

# Living Conditions of Ottoman Istanbul under Occupation at the End of World War I

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At the end of World War I, the defeated Ottoman Empire was forced to sign the Mudros Armistice on 30 October 1918, which enabled the Allied forces to send troops to any Ottoman territory as they deemed necessary. Taking the full advantage of, if not manipulating this armistice, the Allied Powers landed sizable military forces. Only 13 days after the signing of the armistice, France and Great Britain unofficially occupied the imperial capital. However, officially Istanbul was declared occupied on 16 March 1920. When the officers and diplomats came to the city, Allied embassies were forced to assess the living conditions in the city to guide their citizens who would take residence in the capital of the Ottoman Empire. These reports prepared by the diplomats already living in Istanbul are quite descriptive and reveal plainly the desperation of the city and its inhabitants.

The report I would like to focus on today is numbered 867.50/1 describing the living conditions in Constantinople. The report, dated December 26, 1918, was transmitted by American Commissioner Lewis Heck to the Secretary of State; however, the author of the report is Luther R. Fowle, a member of the ABCFM in Istanbul.

### Living Conditions in Constantinople

*For adults in good health, the question of living conditions in Constantinople is merely a question of money. Foods of most kinds can be had in abundance by those who can pay for them—but the mass of the people are suffering much. The charge for board in the American Colleges, that used to be \$200 per annum before the war is now \$1.000 and at this rate the College suffers a loss.*

*Pension for a single person costs from \$150 to \$200 per month and is found with difficulty. American families already established in Constantinople and keeping house for themselves most modestly expend over \$100 per month per head. To live in a good hotel costs about \$450 per month for board and lodging.*

*Cost in cents of certain staples are as follows: per pound*

*Sugar \$1.75, rice .90, white beans .45, kerosene 1.00, tabutter [butter?] 5.00, cheese 1.20, cooking butter 3.50, meat 1.60, flour .50, wheat .35, potatoes .25, milk .50.*

*Eggs .18 a piece, rubber galoshes \$30.00, shoes \$75.00, spool of thread \$1.50, man's suit of clothes \$200.*

*In February 1918 the Ottoman Minister of Finance stated in Parliament that prices had increased since the beginning of the war two thousand [2000%] percent for food-stuffs, and this still holds true. The ration of gold to paper currency is four to one. Hence, if gold can be imported, increased cost of living drops from 2000 percent to 500 percent.*

*No serious epidemic exists at the present time but the city is very dirty and the service of various public utilities—water, lights, trams, etc.—is most irregular and often cut off owing to the lack of fuel. It is to be expected that the entry of the Entente Forces will make possible an improvement in this regard.*

*The above is the situation, as it existed on December 7<sup>th</sup>, five weeks after the signing of the Armistice. There is no prospect of improvement in the immediate future. The Entente Forces are importing all their own foodstuffs, thus avoiding local prices almost entirely.*

*Children and adults without a definite work to do should not go nearer to Constantinople than Egypt or Italy until after May 1919.*

LIVING CONDITIONS OF OTTOMAN ISTANBUL UNDER  
OCCUPATION AT THE END OF WORLD WAR I

The same folder contains more detailed information about the daily life in Constantinople. This report (867.50/1) was penned by Lewis Heck on January 30, 1919.

Lewis Heck points out the great increase in cost of living in Constantinople and concludes that the 1000 percent increase in July 1917 was a combination of the following: (1) scarcity of supplies; (2) difficulties of transportation; (3) inflation of the currency and (4) inability to replenish stocks of imported goods due to the blockade.

*The main special cause was the action of political and even governmental agencies concerning the market in certain staple lines and in charging very high bribes for means of transportation.... The bread is the only foodstuff which has been rationed with a degree of success. During the summer of 1917 the 'vessika' or ration bread was extremely poor consisting of corn meal mud (?) for days at a time. In the autumn of 1917 the control of rations was taken over by the military authorities and conditions were at once improved owing partly to the new crop and to the better organization affected under military control. This improvement did not last for a long time and by the summer of 1918 the quality of bread was almost as poor as in the previous year.*

*Apart from bread there are distributions of sugar, cheese, matches, olives, and potatoes, but these articles were never given out with any regularity or in any considerable [quantity]. Three quarters of a pound of sugar per head used to be distributed about one piasters in three months at a charge of the 20 piasters an oke. (...)*

*In order to maintain the local water, electric light, tram and ferry services, the city of Constantinople requires about 1200 tons of coal a day. The Germans used to send here from Germany an average of about three hundred tons of coal and coke a day. After the Armistice these supplies from Germany were not only cut off and local stocks exhausted, but owing to the disorganization of the Turkish military department, most of the workmen, who were under military discipline stopped work at the mines of Zongouldak. It is also reported that German officers stationed there caused much damage to the machinery of the mines before they left. As a result, there was a period of about three weeks without electric light. It was at this time that public order was at its worst when the disorderly elements*

were encouraged by the darkness of the streets. There was much shooting in the streets at night, and often several men were killed in one night. There were a number of political murders at the same time. This situation is now much better; the authorities have decided to disarm the population of the city but this measure will not be carried out with any degree of efficiency in the prevailing circumstances. (...)

Since the latter part of December, it has been possible to maintain the electric light service more regularly so that now it does not go out for a very long period. The electric tram service has stopped running since the beginning of December chiefly from lack of coal and also because the company does not wish to resume operations until the Municipal authorities permit a decided increase in its tariffs (as much as 400 per cent.)

The water service was poor all through 1918, as the pumping apparatus at Lake Dercos was out of order and the water flowed for only a few days each week. Now there is water for several hours each day, but only a small supply and none can be used for street cleaning.

The Bosphorus and other boat services are limited by lack of coal, and boats are always dangerously overcrowded, although so far there have been no accidents. The service of the railways in both Asiatic and European Turkey is also limited because of short supplies of fuel. (...)

Persons returning to Constantinople are very much increased by the great number of people in the street who seem to have no occupation. This is due first to the fact that everybody must go on foot and also to the fact that trade and industry are almost at a complete standstill. (...)

During the war and especially the last two years some very great fortunes have been made in this country by people who were either in the government or who had the right sort of connections with men in authority. The figures of the amounts made by many persons are fantastic when one considers the utter misery and destitution of 95 per cent of the whole population. [They keep their money in Germany and Austria]. (...)

The ordinary Municipal services of the city, such as the removal of garbage, cleaning the streets etc., are very poor and the city is generally in a filthy condition, both the street and the people themselves, who have been obliged to keep on wearing the same clothes for several years due to lack of textiles. (...)

LIVING CONDITIONS OF OTTOMAN ISTANBUL UNDER  
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*With all the poverty prevailing in Constantinople, it is nevertheless in certain ways one of the best stocked cities in the world for those who have money to pay high prices. There are very few commodities, which cannot be obtained here if a sufficient amount is paid.*

I believe this report of Constantinople vividly describes the desperation of people in Constantinople, the capital city of the dying Ottoman Empire. Comparisons can only be imagined for other non-prominent Ottoman towns. It is during these troubled periods that Ottoman citizens awaited the signing of a peace treaty to normalize their lives, at least to a degree.

I have not seen any other report that describes the post war realities in a city as prominently as the report above. These reports are significant for it reveals the details of the daily life immediately after the World War I. There is significant amount of information in these reports that allow scholars to produce not only a case study, but also, more importantly, to examine the destruction of the World War I in terms of civilian life. One can compare these reports with the living conditions of other capitals in the world during and after the Great War. Historians can also compare and contrast these reports with local memoirs to see how they differ and analyze why they do. Regardless, I believe that the information contained in these reports are very useful for historians.

