

Yaron Ayalon,

Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes,

New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015, 245 pages,

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Yaron Ayalon's book fits into the field of environmental history with its focus on the phenomenon of natural disasters which has its own genealogy of historical studies. As works that look into climate, water and irrigation, pollution, animals, and other issues related to rural or urban environments are proliferating, topics on disasters such as fires, earthquakes, famines, epidemics, and floods are increasingly becoming attractive for academicians. A reason for this attraction should be the fact that the moment of a natural disaster is usually the peak of a process produced by the inter-relationship between nature and society. This usually violent moment is indispensable for understanding how the environment affects human society and vice versa. Also the revelation that natural disasters have shaped our world in unimaginable ways since the Sumerian cuneiform and further before that has made them an inevitable historical subject for understanding both the past and our future as a society. Lastly, the instance of destruction creates such a mess that usually the chaos and sometimes the dynamism that comes with it produce a wealth of information for the historian which might not exist in normal times.¹

Historical studies on the environment were present since at least the nineteenth century, but as a field, environmental history has been established in the 1970s with an academic journal of its own. The impact on Ottoman and Middle Eastern studies was felt with a few works in the 80s and 90s but the rapid increase in published books came in the last decade or so. Within this recently ascendant literature, the originality of Yaron Ayalon's book is that it takes natural disasters as a whole and reads the entire Ottoman history through their perspective. With that ambitious goal it explores the many ways by which the Ottomans came to face disasters such as plague, famine, fire, and earthquake over a period of approximately six centuries. A few among the book's many arguments stand out. Ayalon states that the Black Death and its ravaging effect on the Byzantine territories

1 A fact which is not necessarily true for some historical periods, as Ayalon notes: p. 13

have been downplayed in understanding the rise of the Ottomans against a declining Eastern Roman Empire. Again, he explains the downfall of the Ottoman Empire following the First World War through insufficient sanitation practices, unsuccessful urban planning, poor finances that made disaster situations worse, and finally bad luck that brought so many calamities which added to other more obvious causes of the disintegration. Finally, he analyses the nature of the Ottoman state and society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by looking into the ways they coped with natural disasters. In this perspective, it covers a lot of ground temporally and spatially keeping the concept of natural disaster as a constant throughout.

To be more precise, the organization of the book is of three parts. The first part is the entire Chapter 1 in which the author compares European and Middle Eastern responses to the Black Death. Some important findings in this chapter are that pre-Ottoman Islamic world was fatalistic in its view of disasters as some treatises on plague and earthquake demonstrate; but this did not hinder those societies and individuals that lived in them from acting differently during disasters. The author rightfully notes the dilemma regarding “the gap between common beliefs about disasters and the ways people actually responded to them” (p. 28). For example, it is true that Islamic scholarship established a common belief among Arab-Muslim society that plague was a result of God’s anger—and not contagion or a similar natural occurrence—; consequently fleeing needed to be avoided. However research shows that migration was quite common following natural disasters including plagues. Another theme is the impact of plague on a weakening Byzantine state and the consequent rise of the Ottomans. The author reiterates the thesis first developed by Uli Schamiloğlu on how Byzantine lands were ravaged by the epidemic and became prone to Ottoman conquest as an additional factor to other explanations on the rise of the Ottoman dynasty (pp. 51-3).

The second part consists of chapters 2, 3, and 4 in which Ayalon delves into the workings of the Ottoman state and society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This part is the core of the book and stems from the author’s dissertation. Ayalon’s doctoral work was based on a study of disasters—mainly epidemics, famine, and earthquake—in Greater Syria during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.² Its focus was the Jewish communities of Aleppo and

2 *Plagues, Famines, Earthquakes: The Jews of Ottoman Syria and Natural Disasters* (Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation: Princeton University, 2009).

Damascus. Here Ayalon extends his research and his questions by including a whole range of disaster situations from entire imperial territories that impacted Jews, Christians, and Muslims—even though the weight is still on Greater Syria and non-Muslims. Ayalon disagrees with scholars who saw faith as “the primary organizing principle of Ottoman society” (p. 3). Looking into several instances of disaster on imperial, communal, and individual levels he concludes that religious boundaries were not as significant as scholars have made us believe. Religious identities and communal cooperation were always present; but the boundaries between confessional communities were porous and religion was “neither the sole nor the primary social divider in Ottoman society at large” (p. 209). The state did give priority to restoring Islamic monuments but that action was based on political considerations more than theological principles. The importance given to the maintenance of the symbols of Islam was to enhance the prestige of the dynasty and the role of the state. When it came to providing aid as part of disaster recovery, no distinction was made between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Another original contribution of the author has to be the discussion on Ottoman regard for a private-public division.³ The documents show that although the Ottoman state immediately repaired mosques, public baths, Sultanic buildings in addition to roads and bridges, there is almost no example of a church or synagogue being restored by the state after destruction. Ayalon sees this behaviour not as religious discrimination, but as the state’s regard for privacy. As the state did not restore private homes, it also did not help with the renovation of religious monuments of non-Muslims, because it saw those specific places as belonging to the private lives of its subjects. This regard for privacy increased with the conquests of Arab lands in the sixteenth century when the Ottoman administration assimilated more and more of the ideas of earlier Islamic rulers. It remained unchanged until the mid-nineteenth century when the Ottoman government began to adapt European forms of urban reconstruction and started to use disaster situations as an excuse to penetrate private spaces and make decisions that would change the structure of cities and construction patterns (pp. 102-105). Ayalon notes that this shift in regard for privacy on the part of the European rulers had its roots in the Black Death when serious decisions regarding private lives—such as quarantine practices—had to be taken by the

3 He first brought this up in an earlier article: “Ottoman Urban Privacy in Light of Disaster Recovery,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43 (2011): 513-28

authorities. The real breakthrough, nevertheless, came after the Great Fire in London (1666) and the Lisbon Earthquake (1755) (pp. 34-40). He states that the enormous destruction that these disasters brought structurally changed the way Western European societies saw public and private spheres which led them to take measures to prevent anything on that scale from happening or causing similar damage (pp. 105-8).

In the last part, or Chapter 5, the author discusses the disintegration of the Empire and the role of natural disasters in it. Ayalon talks about the occurrence of plague and cholera and the Ottoman adoption of the practice of quarantine after the 1830s which, according to him, came when the Europeans were starting to move away from it. He also spends time in new disaster recovery and urban planning principles that were implemented after the Bursa earthquake of 1855. According to him, these proved to be ‘too little too late’ to keep the Empire together when the entire realm suffered from increasing epidemics, famine, earthquakes, and fires; so finally it could not recover from the catastrophe of the First World War. The inability to cope with natural calamities proved to be one of the most significant and hitherto neglected causes of the disintegration of the Ottoman state (pp. 204-7). The discussions in this part—and generally throughout the book—of why Europe and the Ottoman Empire were different are very valuable in that the author focuses on internal political developments and cultural differences of both realms rather than issues external to them.

However factors such as class formation and/or the extent of centralization that eventually made up the ruling elites and the nature of negotiations between them and the subjects/citizens need closer look in addition to the understanding of, for example, private and public spheres. The author has “found no evidence for meaningful transformations in the state’s approach to disaster curtailment and relief before the second half of the nineteenth century” (p. 9); but one can see significant change when it comes to dealing with fires in the eighteenth century, for instance, when a special unit of *Tulumbacı Ocağı* (i.e. Fire Pumper Corps) within the Janissary Army was established in 1719/20 to fight fires using fire pumps similar to European examples that were becoming common after the 1666 London fire. Or the entire structure of volunteer firefighting (encouraged and semi-supported by the state) following the abolition of the Janissaries in 1826—which reminds us of the same phenomenon in antebellum America—is another example of change that was happening before the mid-nineteenth century.

Overall, this book is an important contribution to the understanding of natural disasters from the Ottoman point of view. It is strongest when it deals with state, communal, and individual reactions to disasters and the causes behind them which are the main focus of the research. The role of religion in Ottoman society and the boundaries of confessional communities in the context of famine, plague, and earthquake are well discussed. It specifies how these events were not separate but were inter-related when famines were producing epidemics (p. 64), earthquakes causing fires (p. 87), etc. A disaster stricken community became prone to several types of calamities. Also there is good elaboration of individual responses to disasters through theories taken from economics, psychology, and biology to explain disaster behavior (pp. 154-67). In these discussions, Ayalon utilizes a rich array of sources the bulk of which come from *Prime Ministry Ottoman Archives* in Istanbul, but also from *The National Archives* in London and *Archives de la Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie* in Marseille. He brings in a significant amount of Arabic and Jewish manuscripts and treatises to his analysis. He uses secondary sources not only in English and French but also, occasionally, in German and Italian.

The author frequently asks questions in search of a more holistic view on Ottoman and European actions, why they differed in certain situations, why the Ottomans were a latecomer in public health and urban planning, or how it happened that it could not survive the World War. In answering those questions he is less nuanced compared to discussions in the central chapters of the book. The story of the later Ottoman Empire suddenly becomes one that starts with Bonaparte's arrival in Egypt and the changes introduced following that development (pp. 173-83 and 197-207). Obviously, that narrative of progress continuing into the Turkish Republic—which falls short at certain intervals—is not totally wrong; it is rather just stripped of internal and external power relations that are much needed in order to grasp the full story.

Bariş Taşyakan

University of California
at San Diego