



How did trade blockades in World War One cause starvation in Lebanon?

Narrated by Carine Torbey

4. Famine in Lebanon

Lebanon as we know it today didn't exist before the end of the First World War. Back then it was just Mount Lebanon: an arid, semi-autonomous area under the world's greatest Islamic power, the Ottoman Empire.

In 1914, the Ottoman Empire covered 1.3 million square kilometres of land. By allying themselves with Germany, the Ottomans hoped to expand their empire even further. This alliance proved to be devastating for the people of Mount Lebanon.

Before the war, the economy was largely driven by the production of silk. Kfar Matta was one of the largest silk-reeling factories. In this room, mostly women worked the silk fibres from sunrise to sunset. The silk they produced here was shipped all the way to Europe, mainly to France.

But in 1915, international trade routes were cut off, as the allies imposed sea blockades. Silk production plummeted. Incomes dried up. Hunger spread across the mountains. Soldiers, not civilians, were the priority. All resources were confiscated for the Ottoman war effort. Families became desperate.

[Christian Tawtel - Historian] – In my researches I came across some terrible stories of that period. One of them is the story of the father who came to see a priest. He wanted to confess that he ate his own children because of starvation. Many similar cases of cannibalism are seen in the memoirs of Jesuits.

[Carine's narration resumes] – Fate was to deal one more extraordinary blow to Mount Lebanon: the worst locust attack in a generation.