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The Most Important Factors Influencing the Iranian Famine during the First World War

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ABSTRACT

The First World War was one of the most significant events of the twentieth century, whose devastating consequences affected the Iranian population despite Iran's declaration of neutrality, leading to the occupation of the country by Russian and British forces. The northwestern regions of Iran were also repeatedly subjected to attacks by Ottoman troops. A land that had long been exposed to drought and famine due to its climatic conditions, Iran on this occasion—under the shadow of foreign invasion and as a result of internal factors such as the inefficiency of governmental agents and the absence of crisis management, hoarding of grain and food supplies, weakness of the transportation network and road infrastructure, financial incapacity and national dependency, collapse of social order and expansion of poverty, banditry and plunder accompanied by the creation of a climate of fear, population decline caused by disease and debilitation, and fragmentation of military power, along with external factors including military occupation, control of food depots, and the large-scale purchase of Iranian grain by Britain and Russia—became afflicted by a massive catastrophe that laid the groundwork for the emergence of the Great Famine in Iran concurrent with the First World War. The primary objective of this article is to explain and analyze the most important internal and external factors contributing to the outbreak of famine in Iran during the First World War, based on reliable historical documents and reports. The main research question is: What were the most significant internal and external factors affecting the famine in Iran during the First World War? This study is a historical investigation in which data were collected through library-based research and presented using a descriptive-analytical method. The findings indicate that Iran, which due to its climatic conditions had always faced the risk of drought, experienced severe famine and extensive human losses as a result of the simultaneous aggression of foreign occupiers and the exploitative practices of domestic profiteers; a catastrophe whose political and economic repercussions remained in the country for many years.

Keywords: *Iran, First World War, famine, hoarding, Britain, Russia*

Introduction

The First World War began in 1914, following the assassination of the Austrian crown prince in Sarajevo, and rapidly engulfed three continents—Europe, Asia, and Africa. In Iran at that time, few imagined that the flames of this global war would also spread to their country, especially since the Iranian government had officially declared neutrality and denied any involvement in the conflict. The most natural consequence of the struggle between the belligerent powers on Iranian territory was the emergence of food shortages, or more precisely, famine in Iran. This was because Iran's ecological structure was not prepared to accommodate such "uninvited guests." Under the



combined force of weapons and financial power, occupying forces swiftly took control of food depots in order to supply their troops, a process that resulted in famine and hunger for the Iranian population (1-3).

The present study is structured around the main question: What were the most important internal and external factors that contributed to the outbreak of famine in Iran concurrent with the First World War? The two subsidiary questions are as follows: What were the most significant internal factors leading to famine in Iran during the First World War? And what were the most significant external factors leading to famine in Iran during the same period? The main hypothesis of the study is that the famine in Iran during the First World War was linked to multiple internal factors such as profiteering and multiple external factors such as military occupation. The two subsidiary hypotheses of this research are: first, that profiteers, hoarders, the war-induced psychological climate, and the inefficient management of state officials constituted the most important internal causes of famine in Iran during the First World War; and second, that military invasion, occupation of Iranian territory, intimidation of the population to extract food supplies, and the purchase of provisions at abnormal prices were among the most important external causes of famine in Iran during the First World War (3, 4).

The primary objective of this research is to describe, examine, and analyze the role of the most important internal and external factors in the outbreak of famine in Iran during the First World War. The subsidiary objectives are: first, to explain the role of major internal factors in the emergence of famine concurrent with the First World War; and second, to explain the role of major external factors in the occurrence of famine in Iran during the First World War.

Among the existing sources, numerous works have addressed the phenomenon of famine and its consequences. Ahmad Seif, in *The Economy of Iran in the Nineteenth Century*, devotes a chapter entitled "Famine in Iran" to the causes and consequences of famine in Qajar-era Iran (5). Oskar von Niedermayer, the German envoy to Iran during the First World War, refers in his memoirs *Under Iran's Burning Sun* to widespread banditry and insecurity in Iran during the war (6). Martin Henry Donohoe, in *Mission to Iran: Iran in World War I*, recounts what he personally witnessed as famine in the northwestern regions of Iran (7). Mohammad Gholi Majd's book *The Great Famine and Genocide in Iran* presents extensive data concerning the famine in Iran concurrent with the First World War (3). Willem Floor, in *A History of Bread in Iran*, offers a thorough analysis of the importance of bread in Iranian culture (8). The general condition of Iran during the First World War is examined by Touraj Atabaki in *Iran and World War I* (1). Mohammad Gholi Majd, in *Britain and the Occupation of Iran in World War I*, discusses in detail the events related to this subject (2). Seyyed Babak Ruh al-Amini, in *Banditry in the Qajar Period*, provides an extensive examination of one of the major internal causes of famine (9). Elham Malekzadeh, relying on archival sources, reports the internal and external factors influencing famine in Iran during the First World War in her work of the same title (4). Willem Floor, based on archival documentation, addresses critical aspects of food supply and famine in *Food Security in Iran* (10). Mohammad Bakhtiari, in *Iran's Rural Society in the Qajar Period*, analyzes rural social conditions that continually fostered the internal background of famine (11). Stephanie Cronin, in her discussion of bread riots in Qajar Iran, highlights the central role of bread in the Iranian diet and the social unrest caused by its scarcity (12). In addition, Mohammad Mirsandsi, in *Historical Sociology of Security in Iran*, investigates the causes of famine and drought in Iran from a sociological perspective (13).

The Most Important Factors Influencing the Iranian Famine during the First World War

During the First World War, Iran not only suffered the occupation of its territory by Russian, British, and Ottoman forces, but also faced internal structural weaknesses in its economic and administrative systems. The Great Famine

of Iran (1917–1919) resulted from the convergence of two major forces: a set of internal crises and the pressures imposed by foreign invasion. An examination of historical sources indicates that a combination of climatic, political, diplomatic, military, economic, and social factors contributed to the formation and intensification of this catastrophe. Poverty and deprivation engulfed large segments of the population, while internal tensions and foreign interventions created challenges that undermined comprehensive planning for economic reform (14).

Major Internal Factors

Iran's Climatic Conditions

Because of its arid and semi-arid climate, Iran has historically been exposed to drought and chronic food shortages. Overall precipitation in Iran has consistently remained below the global average, with annual rainfall ranging approximately between 250 and 300 millimeters, and this limited rainfall has been unevenly distributed across regions and seasons, resulting in sharp regional disparities (13). Geologists maintain that annual rainfall in Iran was higher in earlier periods but gradually declined due to two main causes: first, the destruction of vast numbers of tall trees that had functioned as natural rain absorbers; and second, the widespread use of charcoal as fuel in the nineteenth century, which depended on large-scale deforestation until petroleum gradually replaced charcoal (5). It is also reported that in 1917, adverse climatic conditions intensified (15).

In his correspondence, Abdolhossein Mirza Farmanfarmā referred to delayed rainfall and the destruction of spring crops, warning: “If they attempt to transport the state's grain, the entire population will die of hunger and famine will occur... If God bestows His grace and rain falls, the situation may improve; otherwise, conditions will become extremely severe” (16). This inherent weakness in agricultural production rendered Iran particularly vulnerable to political and military crises. For years prior to the war, increased cultivation of opium and cotton and a growing emphasis on cash crops had reduced the area devoted to cereals, thereby disrupting the balance of national food production and eliminating surplus reserves. Consequently, at the outbreak of the war, Iran's agricultural and food supply system was already in a highly fragile state (5).

Expansion of Poverty and Collapse of Social Order

Economic conditions fundamentally shaped the social structure: the poor perished while the wealthy descended into poverty (17). With the exception of the Caspian coastal provinces, Kermanshah, and parts of Azerbaijan, most regions of Iran could scarcely feed their populations without resorting to food imports. Long before the war, the majority of the population suffered from malnutrition and inadequate diets. Irregular food distribution led to sharp price increases. The price of bread from 1830 to 1902 rose more than fivefold, and in 1914, with the outbreak of the First World War and the entry of Russian and British forces into Iran, prices surged even further. The Great Famine of 1914–1918 was so horrific that it left contemporary observers stunned (5).

The accumulation of corpses under inhumane conditions in public spaces, the dramatic rise in mortality in cities such as Golpayegan and Kashan, and the mass burial of the poor by fiscal authorities testified to the expansion of poverty and the disintegration of family structures and social order. In Golpayegan, the city's fiscal officer requested funds for the burial of impoverished dead. It is particularly striking that such tragic conditions prevailed in a city that served as one of Isfahan's principal sources of grain. In Kashan, the General Accounting Office concluded that the presence of corpses in the streets—313 adults and 160 children, a total of 473 individuals—was provoking public

outrage and fear, necessitating the allocation of transport revenues for sanitation and public health expenses. In Shiraz, according to Percy Sykes, out of a population of fifty thousand, ten thousand people perished (18). Such conditions demonstrate that famine was not merely a natural or military phenomenon, but a crisis rooted in the collapse of social and political structures. In Isfahan and Golpayegan, shortages of bread and the soaring price of grain triggered popular uprisings (19).

Inefficiency of the Qajar Government

On the eve of the First World War, the weakness of the Qajar governmental structure can be understood as the result of Ahmad Shah's lack of interest in the country (17) and the incompetence of statesmen and the conflicts among political parties (20). Together with the absence of any crisis-management system, these factors generated some of the most important domestic drivers of famine in that period. In reality, none of the governments was capable of meeting the population's economic needs, because their problems were rooted in Iran's earlier political trajectories. During the First World War, at least seven short-lived cabinets came to power, and the political chaos that followed made any durable reform or stable transformation effectively impossible (21). Successive governments were practically unable to take meaningful action against the presence of foreign forces; they arrived and departed in a cycle of ineffectiveness (1).

Iranian governments were entangled in internal disputes, administrative corruption, and economic mismanagement, and the origin of these dysfunctions lay in the failure to implement the law (22). It was also argued by prominent clerics—Shari'at Isfahani, Molla Abdullah Mazandarani, and Akhund Khurasani—that factionalism and discord, internal fighting, the continuation of insecurity, and the collaboration of corrupt elements and armed criminals in killing, looting, and violations against others created a pretext for foreign intervention (23). As Farmanfarmā observed: "A country that for ten years has been entirely in upheaval, without provincial administration, amid arbitrariness, audacity, differences of belief and doctrine, and factional alignments—its condition is evident..." (16). Reports also repeatedly referenced behind-the-scenes intrigues among political elites, with some accusing others of being installed agents or spies. Farmanfarmā, for example, obtained a document suggesting a covert relationship between Solat al-Dowleh and a number of Iranian gendarmerie officers. On the other hand, Farmanfarmā himself became suspicious of the gendarmerie and came to believe in the necessity of cooperation with the forces under Sykes and the strengthening of the South Persia Rifles, leaving Sykes with considerable freedom of action. Britain, it was claimed, was determined to separate Fars in the same way as Bahrain and to place its governance in the hands of Farmanfarmā and his sons (20).

As Seif stated, "The occurrence of famine in Iran was an avoidable calamity—on the condition that Iran possessed farsighted and compassionate rulers; but it did not" (5). Despite the fact that Tehran's granary traditionally held supplies sufficient for forty days and the system was functioning properly, famine nevertheless occurred (24). According to Farmanfarmā, the bread unrest absorbed nearly all department heads, and groups of women and men poured into the provincial administration shouting; he added that the general public lacked social and political consciousness (16).

Financial Incapacity and Economic Dependence

The principal challenge of Iran's domestic politics was to impose order and discipline on the country's financial system, because once that problem was solved, other national problems could be addressed. However, owing to

the actions of reactionary forces, foreign interference, and internal deficiencies, Iran's newly established parliamentary system failed to implement fiscal reforms—reforms that were considered the only path to rebuilding the state's institutional foundations. The failure of financial reforms led to greater borrowing from Russia and Britain and increased dependence upon them (25, 26). The chronic budget deficit of the Qajar state, heavy debts to Russia and Britain, and the inability to mobilize domestic finance stripped the government of administrative capacity. Plans for domestic borrowing failed, and the state was compelled to seek foreign loans—an outcome that weakened Iran's economic sovereignty (17).

Iran's financial problems were extensive. The government attempted to secure loans from private associations, but Russia—pursuing a policy of expanding influence in Iran—undermined these efforts and insisted that loans should be taken only from the two governments. Another major financial issue was the depreciation of Iran's currency beginning roughly a decade before the First World War: with the circulation of paper rubles in northern Iran and the rising price of silver, coin shortages emerged and trade contracted, so that one rial fell to the value of eight pence. As a consequence, British expenses doubled (18). A further complication appeared in the form of a monetary famine: cash was not abundant in Iran, while British demand for currency was extremely high (2).

Structural Weakness of the Central State

Iran's overall condition was chaotic, and the bankrupt Qajar government was simultaneously confronted with economic crises, political conflicts, and comprehensive interference by foreign powers. In order to escape this predicament, Ahmad Shah repeatedly reshuffled cabinets and replaced prime ministers, yet none of these governments demonstrated meaningful resilience in the face of internal and external problems (27). Although the regulations drafted by Mokhber al-Saltaneh and Arance Rancouin, a Belgian expert in the Ministry of Finance, were reasonable in **1912**, they had been designed for normal conditions and were ill-suited to famine circumstances. In such a crisis, strict regulations for inspecting bakeries and flour mills were essential (10). The unsanitary condition of warehouses and insect infestations further exacerbated shortages, price inflation, and repeated episodes of famine, which in turn precipitated significant political shifts and discouraged any positive expectations regarding Iran's political situation. Despite famine conditions, provisions continued to be exported, inspectors worked intensively, and there was no authority capable of overcoming the subsistence crisis (2).

According to Stephanie Cronin, Iran's tribal political structure and the absence of stable central authority in the early twentieth century meant that the state responded weakly to crises such as famine and war (12). In this context, many individuals became victims of inflation and deteriorating economic conditions. One case was Matin al-Saltaneh, who—after the bread price crisis of **22 December 1912**—was accused of collusion with bakers to raise wheat prices; this issue later became one of the factors leading to his assassination by the Committee of Punishment (28). Rivalries among ministers, bribery by princes, and Ahmad Shah's indifference to public livelihood destroyed public trust. In Majd's interpretation, famine in Iran was the direct outcome of state incapacity and the ruling class's exploitation of popular poverty. Overall, these domestic factors created the conditions for the emergence and spread of famine in Iran during the First World War. The weakness of agricultural structures, hoarding, economic mismanagement, administrative incapacity, and entrenched corruption—together with external pressures—produced a crisis that claimed the lives of millions of Iranians, leaving social and economic consequences that persisted for decades in Iran's history (29).

In cities and provinces alike, political conflicts left little opportunity to address the population's horrific condition. Meanwhile, people—driven by the torment of starvation—lost self-control and awareness and reportedly resorted to cannibalism; police forces, in searches of streets and houses, found human remains and bones. The ministers of the Shah's weak and lethargic cabinet were largely unable to respond. Some Democrats even argued, optimistically, that the people should endure hunger until hoarders were compelled to release their stored wheat; this group also did not welcome Britain's limited efforts to alleviate the famine, because if conditions stabilized they could not expect unrest and protest that would advance their political interests (7).

Hoarding and Profiteering at Micro and Macro Levels

The reality is that the absence of accountability among authoritarian rulers was common: because such rulers were not chosen by the people, they felt little concern about public dissatisfaction. To the extent that not only did they fail to alleviate famine, but hoarding of grain by those in power can be treated as a primary origin of famine. Kaykhosrow Shahrukh, the Zoroastrian representative in the National Consultative Assembly and a member of the Tehran Relief Commission, in a meeting aimed at persuading Ahmad Shah to sell hoarded provisions, explicitly pointed to the Shah's responsibility toward the people under the Constitution (30, 31). Amidī Nūrī, in his memoirs, wrote that Tehran "burned in the fire of famine," that people were terrified, that the surrounding harvest was meager and bakeries rarely operated, and that everyone knew Ahmad Shah had stored his wheat crop and refused to sell it at a normal rate, demanding two hundred tomans per kharvar—hence the public nickname "Ahmad the Merchant" (2).

At the same time, hoarders and profiteers—often alongside state agents—stockpiled flour, wheat, and grain, worsening livelihood conditions. This escalation contributed to conflicts between bakery officials and Bernard, and the famine produced by such dynamics was attributed more than anything to the lack of prudent governance by Iranian officials (24). These pressures gradually widened political fractures which, according to Blosher, operated in both formal and informal—or national—forms (32). According to a document dated 17 October 1912, the Director-General of the Ministry of Finance asked Monsieur Bernard to confirm a number of trusted individuals to supervise the allocation of revenue to the poor and famine-stricken in Borujerd through the Toumanians trading house, and to dispatch Amir Khan, a finance inspector, to Borujerd for two months—an indication that shortages and hoarding were already being referenced in official correspondence (33). On some occasions, bakers themselves, aware that liquidity had reached the public by one means or another, raised bread prices and thereby deepened famine and hunger—especially among women and children—because even that limited cash was often exhausted by men in opium dens (7).

Sykes remarked: "It is shameful to mention this, but nonetheless it must be said that Iranian officials even hoarded shrouds" (18). One of the intensifying drivers of famine was the hoarding of grain by landlords, princes, and merchants. Mostofi's account describes the sealing of wheat warehouses and the sale of their contents at exorbitant prices (24). Large-scale British purchasing drove prices upward, and anticipation of even higher prices tempted landowners to hoard grain. This practice, combined with governmental indifference, pushed the population toward starvation (2, 34). The increase in wheat prices from 1913 to 1917, from thirty-five tomans per kharvar to two hundred tomans, was described as a grave and catastrophic phenomenon. Famine encompassed the entire country, though its intensity varied across cities (35). The hedonism and profiteering of certain leading figures further compounded the crisis (20).

Weakness of the Transportation Network and Roads

Because of the absence of secure and standardized communication routes, and due to governmental incompetence and inefficiency, transporting foodstuffs from one region to another during periods of shortage was highly problematic and conflict-generating. Moreover, not only were production techniques extremely rudimentary and the tax burden distributed unevenly, but in the absence of roads, surplus production in one region could not mitigate shortages in another (5). The lack of road and transport infrastructure, together with insecurity on major routes, constituted another domestic factor that obstructed the timely and equitable distribution of provisions. The absence of engineered roads, the plundering of caravans, and the reliance on mule- and camel-based grain transport impeded the transfer of food from fertile regions to areas in crisis.

According to a telegram from the government of Isfahan dated 23 May 1914, Samsam al-Saltaneh reported that extraordinary rainfall had blocked roads and that shortages had become noticeable; three days later, after the rainfall ceased, the weather improved and “relief” was achieved. This reflects the deterioration and underdevelopment of roads. The use of horse-drawn carriages and freight wagons for passenger and cargo transport itself constituted a major logistical problem, and assurances were reportedly given by the state to improve correspondence and postal services in the vicinity of Isfahan (Shahreza). Sykes referred to the construction of one thousand miles of roads in southern Iran, yet roads built by the British served British military interests more than they benefited Iran (18, 33).

Dispersion of Tribal Power and Rebellion

One of the consequences of the turbulent years of revolution was widespread insecurity in Iran. It has been argued that, roughly every fifteen years, a large-scale insecurity-producing event occurred in Iran’s historical experience (13). Among prominent cases was Salar al-Dowleh, whose rebellion reportedly cast the country into fear and anxiety (26). Inflation and the scarcity of bread and grain produced destructive outcomes such as theft, plunder, and banditry—patterns repeatedly visible throughout Iranian history. A government request, dated 30 September 1918, calling for the return of stolen property to the inhabitants of Faridan and for preventing Bakhtiari horsemen from committing abuses in that area—while simultaneously seeking accommodation with the same group—implicitly confirms persistent robbery and looting, and the lack of control over raiders resulted in extensive destruction and devastation (33).

Na’ib Hossein Kashani and his son Masha’allah Khan challenged nearly all constitutional governments. Despite repeated efforts, these governments failed to apprehend these rebels, who had gathered roughly two thousand riflemen around themselves (22). Bandits and looters created insecurity across many regions. Sykes wrote that the road from Qahveh Rokh to Isfahan—a distance of fifty miles—had been blocked by Ja’far Qoli, one of the leaders of brigands, and that Isfahani merchants were subjected to extreme hardship; he added that Russian Cossacks, under strict command, made the main Tehran road more or less secure, and that without these Russian forces, the Iranian state had no capacity to confront such criminals and bandits (18). In another instance, the government official responsible for apprehending bandits in Khaf considered thirty horsemen insufficient and requested one hundred (36).

Iran’s vast territory, the lack of cohesion and unity among statesmen, competition over power, severe economic conditions, and the restrictions imposed by occupying forces in cities created an enabling environment for criminality

and banditry across many provinces; these are only a few illustrations of insecurity and lawlessness. Dowlatabadi recounts that a mounted raider near Astarabad rapidly stole a bundle of bedding; after several days, a stench emerged from the bundle, and when it was opened a dead child was discovered inside (17). Plunder, theft, and banditry were among the major contributors to social fragmentation and the erosion of cohesion in Iran during the First World War. Although tribal military capacity could have been valuable and mobilized in the service of the homeland, multiple factors led some groups into warfare and predation, to the point that their preferred occupation became raiding and looting sedentary communities (29).

Population Decline Due to Disease and Debilitation

Sykes reported that before the conflict with the Qashqai had even ended, both victors and defeated were struck by a terrifying influenza epidemic in 1918, collapsing to the ground; in Shiraz, out of a population of fifty thousand, ten thousand died. He further stated that Farmanfarmā barely survived and that, after recovering, he explained in striking French that “half of Shiraz has died” (18). Akhavat also refers to three disasters: famine, the Spanish influenza, and cholera (37). Majd reports that typhus spread in western and northwestern Iran in 1918, and that later in the same year plague and influenza also appeared. The influenza strain circulating among British forces differed from that affecting the local population; in any case, widespread weakness and hunger among the people certainly aggravated the severity of disease (2).

Salur records that ‘Ayn al-Saltaneh claimed that as many as one thousand people per day died from hunger and its related diseases; some houses remained locked, with all occupants dead. Men, women, and children died of acute starvation; to fill their stomachs they ate the flesh of dead animals; they lacked shelter; and villagers arrived in waves from mountains and villages (38). Kahalzadeh reports that news from Kurdistan described poverty and deprivation reaching such extremes that the poor suffocated their children and consumed their flesh (20). Although precise victim counts are not feasible for Iran, there is little doubt that hundreds of thousands fell victim to governmental negligence and the evasion of responsibility (5).

The failure of Iranian chroniclers to register accurate statistics, together with censorship of documents held by invading powers, has prevented the presentation of clear evidence on population size and famine casualties in Iran during the First World War. Divergent views regarding population and mortality figures are plainly visible. One estimate holds that two million out of a national population of twelve million suffered famine and the contagious diseases associated with it (39). Majd argues that eight to ten million Iranians perished as a result of famine and disease, and that famine occurred on a vast scale (3, 29). Although this figure may appear exaggerated, it remains noteworthy.

Major External Factors

Britain

Britain’s role in the outbreak of famine in Iran during the First World War constitutes one of the most significant and at the same time most controversial dimensions of this historical catastrophe. In fact, Britain’s military and economic policies, more than any other external factor, played a decisive role in intensifying the famine crisis. The seizure of Iran represented a new phase in Britain’s long-standing expansionist strategy, aimed at completing the chain of its vast empire by linking possessions from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Pacific coast of Asia (15).

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Iran formally declared its neutrality, yet British forces, driven by rivalry with Russia and under the pretext of countering the Ottomans, expanded their military presence and occupied southern and western Iran. Ottoman military operations in Azerbaijan, which according to reports resulted in the killing of thousands of civilians, further prompted Britain to deploy troops in order to protect the oil fields of Abadan (40). The discovery of oil in neutral Iranian territory in 1907 and its commercial production in 1912 significantly increased Britain's strategic engagement in Iran. By November 1914, southwestern Iran was under British military occupation, and by early 1916 Fars had also been occupied. No Russian or Ottoman forces were present in southern Iran at that time; the region was entirely controlled by Britain (2, 3).

Violation of Neutrality and Occupation of Iran

Events in northern and western Iran directly influenced developments in the south and strengthened Britain's expanding presence. As noted, following Ottoman incursions Britain violated Iran's declared neutrality, and British operatives—beginning with the entry of a British warship into the Karun River—undertook actions that explicitly disregarded Iran's neutral status (4). This military presence not only undermined Iran's political sovereignty but also severely disrupted its economic and social systems. Although Iran proclaimed neutrality, its territory was violated from every direction, while the government made little effort to defend that status despite having both official and unofficial forces at its disposal (17).

Seizure of Grain and Provisions by Britain

Numerous reports from British commanders, including General Dunsterville, reveal that British forces procured massive quantities of grain—often forcibly—from western and southern Iran to supply their troops. In a letter dated 5 May 1918, Dunsterville expressed “complete satisfaction” with the provisioning of his forces, while at the same time the population of Hamadan and surrounding areas were dying of hunger (2). British authorities, coordinating with the Viceroy of India, decided to launch military operations in southern Iraq and Iran. In 1916, in competition with Russia and in fear of Ottoman advances, Britain established the South Persia Rifles, significantly increasing British troop numbers in the south. This massive consumption of Iranian food resources produced acute grain shortages and soaring bread prices. According to 'Ayn al-Saltaneh, Russian and British military administrations stockpiled provisions for their forces, and Britain even ordered the Imperial Bank of Persia to purchase and store grain, including in Qazvin, far from the operational zone of the South Persia Rifles (17, 38).

Disruption of the Domestic Market

The British army requisitioned vast quantities of agricultural products, livestock, and transport resources to supply its forces. British authorities purchased or confiscated grain warehouses and procured over 500,000 tons of grain for their army. At the same time, they obstructed Iran's trade with Mesopotamia and the United States and prevented food imports from America, even during the height of famine. Although grain was inexpensive and plentiful in India, Britain refrained from purchasing it for famine-stricken Iranians—apparently to prioritize the needs of its Middle Eastern military forces (2).

Economic and Political Dominance after the Russian Revolution

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the withdrawal of Russian forces from Iran, British influence reached its peak. Taking advantage of the power vacuum in northern Iran, Britain expanded its economic and military dominance from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea (39). The deployment of General Dunsterville's forces in Manjil and Rasht demonstrated Britain's determination to control north–south communication routes and to use Iran as a strategic corridor between India and Russia. Consequently, Iran effectively became a zone of exclusive British influence (39). British economic and military policies not only contributed to the deaths of millions of Iranians but also weakened Iran's economic independence for decades. Public anger toward Britain surfaced most visibly in opposition to the 1919 agreement.

Attempted Trusteeship and Continued Political Influence

British influence expanded steadily, particularly after 1917, when Russian forces evacuated Iran. With Russia sidelined and Germany and the Ottoman Empire weakened, Britain consolidated its dominance. General Lionel Dunsterville, with only two hundred soldiers and several small vessels, secured control of the Caspian Sea, while southern Iran remained under British authority. This absence of rivals encouraged Britain to pursue formal trusteeship over Iran in 1919, although opposition from the United States and France prevented this outcome. Nevertheless, Iran became increasingly isolated politically and economically, accelerating its economic deterioration (41). Overall, historical evidence demonstrates that Britain—through violation of neutrality, military occupation, forced grain requisitions, and trade monopolization—played a decisive role in the emergence and expansion of the Great Famine in Iran.

Resource Plunder and Human Catastrophe

Beyond maintaining an 8,000-man military force at enormous expense, Britain also supervised Cossack officers and deployed additional troops from India and Mesopotamia to control Khorasan and Baku (39). Large portions of Iran's agricultural output, livestock, and fodder were seized and consumed by British forces. While the local population starved, priority was given to feeding British and Indian soldiers. Domestic sources confirm that Britain, alongside Russia, was a direct agent in intensifying starvation in Iran through excessive grain purchases, exclusive stockpiling, and trade blockades. Internal documents and consular reports describe horrific scenes of hunger and mass death in towns and villages resulting from these policies. Majd characterizes Britain's strategy as a form of military–economic domination designed not merely to supply its army but to undermine Iran's economic capacity and resistance (29).

Russia

Among the foreign powers that contributed to the Great Famine in Iran, Russia's role was more pronounced in the northern regions of the country. Iran's strategic position and its importance for safeguarding Russian interests turned the country into a theater of military and political rivalry between two great powers; alongside other factors, this rivalry contributed to the expansion of famine across Iranian territory (27).

Military Occupation and Violation of Iran's Sovereignty

Russia and Britain, which under the 1907 agreement had placed parts of Iranian territory under their respective spheres of influence, expanded that influence even further only eighty days after Iran declared neutrality in the war, by concluding a new agreement in 1915. The Ottoman Empire, for its part, accepted Iran's neutrality on the condition that Russia withdraw its forces from Azerbaijan (42). Ottoman military incursions into Azerbaijan provided the pretext for expanded Russian campaigns in Iran, and Russia—together with Iranian forces—confronted the Ottomans in these regions (43). Claiming that its presence was necessary to ensure the security of Russian subjects, Russia rejected demands to evacuate Azerbaijan (44). The Russian minister plenipotentiary reportedly told Mostofi al-Mamalek: "What guarantee exists that after our army withdraws, the Ottomans will not bring their forces into Iran?" (45).

Requisition of Grain and Stockpiling of Provisions

One of Russia's most destructive measures was the seizure and transfer of grain and agricultural products to feed its forces. According to Mostofi's notes, the Russian provisioning commission collected thousands of kharvars of wheat and barley daily from northern warehouses and dispatched them to the Caucasus (24). In Azerbaijan, villages were subjected to requisitions, and any sale or movement of grain without Russian authorization was prohibited. Russian forces even blocked the entry of provisions from western Iran and closed trade routes. These policies sharply reduced food supply and produced unprecedented increases in the prices of wheat and rice. The severe shortage of food—driven by Russian and British military consumption of agricultural output and by restrictions on the entry of provisions, especially from the west—generated a massive catastrophe for Iranian society and led to the deaths of thousands; historical accounts of this period describe it as "one of the greatest human catastrophes of the century" in Iran (2). Beyond the inhumanity of these actions toward Iranians, Saatchian argues that they were also damaging to Russia itself (15).

Russia also purchased and stockpiled grain. According to available reports, the price of wheat in Tabriz rose due to Russian actions, and people returned empty-handed from bakeries. In Mazandaran and Gilan, Russian forces caused destruction, collecting grain and rice wherever they could; in some cases, they set markets on fire, and in one such incident a thousand sacks of rice—potentially crucial for alleviating hunger—were consumed by flames, while famine and inflation remained an "uninvited guest" for the Iranian population. Iran's central government, unable to confront Russian killing and looting, instructed local governors to meet the needs of Russian troops and to ensure that their required grain and provisions were supplied. Nevertheless, towns and villages along Russian routes were systematically plundered (2).

Destruction of Agricultural Infrastructure and Devastation of Villages

Following the deployment of Russian forces, large areas of farmland in northern Iran were devastated. In order to prevent the looting of harvests, peasants abandoned their lands. Beyond forced extraction of crops, Russian forces burned farms, orchards, and fields along their routes (16). This destruction disrupted production cycles and generated forced rural displacement. A report concerning the abuses of Mahmud Khan Estaki, a Russian agent in villages around Isfahan, provides an example of the destructive conduct of Russian forces in central Iran (33). Certain Russian representatives and subjects—including an individual referred to as "Kaver"—possessed

extraordinary privileges and influence in Iran's economy, such as irrigation concessions and the seizure of extensive lands, benefiting only select individuals. By early winter 1914, it became clear that Isfahan province had become a focal point of Russian politico-economic activity, and Britain recognized Russia's insatiable appetite. Control over water and land concessions lay in the hands of occupiers, and such abuses undoubtedly had direct effects on bread crises and famine (26).

Trade Policies and the Blocking of Exchange

Russia's presence in northern Iran severely disrupted the country's commercial relations. According to a report by the head of the Babolsar customs office, from the beginning of the war the export of oil, sugar, and flour from Russia to Iran was prohibited, and imports through northern ports were halted (46). Whenever people, fearing famine, attempted to prevent the export of goods, the Russian consulate imprisoned responsible officials. This practice fueled price inflation. The cost of imported goods—already high—rose further, while local products also became more expensive under these policies (2). Many merchants and bazaaris went bankrupt. It was also common for foreign traders to use their advantages to drive Iranian competitors into bankruptcy (5).

At the same time, the port of Bushehr remained open for unloading foreign goods and was administered under the protection of British forces and the South Persia Rifles. Many merchants could import foreign goods through Bushehr and distribute them across the country via Shiraz. The establishment of the Jahaniyan trading house in Isfahan and later its branches in other cities exemplifies such activities; in administrative terms, these firms were British. Prices of imported goods rose sharply—for example, “kerm ink” used as a disinfectant in medical practice was priced at twenty-four qirans per mithqal, while one man of sugar reached four tomans, and the price of matches also increased (37).

Human and Social Impacts of the Occupation of Iran

The presence of foreign forces in Iran produced a terrifying famine, which many reports describe as among the greatest mass killings, with a scale and intensity rarely observed elsewhere. According to observers such as Mirza Abolqasem Kahalzadeh, famine produced extensive mortality in Tehran due to the disappearance and scarcity of bread and other foodstuffs—an outcome attributed to the entry of foreign forces into Iran. Corpses of the starving reportedly accumulated in the streets in horrifying layers. Iranians were dissatisfied with both Russia and Britain; even after the Russian Revolution, despite commitments reportedly made to Iran by “Bravin,” the Bolshevik representative, no meaningful improvement was observed in popular conditions (20). Beneath the ash of war and famine, the fire of popular anger and dissatisfaction with despotism and colonialism continued to flare.

Russia's Rivalry with Germany in Iran

In his memoirs, Percy Sykes wrote that one of the German spies was a German merchant named “Pogin,” who wore Iranian clothing and outwardly presented himself as Muslim. Sykes claimed that this individual succeeded in influencing many residents of Isfahan, telling them that the German nation had converted to Islam and that the Kaiser was truly a “Haji.” Assassination and terror became preferred tools, and the Russian vice-consul in Isfahan was first targeted and killed; later the British consul-general (Mr. J. Graham) was wounded, while his Indian officer was killed. Isfahan became so dangerous that all European residents left the city in early autumn **1915**, heading toward Ahvaz (18). This account suggests that German activities in Iran prior to and during the war helped furnish

occupiers with pretexts, while the sensitivities of Russia and Britain toward German influence, in pursuit of their own expansionist agendas, contributed to war and famine in Iran.

Russia's Rivalry with the Ottoman Empire and Escalation of War in Azerbaijan

In the escalation of the First World War, the Ottoman Empire—alongside Russia—also played a major role, particularly along Iran's western borders. Due to their presence in certain areas, the price of wheat reportedly rose to nearly eighty toman per kharvar and rice to six hundred toman, while daily hoarding eliminated more members of the population and this pattern persisted (45, 47). Repeated clashes between Russian and Ottoman forces in Azerbaijan—sometimes around Tabriz, Urmia, and Salmas—resulted in the destruction of food resources and the spread of famine across the north and center of the country. On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire, driven by Pan-Turkic sentiments and the dream of a unified homeland for Turkic-speaking populations, opened a new front in Azerbaijan, turning the region into one of the principal battlefields of the First World War (45).

Archival documents indicate that in addition to Russia and Britain, the Ottoman Empire and Germany were also present in Iran during the war years—Ottoman forces in the west and German influence wherever circumstances required. The oppression of the Ottoman army against border populations intensified: money and goods were extracted from the people in various forms, while the name of the Iranian nation and state was discredited and predation enriched private pockets. Political mobilizations and protests in assemblies also targeted Nezam al-Saltaneh Mafi in western Iran, with the state declaring his government illegitimate—developments that generated major problems and further undermined national cohesion (33).

Coercive Policies and Harsh Conduct of Russian Forces

Numerous reports describe violent Russian conduct toward the population in northern Iran. House plundering, livestock confiscation, and summary executions formed part of their intimidation policies (4). Russian forces not only refused to pay fair prices for grain, but in some cases burned crops to prevent public access. As a result, hunger, disease, and forced migration became defining features of occupied regions. The principal instrument of Russian pressure was its army in Iran, which from 1911 had effectively occupied nearly all of northern Iran. Purchasing property was another Russian policy aimed at deeper penetration into Iranian society (26).

Consequently, Russia's policies in Iran during the First World War—from military occupation and grain requisitioning to blocking trade routes and suppressing the population—played a direct role in expanding famine. Russian forces, which ostensibly entered Iran to preserve order and security, in practice operated through colonial and militarized behavior that contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iranians, with political, economic, and demographic effects that remained embedded in Iran's structure for years. Although archival materials held in German, Ottoman, Russian, and British repositories can be highly useful for clarifying developments of the First World War in Iran, they cannot substitute for domestic sources, since information was often concealed or recorded in a biased manner by actors whose interests were threatened (36).

Conclusion

Repeated famines in Iranian history have always been closely associated with the country's arid and fragile climatic structure; nevertheless, the Great Famine of the First World War period was not merely the result of drought, but rather the outcome of a complex combination of internal and external factors that drove the country into

catastrophe. Among the most significant internal factors were the inefficiency of the Qajar government and dysfunction within the state's administrative system, the weakness of transportation and road infrastructure, financial incapacity and economic dependence, rising food prices, hoarding and profiteering on both small and large scales, the collapse of social order and the expansion of poverty, disease, banditry, and plunder. In addition, deficiencies in the agricultural system and in grain storage, the expansion of cash-crop cultivation such as opium and cotton in place of staple grains, and the absence of investment in the preservation of water resources had severely disrupted the balance of food production. Yet overall, although Iran was in a critical condition in terms of food supply and grain reserves, on the eve of the First World War it was, according to officials, capable of meeting domestic needs for a considerable period, and warehouses still contained grain.

It may therefore be concluded that external factors also played a substantial role in deepening this crisis. The military occupation of the country by Britain, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire; the seizure and forced purchase of grain; the destruction of farmland; and the obstruction of commercial routes by these powers, together with Britain's policies aimed at protecting oil-rich zones, resulted in the population losing access even to the limited remaining reserves. The arrival of hundreds of thousands of foreign troops, the sudden increase in the consuming population, and the influx of displaced persons placed additional pressure on society's ability to secure food resources. At the same time, administrative corruption, the collaboration of some local officials with foreign forces, and the indifference of the central government toward these actions pushed the crisis to the brink of socio-economic collapse.

The consequences of this catastrophe were far-reaching. According to historical research, between **1917 and 1919**, a population ranging from two to ten million people perished as a result of famine or diseases such as cholera, typhus, diarrhea, and malnutrition. Numerous villages were abandoned, waves of migration to urban centers intensified, the rural and nomadic economy collapsed, and society faced profound moral and cultural crises; among these were reports of cannibalism in famine-stricken regions, which left a bitter image of this period in Iran's historical memory.

In sum, the Great Famine of Iran was not simply a natural event, but a political–economic phenomenon that emerged from the convergence of internal structural weakness with the colonial policies of foreign powers. This episode, while exposing the inefficiency of the Qajar system of governance, initiated deep social transformations in Iran's contemporary history, and its economic, demographic, and cultural repercussions persisted within the country's structure for many years. As a final observation, it should be acknowledged that this study has identified the most important factors influencing the famine of the First World War, and it is recommended that other contributing factors also be examined in detail. Education and the enhancement of national and governmental crisis-management skills, the creation of a low-tension environment, the reduction of public anxiety, and the cultivation of resilience and collective resolve during unavoidable political, social, and economic crises (such as short-term armed conflicts) represent critical lessons from this historical period that should be systematically incorporated into educational curricula.

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All authors equally contributed to this study.

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Transparency of Data

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