelihoods, mass displacement, and denial of sustenance served as a primary weapon to achieve the regime's aims of ethnic cleansing and the elimination of Kurdish identity and presence in strategic regions.

A. The "Arabisation" Policy and Systematic Destruction of Kurdish Livelihoods

The Anfal campaign was the violent culmination of a long-standing Iraqi state policy known as "Arabisation." Initiated in the 1960s and intensifying throughout the 1970s and 1980s, this policy aimed to forcibly alter the demographic makeup of northern Iraq, particularly in oil-rich areas like Kirkuk and other territories claimed by Kurds. The goal was to displace the indigenous Kurdish population and replace them with Arab settlers, thereby consolidating state control over valuable resources and suppressing Kurdish aspirations for autonomy.⁷ The methods employed during Anfal to destroy Kurdish livelihoods were comprehensive and ruthless:

- **Systematic Destruction of Villages:** An estimated 4,500 Kurdish villages were razed to the ground.⁶ Human Rights Watch and other sources indicate that as much as 90% of all Kurdish villages, along with over twenty small towns and administrative centers, were "wiped off the map".⁶ Captured Iraqi government documents from the period chillingly describe these villages as having been "burned," "destroyed," "demolished," and "purified".⁷
- **Destruction of Agricultural Infrastructure:** The campaign went beyond merely destroying homes. The countryside was deliberately riddled with an estimated 15 million landmines, a tactic explicitly intended to render agricultural activity and animal husbandry impossible for any returning Kurds.⁶ Essential civilian infrastructure, including schools, mosques, wells, and irrigation systems, was also systematically demolished by army engineers.²⁰
- **Looting of Property and Livestock:** Iraqi army troops and collaborating

pro-government Kurdish militias (known as *jahsh*) engaged in vast-scale looting of civilian property, including household goods, agricultural equipment, and, crucially, farm animals, which were vital for sustenance and economic survival.²⁰

These actions constituted a deliberate strategy to eradicate the material basis of Kurdish rural life, severing the population's connection to their ancestral lands and traditional modes of subsistence, which are intrinsically linked to Kurdish identity and culture.

B. Mass Displacement, Internment, and Deliberate Starvation Tactics

The destruction of villages was accompanied by the forced displacement of their inhabitants on an enormous scale. Estimates suggest that at least one million ⁶, and possibly as many as one and a half million ⁶, Kurdish peasants were forcibly uprooted from their homes. Many were herded into hastily constructed internment camps within Kurdistan or, in a particularly cruel tactic, transported to barren, desolate sites in the deserts of southern Iraq, where they were abandoned with little to no means of survival—no shelter, food, water, or medical aid.⁶ Tens of thousands of women, children, and elderly individuals, who were not immediately executed, were arbitrarily arrested and warehoused for months in these camps and detention centers. They were held in conditions of extreme deprivation, deliberately denied adequate food, clean water, and medical care.⁷ Even before the Anfal campaign reached its peak intensity, Kurdish villagers in targeted "prohibited areas" had endured years of harsh economic blockades and stringent food rationing imposed by the Iraqi regime.²⁰ The Anfal operations themselves involved a combination of ground offensives by the Iraqi army, mass deportations, the systematic destruction detailed above, summary executions by firing squads, terrifying aerial bombings, and the widespread use of chemical weapons against civilian populations.⁶

C. Humanitarian Crisis: Mortality from Malnutrition, Disease, and Exposure

While adult and teenage males of "battle-age" were the primary targets for immediate mass execution and disappearance ⁶, a significant proportion of the Anfal death toll comprised women, children, and the elderly. These groups largely perished not from bullets, but from the slower, agonizing effects of starvation, disease, and exposure deliberately inflicted upon them in the camps and during displacement.⁶ This differential targeting, leading to massive mortality across all demographics but through varied methods, underscores a comprehensive strategy to destroy the Kurdish community's present and future. Human Rights Watch conservatively estimated that at least 50,000 rural Kurds were killed during the Anfal campaign, though acknowledging that the actual figure was likely closer to 100,000, with some Kurdish sources and subsequent findings suggesting a death toll of up to 182,000 Kurds disappeared or killed in 1988 alone.⁶ The conditions in the detention centers and relocation sites were described as squalid and grossly overcrowded, creating a fertile ground for epidemic diseases. Children, being the most vulnerable, died in large numbers from malnutrition-related illnesses and lack of basic medical care.⁶ The infamous chemical attack on the town of Halabja in March 1988, which killed an estimated 5,000 civilians instantly and

injured thousands more, was part of this broader assault on Kurdish civilians, further weakening the population and contributing to the overall humanitarian catastrophe.²⁰ The Anfal campaign thus stands as a clear and horrifying instance where famine was not an unintended byproduct of conflict but a deliberately engineered condition, a core component of a state-sponsored genocide.

Table 4: The Anfal Campaign – Systemic Starvation as a Genocidal Tactic

Tactic	Description of Tactic and its Impact on Food Security/Livelihoods	Resulting Human Cost (Starvation, Disease, Mortality)	Connection to "Arabisation"/Genocidal Intent	Key Source Snippets
Village Destruction & Agricultural Sabotage	Systematic razing of ~4,500 Kurdish villages; destruction of homes, schools, mosques, wells. Laying of ~15 million landmines to prevent future agriculture.	Elimination of food sources, shelter, and means of production. Rendered land uninhabitable and unfarmable.	Thousands died from direct attacks, subsequent starvation, and disease due to loss of all resources.	Intended to make Kurdish rural life impossible, facilitating "Arabisation" and ethnic cleansing. "Purification" of areas.
Forced Displacement & Internment	Mass deportation of ~1-1.5 million Kurds to internment camps or barren desert sites in southern Iraq without provisions.	Stripped of all assets, no access to food, water, or shelter. Overcrowded and unsanitary camp conditions.	Widespread death from malnutrition, dehydration, exposure, and epidemic diseases, especially among women, children, and elderly.	Key method to remove Kurds from their lands ("prohibited zones") and warehouse them under conditions calculated to cause physical destruction.
Denial of Food/Aid in Camps & Economic Blockade	Deliberate withholding of adequate food, water, and medical supplies in detention centers and relocation sites. Pre-existing economic blockades and food rationing in	Extreme deprivation leading to severe malnutrition and weakened immune systems.	Many hundreds, likely thousands, died directly from starvation and related diseases in camps.	Part of inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about physical destruction of the group.

	Kurdish areas.			
Looting of Livestock & Property	Systematic looting of farm animals, food stores, and personal belongings by Iraqi army and <i>jahsh</i> militia.	Deprived families of immediate food reserves and future means of livelihood (e.g., dairy, meat, draft animals).	Increased immediate hunger and long-term destitution, contributing to famine conditions.	Destroyed economic self-sufficiency and impoverished the Kurdish population.
Chemical Attacks on Civilian Areas	Use of mustard gas and nerve agents (e.g., Sarin) against towns like Halabja and dozens of Kurdish villages.	Immediate mass deaths; long-term health issues for survivors, contaminating land and water sources, killing livestock.	Thousands killed directly; survivors weakened and traumatized, agricultural land poisoned.	Terrorized the population, destroyed agricultural capacity, and directly contributed to the genocidal aim of eliminating Kurds.

VI. Overarching Themes and Long-Term Consequences

The recurrent famines that swept through Kurdistan during the 19th and 20th centuries were not isolated incidents of starvation but complex crises with profound and lasting repercussions. These events were consistently characterized by a deadly interplay of hunger, disease, and displacement, and they acted as brutal catalysts for significant socio-economic transformations, demographic shifts, and enduring political grievances.

A. The Symbiotic Relationship Between Famine, Disease, and Mortality

Across virtually all documented famines in Kurdistan, epidemic diseases emerged as a constant and lethal companion, significantly amplifying mortality rates. Malnourished populations, with their compromised immune systems, are acutely vulnerable to infections that might otherwise be survivable. This created a devastating feedback loop: famine weakened bodies, making them susceptible to disease, and widespread illness further incapacitated communities, hindering their ability to procure food or care for the sick. Cholera, a waterborne disease that thrives in conditions of poor sanitation often exacerbated by social upheaval, repeatedly struck Iran, including its Kurdish regions, during the 19th and early 20th centuries. These outbreaks frequently coincided with periods of food shortage. For

example, a major cholera epidemic in Iran in 1869 occurred concurrently with a famine that persisted until 1871.²⁹ During the widespread famine conditions of World War I, typhus, a louse-borne disease often associated with overcrowding and lack of hygiene in conditions of war and displacement, was rampant in Greater Syria, including areas adjacent to Kurdistan.⁸ The Great Persian Famine of 1917-1919 was accompanied by devastating outbreaks of cholera and typhus, as well as the pandemic Spanish Influenza, all of which spread rapidly among the starving and mobile populations.⁴ Similarly, during the Anfal campaign, the deplorable conditions in internment camps, coupled with severe malnutrition, led to common and fatal outbreaks of various diseases among the captive Kurdish population.⁷ This famine-disease-displacement nexus formed a recurring cycle of catastrophe, where each element exacerbated the others, leading to compounded suffering and death.

B. Demographic Shifts and the Erosion of Social Fabric in Kurdish Society

The sheer scale of mortality associated with major famines, such as the Great Persian Famine and the Anfal campaign, inevitably led to significant and lasting demographic shifts in the affected Kurdish regions. These shifts included not only outright population decline but also alterations in the age and gender structure of communities, with disproportionate losses often among the very young and the elderly.⁴ Beyond the grim statistics, famine conditions frequently led to the profound erosion of the social fabric. Families were uprooted and separated, either through forced displacement or the desperate search for food. Traditional social bonds, support networks, and communal obligations often broke down under the extreme pressure of survival.¹² Extreme hunger could lead to a documented collapse of neighborliness, a decline in charitable acts, and a growing desensitization in the face of overwhelming mortality and suffering.¹² Reports of people eating street animals, and in the most desperate circumstances, resorting to cannibalism, surfaced during the Persian famine of 1917-1919⁴ and the Great Famine of Mount Lebanon.³⁴ Such acts, though rare and indicative of utter desperation, signify a complete breakdown of societal norms. While direct, detailed oral histories of Kurdish famine survivors focusing specifically on hunger and its psychological toll are less prominent in the provided materials⁴⁴, the general understanding of trauma suggests that these extreme experiences would inevitably leave deep psychological scars and contribute to intergenerational trauma within Kurdish communities. The "silenced memories" associated with some famines⁵ might, in part, be a manifestation of this collective trauma and the difficulty of articulating such profound suffering.

C. Impact on Land Tenure, Livelihoods, and Tribal Structures

Famines, particularly when intertwined with conflict, state-sponsored violence, or policies of ethnic cleansing like the Anfal campaign's "Arabisation," had profound and often irreversible impacts on land tenure, access to resources, and traditional livelihoods in Kurdistan. These events acted as powerful, albeit brutal, engines of socio-economic change.

The Anfal campaign, for example, resulted in the mass displacement of Kurds from their

ancestral lands and the subsequent settlement of Arab populations in these areas, particularly in and around Kirkuk. This created complex and deeply contentious land ownership disputes that continue to fuel political tensions and demand resolution to this day.⁷ Article 140 of the Iraqi Constitution was intended to address these historical injustices, but its implementation has been fraught with political challenges and delays.³⁶ In Ottoman Kurdistan, the famine of 1879-1881 dramatically altered resource access dynamics. Starving pastoralist communities, having lost their livestock, turned to raiding the granaries and livestock of settled agriculturalists, primarily Armenian peasants. This escalated from acts of desperation to more organized forms of plunder, sometimes involving state-affiliated militias like the Hamidiye regiments.⁹ Such shifts would have severely disrupted traditional land use patterns, inter-communal economic relationships, and social hierarchies. The devastation wrought by World War I, including the widespread looting and destruction of crops by various occupying armies, placed immense pressure on Kurdish tribal leaders. In the aftermath, a central focus for these leaders was the rebuilding of village and tribal infrastructure to provide for their people and restore some semblance of order and sustenance.² This suggests that famine could both strain traditional social structures and, paradoxically, reinforce the roles and responsibilities of tribal leadership, depending on their capacity to manage the crisis and secure resources for their communities. Furthermore, broader economic trends, such as the shift towards cash crop production like opium in parts of Persia (which included Kurdish areas), potentially at the expense of cultivating staple food crops, could have made agricultural communities more vulnerable to famine if food prices surged or access was otherwise restricted during times of crisis.³⁰ These long-term transformations, particularly concerning land and resource control, continue to shape the socio-political landscape of Kurdistan.

VII. Conclusion: Remembering the Forgotten Famines and Their Enduring Legacy in Kurdistan

The 19th and 20th centuries were scarred by recurrent and devastating famines that inflicted immense suffering upon the Kurdish populations across Ottoman, Persian, Iraqi, and Syrian territories. These were not mere episodes of food scarcity; they were profound crises born from a toxic interplay of adverse climatic conditions, political decisions, brutal military conflicts, systemic economic vulnerabilities, and, in the most horrific instances, deliberate state-sponsored policies of starvation and ethnic cleansing. From the widespread Anatolian famines of the 1870s that saw tens of thousands perish³, through the catastrophic Great Persian Famine of 1917-1919 where millions may have died amidst the turmoil of World War I⁴, to the genocidal Anfal campaign in 1988 where hunger was systematically wielded as a weapon against Iraqi Kurds⁶, a pattern of acute vulnerability and immense loss is evident. A chilling thread that runs through this history is the recurring weaponization of hunger. Whether through the neglect characteristic of declining empires struggling to manage their peripheries³, the deliberate resource stripping by occupying armies during wartime⁴, or the systematic state-engineered starvation witnessed during the Anfal campaign⁶, Kurdish food security was consistently compromised by more powerful external and internal actors. This pattern underscores a persistent vulnerability, where access to the most basic necessity of life

was repeatedly and tragically undermined. Many of these famines have remained "silenced memories" ⁵ or "overshadowed" events ³ in broader historical narratives, often marginalized by accounts focusing on political elites or major military confrontations. Recognizing these famines as critical, defining events in Kurdish history is essential not only for a more complete historical understanding but also for acknowledging the depth of suffering endured by ordinary people. The lack of official commemoration for some of these tragedies speaks to the power dynamics that shape historical memory and the frequent disenfranchisement of victimized communities. The enduring legacy of these famines is multifaceted and deeply imprinted on Kurdish society. They caused significant demographic shifts, altering the human landscape of entire regions. They contributed to the erosion of social fabrics, the breakdown of traditional livelihoods, and long-term economic hardship. The impact on land tenure, particularly following state-sponsored displacements like Anfal, has created deep-seated grievances and ongoing political contestation.³⁶ Moreover, the collective trauma resulting from such extreme suffering, loss, and the brutalization of human relations has undoubtedly left psychological scars that resonate across generations. Studying these famines offers a critical, albeit grim, lens through which to understand broader themes in Kurdish history: the profound impact of imperial peripherality and subsequent statelessness, the complex dynamics of inter-communal relations under extreme duress, the brutal realities of nation-state formation and consolidation in the Middle East, and the remarkable resilience, as well as the profound suffering, of the Kurdish people. These are not just isolated tragedies but integral components of the Kurdish historical narrative. Further research, particularly that which seeks to uncover local narratives, oral histories, and the psychological dimensions of these experiences ³, is crucial to ensure that these forgotten famines are fully understood, their victims remembered, and their lessons learned.

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