

# COST OF LIVING IN OTTOMAN EMPIRE DURING THE ARMISTICE PERIOD: A CASE OF ISTANBUL<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** At the time when the Montrose Armistice was concluded, the economic situation in Ottoman Empire(Turkey) was very serious. The food crop that had been produced was not enough to meet the needs of consumption. The First World War had a huge impact on this situation. There was a great loss of life because of the war and the number of people required for production was not sufficient. In this study, the question of the cost of living in Istanbul, and whether the reasons given and the precautionary measures taken were sufficient, is central. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate cost of living in Istanbul during the armistice period.

The problems experienced during the armistice and the solutions to these problems will be evaluated from an economic point of view. This study used historical data and archival resources to explain people's economic life and consumption situation in Istanbul during armistice period. In order to prevent the loss of life, the Economy Struggle Commission, sample grocery stores and sales booths were established and economic solutions were found for cost of living increases. This study is limited by case of Istanbul and period from 1918 to 1922 in Ottoman Empire. This study provides useful information about living conditions and consumption situation of population in Ottoman empire during armistice period. In addition, archival resources are clarified for actual period.

**Keywords:** cost of living the armistice period, economic history, otoman empire

## INTRODUCTION

The Armistice Period is the period of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic which occurred between 1918 and 1922. This period is also a period in which both political and social transformations were experienced. A period was entered into in which the political importance of the capital city, Istanbul, diminished. The Ottoman Empire was divided in accordance with the provisions of Sèvres Treaty. Istanbul was occupied on November 13, 1918 and in 1919 the delegates of the Allied Powers were in occupation of an important part of the city. Leaders of the Union and Progress Party left the country along with the previously ruling government. In the Armistice Period in Istanbul the predominant factor in political life were the occupying forces (Toprak, 1994:19).

The Turkish people struggled against poverty, starvation and famine in the First World War and the Armistice Period. Setbacks occurred in production during the war years and in the aftermath. Production decreased because of the war and there were periods in which no one

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could be found to reap harvests. During this period the Ottoman Empire was a state whose economy consisted primarily of exporting raw materials and importing manufactured products (Boratav, 2007:20).

By the time the Montrose Armistice was concluded, the economic condition of the country had deteriorated. Production stocks were insufficient and crops were being produced under difficult conditions and with insufficient resources. Producers did not want to sell their crops because of the war and for this reason products could not be supplied to the city center. The destructive effects of the First World War were both economic and social. During the war, migration occurred from the occupied regions of the country to other regions. This migration increased the population and made the food requirements of the region around Istanbul, whose food was already inadequate, unsustainable (Himmetoğlu, 1975:246-247). Istanbul, which developed and expanded its governing area in 19<sup>th</sup> century, was one of the cities with an important role in the world economy. Although there was some distress during the First World War and afterwards, Istanbul maintained its position as the commercial center until the proclamation of the Turkish Republic. While the population of Istanbul was 356,653 people in 1844, it grew to 875,575 in 1855 and 909,978 in 1914. The increase in population, however, only changed the structure of the groups making up the city in terms of their numbers. The number of governmental officials decreased and the wage levels dropped in the city after 1908. Nevertheless, as a consequence of the degree and size of the civil and military bureaucracy there was a substantial number of consumers (Koraltürk, 1998:38). Occupations and movements by the National Forces in this period caused the governing of Istanbul to remain confined to the city and its dependent areas. This situation caused the budgets which were prepared not to set a budget by year until 1920. The fact that a budget could not be set in a period in which the defense expenditure of the country was so intense also caused problems in the use of resources. Laws of advance payment could not substitute for the budget and difficulties were experienced in expenditure. The country split into three separate customs territories within a short period of time because the balance of income and expenditure could not be assured. Transition from one customs territory to another customs territory was excised and this therefore caused setbacks in the delivery of goods. Setbacks were experienced in the delivery of goods notably in Istanbul and within the country and this situation turned the problem of food shortages into an even more troubling situation.

## **1. ECONOMIC LIFE IN THE ARMISTICE PERIOD**

The army, which fought under difficult conditions throughout the war, spared no sacrifices, but its living conditions became harder and hopes of winning the war were lost. While the Ottoman soldiers had insufficient equipment and food they were fighting with an army on the opposite side which was well fed and which was fully equipped. As the war continued, news that the situation at the front was serious spread swiftly and the number of deserters increased. While the number of deserters was 300,000 in 1917 it increased to half a million in 1918. The

deserters took shelter in the mountains with their equipment and formed gangs. These gangs started to steal from the villages and the food storehouses (Yalman, 1930:62).

The Cabinet of Union and Progress, which was in power from the beginning of the First World War, frequently attracted criticisms and attacks because of the depression the country was experiencing. The economic condition of the country had worsened by the date of the armistice's conclusion (Eldem, 1994:130). The import of grains from various countries ceased and shortages were experienced across the country as stocks ran out. Istanbul was the city most affected by the distress brought about by the First World War. With the return of a large number of military personnel, the settlement of soldiers from the allied powers from 1918 on, the influx of exiles from the Bolshevik regime in Russia and of refugees fleeing raids by National Forces and seeking shelter, Istanbul was no longer able to bear this burden. Price rises, financial difficulties and a lack of public order began to be seen in the city (Temel, 1998:38).

## 2. COST OF LIVING

After the war had ended, the struggle against the rising cost of living continued all over the world. After Vienna and the large Russian cities Istanbul was among the most expensive cities in the world (Aydin, 2010:442). The prices of vital necessities increased at a rate of 1350% between 1914 and 1920 in Istanbul whereas the price increases in London and Paris were at a level of 200-300% between the same dates. When compared to cities in Europe, the cost of living in Istanbul was very high (Georgeon, 1997:85).

According to the Public Debt Index, the level of the cost of living in Istanbul in October 1918 had increased by 15 times compared to the prewar cost and by 7 to 8 times when delivery prices were taken as the data. However, the wages of government officials increased by 50% by that date. Therefore, government officials lost 60% to 80% of their purchasing power with respect to their wages. The purchasing power of a government official who earned 100 liras corresponded to 25 liras before the war (Eldem, 1994:131).

Food Supervision was established on November 30, 1918 with the intent of solving the food problem that the country was experiencing. According to the decree it issued not only the nutrition of the public but also the nutrition of the army was made the responsibility of the Food Supervision; that is to say to civil government (Bayur, 1983:543). The duty of the Food Supervision was to supply the vital necessities for making the life of the army and the needy and indigent community easier. The task of preventing the price of materials sold from becoming more expensive for no reason and preventing high prices for them belonged to the Food Supervision. Ships belonging to the Navigation Governance were to be assigned to the order of the Food Supervision when required. The Food Supervision determined which products were appropriate for exportation to foreign countries and also gave permission for export. The Food Supervision was entitled to quote prices for purchase-sale and transport of foodstuffs and all kinds of basic means and to explore and inspect whether or not tradesmen

dealing with trade were closing sales in accordance with the law. Those who did not obey statutory prices were subject to cash fines ranging from 5 to 500 liras and imprisonment from 24 hours to 1 year, or they were given both of these penalties (Ati, August 18, 1918). The Food Supervision was established as a solution to the food problem but corruption and abuses of the system could not be prevented. For this reason, the Food Supervision was disestablished with a decree dated January 20, 1919 (Aydın, 2010:19). In place of the Food Supervision the Public Food Management, which had the task of dealing with food duties and which was attached to the Trade and Agriculture Supervision was established. The Public Food Management was attached to the municipality with a decree dated February 12, 1919 but after a short while the Public Food Management was also abolished. The Economy Commission was established on June 19, 1919 (Aydın, 2010: 37).

The Economy Commission conducted a study on the cost of living in Istanbul. As a result of this study a report was prepared based on the wage of a family with two children, calculated as 500 kuruş, and considering the basic needs of that family. Prices in the first half of the year 1920 had increased at a rate of 227% compared to the beginning of 1914, and in the second half of the year 1920 purchase and sale on the market slowed down (Aydın, 2002:443).

The Committee of Injunction of Engrossing was constituted during the war with the intent of preventing the cost of living increasing but it was not able to prevent this. The institutions established to prevent engrossing in Istanbul were constituted by being attached to the Police Department and the Courthouse Supervision but the problem of the cost of living increased day by day. The prices of the basic necessities would be announced by the Public Food Management and criminal actions would be taken against anyone who did not obey the price lists in order to prevent engrossing by tradesmen (Karataşer, 2013:114).

**A List Showing The Maximum Prices Of Foodstuffs Valid For One Week From  
November 28, 1919**

| NAME OF FOODS                          | MAXIMUM<br>RETAIL<br>PRICE | NAME OF FOODS                 | MAXIMUM<br>RETAIL<br>PRICE |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| First Class American Flour             | 30                         | Small Potato                  | 13                         |
| Extra Domestic Flour                   | 30                         | Cube Sugar                    | 75                         |
| First Class Domestic Flour             | 29                         | Cavan Granulated Sugar        | 54                         |
| Second Class Domestic Flour            | ---                        | American Granulated Sugar     | ---                        |
| Domestic Flat Grits Flour              | 26                         | First Class Santos Coffee     | ---                        |
| First Class Non-Grits Siam<br>Rice     | ---                        | Lave Coffee                   | ---                        |
| First Class Non-Grits<br>American Rice | ---                        | Rio Coffee                    | ---                        |
| First Class Non-Grits Camolin<br>Rice  | ---                        | Ordinary Coffee               | ---                        |
| First Class Non-Grits English<br>Rice  | ---                        | Extra Filtered Olive Oil      | 110                        |
| First Class Non-Grits Rizon<br>Rice    | ---                        | First Class Edible Olive Oil  | 105                        |
| Grits Rice                             | ---                        | Second Class Edible Olive Oil | 94                         |
| Non-Grits Corn Rice                    | 42                         | Third Class Edible Olive Oil  | ---                        |
| Grits Corn Rice                        | 37,5                       | Extra Ingot Soap              | 60                         |
| Grits Rangon English Rice              | 32-34                      | Ayvalık Soap                  | 62                         |
| Baku Rice                              | 38-40                      | Domestic Soap                 | ---                        |
| Bursa Rice                             | 60                         | Salty Trabzon Butter          | ---                        |
| Tosya and Ankara Rice                  | 59                         | Salty Anatolian Butter        | 130-140                    |
| Spain Bigan Chickpea                   | ---                        | Konya Aksaray Edible Butter   | 160                        |
| Bigan Chickpea                         | 21                         | Halis Aleppo Hadide Butter    | 155-170                    |
| Bandırma Chickpea                      | 18                         | First Class American Butter   | 115                        |
| Anatolian Konya Chickpea               | 15                         | Second Class American Butter  | 108                        |
| White Pasta                            | 43                         | Third Class American Butter   | 95                         |
| Brown Pasta                            | 40                         | Margarine                     | ---                        |
| Vermicelli                             | ---                        | First Class Balkan Cheddar    | ---                        |
| Semolina Pasta                         | ---                        | Second Class Balkan Cheddar   | ---                        |
| Bursa Product Surgeon Beans            | ---                        | Domestic Cheddar              | ---                        |
| Large Bush Beans                       | 32, 25-35                  | First Class White Cheese      | ---                        |
| Small Bush Beans                       | ---                        | Second Class White Cheese     | ---                        |
| Trabzon Beans                          | 23-25                      | First Class Domestic Olive    | 62                         |
| Reddish Beans                          | 22                         | Second Class Domestic Olive   | 57                         |
| Small White Beans                      | 30-37                      | Third Class Domestic Olive    | 45-50                      |
| Red Lentil                             | ---                        | First Class Golos Olive       | ---                        |
| Ordinary Lentil                        | ---                        | Second Class Golos Olive      | ---                        |
| First Class Bulgur                     | 25                         | First Class American Gas Oil  | 25                         |
| Second Class Bulgur                    | ---                        | Second Class American Gas Oil | 23                         |
| Selected Potato                        | 15                         | Batum Gas Oil                 | ---                        |
|  |                            | Atoval Romanian Gas Oil       | 17                         |

Source: BOA, DH.İUM E 57/47

Weekly sales prices were valid for one week and served as maximum prices.

A sample was given to food government officials working in the municipality administration for them to be able to identify the products indicated in the list.

The products that were bought by the customers were inspected to see whether or not they conformed to these samples.

Tradesmen who had complaints about the prices in the list were able to apply to the Economy Struggle Management via Food Chairmanship.

Complaints made by the community were transmitted to the Food Government Officials and would be taken into consideration immediately (BOA, DH.IUM E 57/47).

There were great differences between the prices applied in Istanbul and prices applied in other areas of the country. Transportation difficulties also had an impact on the prices of the products. An increase in transport costs also caused the prices to increase. Besides that, prices differed from region to region because of problems in the transport and the wagon trade, and because of the extension of the war. For example, food prices in Izmir were fifty per cent cheaper than food prices in Istanbul (Eldem, 1994:51). At the beginning of the Armistice Period the prices of some consumer goods were as following (Pamuk, 2000:80):

#### Prices of some Consumer Goods during the Armistice Period

| Consumer Good | Year 1914 | Year 1915 | Year 1916 | Year 1917 | Year 1918 | Year 1919 |
|---------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Bread         | 1.25      | 1.65      | 9.5       | 18        | 34        | 13        |
| Flour         | 1.75      | 2.3       | 12        | 34        | 45        | 20        |
| Potato        | 1         | 1.6       | 3         | 14        | 27        | 16        |
| Pasta         | 3         | 4.5       | 24        | 65        | 90        | 38        |
| Sugar         | 3         | 7.5       | 30        | 112       | 195       | 46        |
| Tea           | 60        | 120       | 250       | 400       | 500       | 250       |
| Rice          | 3         | 5         | 20        | 45        | 92        | 45        |
| Olive Oil     | 8         | 14.5      | 24        | 88        | 160       | 115       |
| Coal          | 115       | 126       | 200       | 420       | 975       | 3000      |

### **3. REASONS FOR COST OF LIVING INCREASES**

Obstacles to foreign trade routes were removed at the end of the Armistice Period. The newly imported products thus caused an increase in supply on the market. During the First World War and the Armistice Period it was more expensive to import wheat from Anatolia than from New York as a result of occupations, gang activities and raids by National Forces (Boratav, 2007:29), but the increase in products on the market was still not successful in solving the food problem. The reason for this stemmed from the fact that Ottoman money was depreciating against foreign currencies (BOA, DH.IUM20-8/2-50).

Another reason for the cost of living increases arose from tradesmen and those in or close to the power taking advantage of the war and the Armistice Period. Some merchants took advantage of the differences in the rates of exchange and this had an impact on domestic goods. For this reason prices caused the cost of living to continually increase. The Food Management determined who was involved in engrossing and who bid more than 10% as profiteers and a decision was taken to send these merchants to the Court-Martial (İkdam, December 15, 1919).

Another reason for the cost of living increase was the absence of coal. The lack of in coal caused transportation to come to a halt because the trains were run on coal. Procurement of foodstuffs could not be carried out since vital consumer goods were also transported by train. For this reason, there were difficulties in the transportation of foodstuffs to Istanbul. There was especial difficulty in the transportation of wheat, and the absence of coal meant that the population had no bread or that only uneatable poor quality bread containing straws or stones instead of wheat was produced (Çavdar, 2014:285).

Another reason for the cost of living increase was the fact that the merchants were engrossing with chaining method. A product that was sold in London for one lira should have been sold for 4.5 lira in Ottoman money when differences in rate of exchanges, freight charges and commission charges had been added to it, but while passing from hand to hand during the circulation it became much higher than it should have been because of differences in the dividends (Aydın, 2010:445).

A decrease in production, insufficient transportation, difficulties getting vital necessities to Istanbul and activities such as smuggling were among the reasons for the increase in the cost of living.

### **4. MEASURES TAKEN AGAINST THE COST OF LIVING**

For the purpose of solving the problem of the cost of living different measures were taken by the government of the Ottoman Empire.

People from all strata, whether government officials, bureaucrats or the general public, were substantially affected by the cost of living in Istanbul. Although consumer goods came from foreign countries after the Armistice Period, the level of the cost of living did not fall. This situation was an important indication that the cost of living did not just stem from insufficient production or from the fact that products could not be found.

Although different reasons were given for the cost of living, the real reason stemmed from the fact that the leaders of the Union and Progress Party gave the imported materials from Austria such as sugar, gas, dry goods to groups who were close to them and blocked other merchants from taking advantage of this right. This situation caused importation to be carried out by only one set of importers and therefore caused prices and the cost of living to increase (Aydın, 2008:702).

Measures were taken in order to increase the supply of foodstuffs to prevent the cost of living increases experienced in Istanbul. With this purpose, in the announcement made by the Public Food Management on September 1, 1917, trade in barley, rye, corn, vetch, buckwheat and all kinds of wheat, edible grains and breads was forbidden. (Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri,2013:175)

To provide the products the country needed and to prevent the cost of living from rising not only the sale of foodstuffs but also the sale of all products that were found to be appropriate with regard to the conditions in that period were potentially liable to be banned by the Committee of Injunction of Engrossing. The purpose of these prohibitions was to prevent an insufficient supply of the most needed products within the country at that period. For this purpose, the free sale of products such as cowhide leather and patent leather which were used in shoe production was forbidden on August 25, 1917. Those who needed these prohibited products had to receive credentials through consulting with the trades commission and they then had to apply to the merchants with these credentials. In addition, those who owned these products had to report how many of each product they had by the end of the month. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri,2013:172)

Another precaution taken against the food shortage was to announce food prices in list form. The governor under the presidency of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the pashas who were the head of the Public Necessities, the Public Police Department and Commissions of Tax for the War in Istanbul, Beyoğlu and Üsküdar came together on August 8, 1914 in order to ensure that Istanbul would not experience food shortages because of the taxes and precautions that taken as a result of the war. It was decided by the commission that the foodstuffs that were going to be brought from abroad or from inland for the needs of Istanbul would be held outside of the measures that were taken. It agreed that the bakeries, which had been seized for military requirements would continue to produce bread for the needs of the public. It was stated that the stockpiling and black-marketeering being experienced had caused great difficulties in foodstuffs reaching Istanbul and that legal processes would be immediately initiated against those who carried out such acts. It was also stated that definitive pricelists



would be prepared and those who did not obey these lists would be punished in order to prevent stockpiling and black-marketeering.( Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri,2013:34)

Moreover, precautions were also taken against preventing the increase in the cost of living and against food shortages. For this purpose, a ruling was made by the Council of Ministers on December 19, 1917. According to this ruling, it was stated that because there was difficulty in the procurement of foods, foodstuffs such as grapes and figs would be counted as foodstuffs and that, at the request of the Ministry of War, one-third of these products could be exported and the remaining two-third of these products could be freely sold on the Istanbul market (BOA, MV, 210/109).

Various precautions were taken for the purpose of removing the distress caused by the growing cost of living. Because of the fact that shortages were experienced in the procurement of necessities owing to the war, a fifty thousand kurus supplementary allowance was requested by the Ministry of Internal Affairs for the purpose of distributing these necessities to those in need and this decision was approved by the Council of Ministers (BOA, MV, 212/1).

The Economy Struggle Commission was established to prevent the cost of living from rising and to relieve the distress experienced. This commission was formed of specialists who would be employed by the municipality and the Chamber of Commerce to continually inspect the market and to take the necessary precautions to ensure a decrease in prices. (Aydın, 2010:445).

A ruling was made by the government about sending those selling high-priced goods to the Court-Martial for trial to prevent increases in cost of living and the prices of all vital necessities – especially foodstuffs. In the Grand Bazaar on September 4, 1917 it was confirmed by the Committee of Injunction of Engrossing that Gömlekçi Hacı İsmail Efendi had sold a Turkish yard of a fabric for thirty-six and a half kurus whereas he should have sold it for ten kurus. Similarly, Mustafa Nuri Efendi and Mehmed Tevfik Efendi from the Grand Bazaar were also dispatched to the Court-Martial because of handling cambric without having declared this. ( Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri,2013:177)

The management which was established within the body of the Food Commission controlled three areas: these were foodstuffs, transport and customs procedures. Priority was given to the food necessities department which was dealing with the procurement of vital necessities. This management tried to prevent the cost of living from rising by establishing control over the entire city by assigning one inspector to each of its nine districts (Aydın, 2010:446).

Another measure taken to prevent increases in the cost of living was the opening of the Sample Grocery Stores. It was decided by the Food-Economy Struggle Commission to open sample grocery stores in various districts of Istanbul for the purpose of making the foods needed by the public less expensive (Sabah, November 27, 1919). The Sample Grocery Stores

were established to reduce, by managing them, the extravagant prices set especially by the small retailers, but they were not themselves able to solve the problem of price increases.

Another practice carried out was the opening of the sales booths. The fact that the precautions taken had been insufficient and the fact that these precautions had not been able to prevent engrossing and the cost of living increases made the government search for new measures. For this purpose, booths were built in the city and consumer goods began to be sold in these booths. These places, in which the merchants would be selling objects for a price close to their wholesale prices, were allocated to them in various districts of Istanbul for free for a given period of time. The purpose in constructing of these booths was to prevent goods being sold at expensive prices by creating a competitive environment in which cheaper goods could be procured (Terzi, 2012:90).

The use of sales booths in the struggle against excess prices was seen not only in the Armistice Period but also in the period of Abdulhamid II. A large increase in prices was seen in the period of Abdulhamid II because of the decline in the value of Ottoman money owing to the war between the Ottoman Empire and Russia. There was an increase especially in meat prices. Sheep were bought and slaughtered at night by military department suppliers employed by Sultan Abdulhamid II so that the public would not go unnourished. These slaughtered sheep began to be sold in sites opened next to the butchers and in this way the butchers were made to lower their prices (Tahsinpaşa, 1990:192).

New measures were taken when it was found that domestic tradesmen were not applying to open sales booths. For this purpose, it was stated by Woods, who was the food negotiator of the Allied Powers that goods would be sold with the support of foreign companies and by the American Assistance Committee. The American Assistance Committee promised to sell products such as clothes, shoes, rice, sugar and coffee with only a small profit margin in these sales booths. American sales booths sold cheap products to the public and booths were opened in many districts of Istanbul, such as Beyazıt, Ayasofya, Sultanahmed, Aksaray, Laleli, Yenıcamii, Galata, Beyoğlu, Kasımpaşa, Beşiktaş, Kadıköy, Üsküdar, Beykoz and Beylerbeyi. After a while, sales booths were also opened by the French, alongside the American sales booths. Sales booths were built in Kadıköy, Fatih and Aksaray by the French and these booths served for meat sales in particular (Terzi, 2012:92-102).

## CONCLUSION

The economy was in a serious condition in Istanbul during the Armistice Period. Istanbul suffered from food shortages. The decrease that had occurred in production because of the occupation of the country and the war in Anatolia further aggravated the already existing food shortage. Various precautionary measures were taken by the Istanbul government to prevent increases in and to reduce the cost of living.

The increase in the cost of living took hold of the entire world in the aftermath of the First World War. The Ottoman Empire, and especially Istanbul, was also affected and to a greater extent than other large countries. This period caused speculation on one hand and black-marketeering on the other hand. Massive increases occurred in prices because the Ottoman money was continuously depreciating. The purchasing power of the public diminished with the depreciation of the currency.

The Economy Struggle Commission and the Economy Struggle Management were established by the government to prevent the cost of living from rising. These commissions were not able to solve the problem of the increasing cost of living and the government was forced into taking new measures. For this purpose, the exportation of food products was restricted and the attempt was made to provide the market with an excess supply.

One of the solutions that the Istanbul government applied to reduce the cost of living was to create a competitive market. Products which had been imported were sold to booths that were built in certain districts in the city. Through this, tradesmen who sold products at a high price were obliged to reduce their prices.

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