

The 1915 Locust Plague in Palestine

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The locust invasion started seven days ago and covered the sky. Today it took the locust clouds two hours to pass over the city. God protect us from the three plagues: war, locusts, and disease, for they are spreading through the country. Pity the poor.”

Ihsan Hasan al-Turjman’s
diary entry for March 29, 1915¹

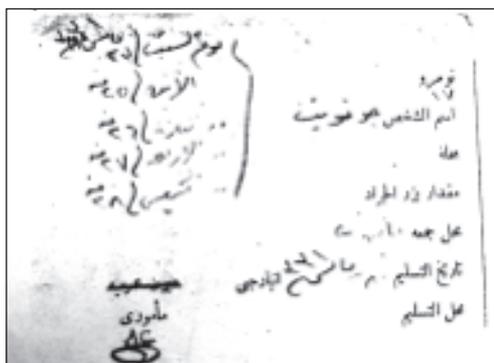
Swarms of locusts regularly invade Palestine, but the invasion of 1915 was the most destructive in recent memory. As this excerpt from Ihsan Hasan al-Turjman’s diary illustrates, the 1915 locust plague only exacerbated difficulties in Greater Syria caused by drought, disease, and the trauma of wartime conscription, Ottoman requisitioning policies, and the British and French naval blockade.² Recently published diaries and memoirs of this period by Jerusalemites Turjman, Sami Hadawi, and Wasif Jawhariyyeh provide intimate glimpses into the human cost of this important episode in Ottoman Palestine’s wartime experience.³ The American Colony of Jerusalem’s extensive photographic and archival documentation of the locust plague, which received international attention through John Whiting’s 1915 article on the plague in *National Geographic* magazine, serves as a rich visual complement to these texts. These sources share a number of motifs in the ways in which they describe the locust invasion, but they are markedly different in their contextualization of the plague. For Turjman, Jawhariyyeh, and Hadawi the locusts are just one of the many hardships of the war, whereas Whiting examines them through a biblical lens from which the war is absent. Taken together these sources serve as a valuable balance to traditional political and diplomatic narratives of the period

and highlight the intersection of natural disasters and manmade upheaval wrought by war in Greater Syria.

Locusts were first sighted outside Jerusalem at the end of March 1915. Eyewitness accounts of the invasion paint similar pictures of swarms of locusts blackening the sky and, in the words of Hadawi, appearing “in such density that they eclipsed the sun.”⁴ They describe the devastation and the sense of helplessness resulting from the onslaught of locusts.

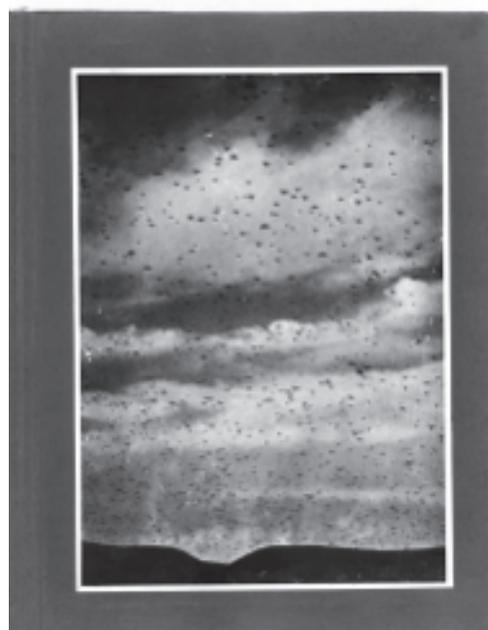
Hadawi recalled the efforts he and his classmates made to protect their school gardens from the pest, “But nothing we did prevented the locusts from coming down and devouring everything green, even the bark of trees, in a matter of minutes.”⁵ Food supplies were already limited due to the wartime British and French blockade of the coast and Ottoman requisitioning policies, and the locust invasion was accompanied by the spread of disease. Turjman noted the spread of cholera throughout Jerusalem in April 1915, and on 9 May 1915 wrote a passage that highlights the myriad causes of wartime hardship in Palestine: “Our lives are threatened from all sides: a European war and an Ottoman war, prices are skyrocketing, a financial crisis, and the locusts are attacking the country north and south. On top of all this, now infectious diseases are spreading throughout the Ottoman lands.”⁶

Ottoman authorities implemented a number of measures to limit the impact of the locust plague, and all of the accounts examined here discuss these efforts. The American Consul in Jerusalem, Dr. Otis Glazebrook, in a *New York Times* article that brought news of the locust invasion to an American audience, noted that Jamal Pasha “vigorously grappled with the situation,” appointing a “Central Committee to Fight the Locusts” led by Midhat Bey, the Governor of Jerusalem. All males between fifteen and sixty were required to collect and turn in twenty kilograms of locust eggs and “This rule was so rigorously enforced – stores being closed if the owners could not show a receipt for eggs or cash – that about 800 persons paid the tax.”⁷ Turjman also recorded these measures and noted that the tax was graduated, with the wealthy paying one Ottoman pound and the poor paying thirty piasters. He engaged in a debate with two friends about whether or not the government was justified in forcing citizens to participate in the eradication campaign. Despite his many criticisms of the Ottoman administration in Jerusalem in other parts of his diary, in this case Turjman supported the ordinance and the fee for noncompliance: “I think the authorities did well with this edict (even though I hate them) by spreading the responsibility of collecting locust eggs on everybody and giving the option of payment [of a fine] to those who do not choose to collect. For the locusts do not discriminate between rich and poor.”⁸



Receipt for Locust Eggs, 1916. Source: Library of Congress; photo by author.

The egg collection ordinance provided opportunities for evasion as well, and eyewitness accounts describe various practices that citizens adopted to bypass the regulations. Hadawi noted that those who did not want to pay the tax would secretly purchase eggs that had already been turned in for destruction from the very government officials tasked with destroying them. They would then turn them in to fulfill their own obligation.⁹ G. E. Bodkin, a government entomologist in Palestine at the time of the 1928 locust infestation, recalled the widespread corruption that hampered the effectiveness of the 1915 locust egg collection effort, and described the “unpleasing spectacle” when the eggs in the government storehouse hatched with “all available exits therefrom literally vomiting young locusts in millions and millions.”¹⁰ These varying accounts of the efficacy of the government response and evasion techniques serve as an interesting case study for exploring the extent of government reach in wartime Palestine.¹¹

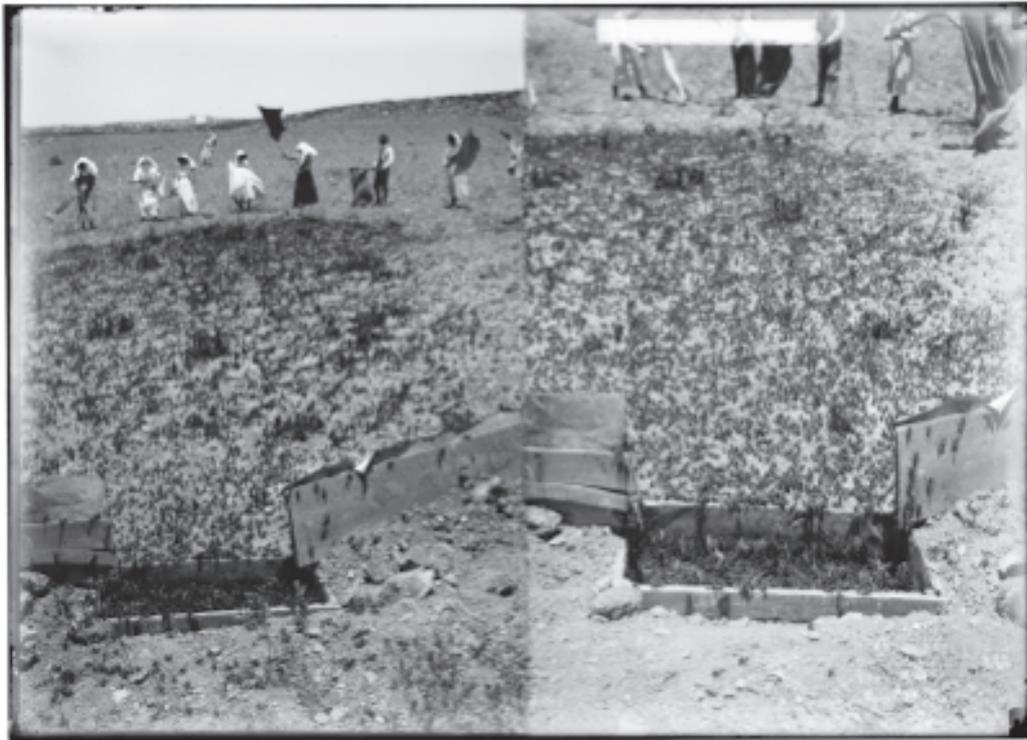


The front of the locust album, showing swarms in the sky. *Source: Library of Congress.*

The American Colony of Jerusalem’s 1915 locust album serves as a powerful visual complement to these textual accounts. The American Colony was a religious community founded in Jerusalem in the 1880s and the colony’s store and photographic service provided a valuable source of revenue to support its philanthropic endeavors. Colony photographers became particularly well known for their photographs of biblical sites in Palestine, but during World War I they were recruited to document the Ottoman war effort.¹² The Library of Congress houses an extensive American Colony archival and photographic collection, and the locust album is available in electronic format on the Library of Congress website, along with two other albums that highlight the military experience during the war and American Colony humanitarian medical and relief efforts.¹³ The 57 hand-tinted images address three key themes: the destruction wrought by the locusts, the eradication efforts, and the life cycle of this pest. The album opens with an aerial shot of the sky blackened by swarms of insects that complements the observations in the written accounts of the locust plague. Some of the most powerful images of the destructive power of the locusts are the “before and after” shots. One sees for example the Garden of Gethsemane in full bloom and then barren after the locusts stripped it of vegetation. The album concludes with a series of close-up photos of isolated locusts at various stages of development. To ensure accuracy in hand-tinting the photos, Lars Lind preserved locust specimens for consultation.¹⁴



Before and after of the Garden of Gethsemane. *Source: Library of Congress.*



American Colony eradication effort, and locusts entering the trap. *Source: Library of Congress.*

John Whiting, a prominent member of the American Colony, published an account of the locust plague in *National Geographic* magazine in 1915.¹⁵ The article is based on Whiting's own experience participating in the colony's locust eradication efforts, and is accompanied by a selection of images from the locust album taken by Lewis Larsson, the lead photographer for the American Colony in this period.¹⁶ Whiting's article follows a similar narrative structure to the locust album in its discussion of the locust's life cycle and the devastation of the invasion. Both sources also document the local government's response to the plague. After the locusts hatched the young insects would march in long columns. Workers recruited for the eradication effort would dig a hole in their path and outfit it with a "bottomless box" lined with tin. Large flags "with which to cast a deep shadow upon the ground" were used to drive them into the box. When full the box frame could be removed and the locusts buried. Whiting estimated that, using this method, "in about an hour's time four large sacks full were caught and destroyed, each containing no less than 100,000 of these insects."¹⁷ Eradication initiatives varied by region, and Whiting noted that in Bethlehem locusts were buried in cisterns, while in Jaffa they were thrown into the sea and, when they washed ashore, dried and used for fuel.¹⁸

In his discussion of eradication efforts Whiting adopted the Orientalist trope of an "active" west and a "passive" east. He contrasted the vigorous response of the American Colony and what he described as their "Yankee ingenuity" in improvising new models of



Close-up of a molting locust. *Source: Library of Congress.*

locust traps, and the fatalism of the local population.¹⁹ He recalled speaking with an “aged fellah” who approached members of the American Colony working to fight the locusts, telling them: “All this is no use; go home and rest; you can do nothing. They are Allah’s army.”²⁰ The men of the American Colony devoted themselves to the eradication effort to combat this attitude and “to set a good example ... for so steeped are the natives in fatalism ... that, unless forced or shown how to, few would turn a finger over in self-defense.”²¹

The locust invasion had a devastating effect on local agriculture, and Whiting observed

that while the grain crops had already been harvested the locusts arrived just as vegetables and fruits were ripening. The local markets were soon devoid of produce as the pests attacked crops of apricots, watermelons, muskmelons cucumbers, tomatoes, grapes, figs, and corn. The locusts also decimated the olive trees, leading to an increase in the price of olive oil: “being one of the food staples of the poor, taking the place of meat and butter, the loss of this crop, combined with the grapes, no doubt will outweigh, economically and commercially, the destruction caused to all other crops combined.”²²

For Hadawi, Jawhariyyeh, and Turjman the locust plague was inseparable from the larger wartime experience of food shortages, disease, and hardship. In Whiting’s *National Geographic* article, the war is notable for its glaring absence. He documented the agricultural and economic impact of the plague, but there is no mention of the grain shortages causing famine, the naval blockade, or even the war itself. It is left to the reader to infer from Whiting’s list of destroyed crops the impact the locust infestation had on the local population. American Consul Glazebrook’s account of the locust plague in the *New York Times* also omitted any details of other wartime hardships in Palestine beyond the locusts. These omissions reflect the self-censorship of foreigners whose position in Jerusalem became increasingly uncertain after the Ottoman entry into World War I. The capitulations were revoked, foreign postal services and banks were closed, many local newspapers were closed or were subjected to Ottoman censorship, and foreigners faced the threat of expulsion.²³ Whiting, as a representative of the American Colony, tried to maintain a precarious neutrality in the period before the United States officially entered the war in order to protect its extensive wartime relief efforts, which included a soup kitchen, hospitals and work projects for local women. The funds donated in the United States to support these efforts were funneled through the State Department and the American Consulate, and the success of these projects relied on the tacit cooperation of the Ottoman administration.²⁴

American Colony correspondence from near the end of the war provides a glimpse into this tense situation. In May 1918 representatives of the American Colony sent a letter to Edward Loud, a supporter in the United States who had helped fund a wartime soup kitchen in Jerusalem. The unnamed author apologized for not sending individual letters of thanks to those who provided financial support for the work of the colony, noting that “Even your innocent letters so full of active sympathy for the starving and needy about us, were burned at the time the whole Colony was in fear of being exiled, lest the Turkish censor should put some false interpretation upon them.” The author then gave an account of the hardships of the war, the burden of conscription, and the high price of purchasing exemptions, all of which complements the accounts of Turjman and Hadawi: “It was thus that the government commandeering not only animals but every requirement of life, the wholesale drafting of the manpower, and the dearth of business, since being entirely cut off from communication with the outside world, all these things brought people to an unbelievable state of poverty.” On top of this came the locust plague, and the author referred Loud to Whiting’s *National Geographic* article for information on this. After providing a report on the American Colony’s relief efforts he drew the link between wartime upheaval, famine, and disease: “Thousands at this time died of slow

starvation and disease, notably from typhus fever, which contagion is carried by vermin. Many a poor person who came to our door dropped onto the road and were attended by our ladies till life left them in spite of the fact that they were alive with deadly vermin.”²⁵

The omission of the war from Whiting’s account is also indicative of the nature of the publication in which the article appeared and the lens through which the colony viewed its environment. Whiting framed the article in biblical terms, and it serves as a classic example of the “timeless Holy Land” genre of travel writing and historical accounts of Palestine.²⁶ Most of the images that accompany the article are drawn from the locust album, but many of the captions are biblical passages. An image of locust larvae covering the ground bears a caption drawn from the book of Judges. The image of an exterior wall covered in locusts has a caption from the book of Exodus, with the observation that “Thus during the Egyptian plagues we find Moses announcing the locust scourge in terms of which our recent experience was such an exact duplicate.” The article opens with a passage from the Old Testament book of Joel, and in addition to frequent references to Joel and Exodus the text is also peppered with allusions to Psalms, Proverbs, Nahum, and Judges. Whiting described the scope of the territory affected by the locusts in biblical terms, attempting to “depict what was here seen and befell the entire land from ‘Dan to Beer-sheba,’”²⁷ He marveled at the locusts’ ability to thrive in a wide variety of environments, from the Jordan River at the places where “the Children of Israel passed over into Canaan,” to the “slime pits” near the Dead Sea where “the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fell,” and even “in the beautiful olive groves about Bethlehem and Zelzah, birthplaces of David and Saul.” The accompanying map shows modern infrastructure such as the railway line juxtaposed on biblical place names and terms for geographic features.²⁸ Whiting’s amalgamation of science and religion extended to the Islamic tradition as well. He ended the article with a compendium of Arabic proverbs, written charms, and local fables about locusts.²⁹

In addition to the images drawn from the locust album, Whiting included photographs that complement the biblical themes of the article and show the iconic architectural landmarks of Jerusalem such as the walls of the city, the Tower of David, and the River Jordan “where the Children of Israel are supposed to have crossed into the promised land.” There are also typological images of local life, such as “a typical Jerusalem street scene” that shows a donkey, camels, and a young girl framed by an arch, with an interesting play of light and shadow. Another shows a circumcision procession, with a crowd of men in the foreground and the walls of the Old City in the background.³⁰ These images showcase the American Colony’s strength in documenting the biblical heritage of Palestine, but also reflect *National Geographic*’s vision as a publication, reproducing the “timeless Holy Land” motif with which American readers would have been familiar. There is, for example, little stylistic difference between the typological images of the “the typical Jerusalem street scene” that accompany Whiting’s article and the typological images of Irish peasants and bucolic rural life in the photographic essay on the English and Irish countryside that immediately follows it in the magazine.³¹

The photographs that appear in Whiting’s *National Geographic* article and the American Colony locust album represent only a small fraction of the over two hundred

images of the 1915 and 1930 locust infestations in the Matson Photographic Collection at the Library of Congress.³² The 1915 photographs are surprisingly devoid of humans, whereas the images relating to the 1930 event are full of life. The focus in the 1930 photos is on containment and eradication efforts, and many of them are set in the locust camps set up for workers. One sees a real advance in the technology deployed to eradicate the locusts. In 1915 the local government relied on mass mobilization of the population to collect and destroy eggs and to corral locusts into pits for burial. The 1930 photos reveal two new weapons in the arsenal of locust destruction: poison (in the form of arsenic-laced bran) and flame throwers. Portable compressed air sprayers used to spray crops with insecticide were adapted to hold compressed fuel that, when ignited, could be used to kill locusts in large numbers before they laid their eggs.³³ The 1930 eradication effort closed with a feast for Bedouin deployed as part of the effort, and the collection includes a number of images showing the feasting and camel racing that accompanied this celebration. These images not only document the resources mobilized by the Mandate government for pest control, but once again reveal American Colony photographers doing what they were best known for, creating typological photos for Western consumption, in this case showing what one caption describes as “Bedouin types of the desert.”

The 1915 locust plague was the benchmark by which all other infestations of the twentieth century would be measured, as the new technology used to fight the 1930 plague and subsequent innovations in locust control limited the destructive impact of later attacks. Contemporary published accounts of the locust plague, such as Whiting’s and Glazebrook’s articles in *National Geographic* and the *New York Times* respectively, brought news of the locust plague to Western audiences and were vital in winning support for American relief efforts. Yet the public nature of these accounts, and Whiting’s biblical lens, mean that they describe the locust plague in curious isolation from the wartime context. They convey the economic and agricultural devastation of the plague but remain silent on the other hardships facing the local population at the same time, such as grain shortages, famine, and conscription. It is only when these public sources are read in conjunction with the American Colony’s private correspondence and the personal diaries and memoirs of other Jerusalemites such as Turjman, Hadawi, and Jawhariyyeh that we get a true sense of the intersection of natural and man-made disasters in causing the tremendous loss of life in wartime Palestine. As Bodkin noted, in looking back on the locust plague, “The terrible visitation during the dark days of 1915 will remain vividly impressed in the memories of all who had the misfortune to be resident in Palestine at that period.”³⁴

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Endnotes

- 1 Salim Tamari, *Year of the Locust: A Soldier's Diary and the Erasure of Palestine's Ottoman Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 93-94.
- 2 For an overview see L. Schatkowski Schilcher, "The Famine of 1915-1918 in Greater Syria," in *Problems of the Modern Middle East in Historical Perspective*, ed. John Spagnolo (Reading: Ithaca Press, 1992), 229-258, and Salim Tamari's introduction to *Year of the Locust*. Two recent books that explore this period in Jerusalem's history are Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem Between Ottoman and British Rule* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011) and Roberto Mazza, *Jerusalem: From the Ottomans to the British* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2011).
- 3 I began this project as a participant in the 2012 NEH summer seminar on World War I in the Middle East with a focus on using accounts of the locust plague in undergraduate teaching. As a result, I draw primarily on readily available English-language sources in print or available electronically. For excerpts from the Turjman diary, see Tamari, *Year of the Locust*, and Sami Hadawi, "Sodomy, Locusts, and Cholera: A Jerusalem Witness," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 53 (Spring 2013), 21-23. Wasif Jawhariyyeh's memoir also includes a brief account of the locust plague: Salim Tamari and Issam Nassar, eds., *Al Quds al-Uthmaniyya fil-mudhakkirat al-Jawhariyyeh: Al-kitab al-awwal min mudhakkirat al-musiqi Wasif Jawhariyyeh, 1904-1917* [Ottoman Jerusalem in the Jawhariyyeh Memoirs: Book One of the Memoirs of the Musician Wasif Jawhariyyeh] (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-dirasat al-Filastiniyya, 2003), 190-191. For accounts in Hebrew see Jacobson, 193, n. 36.
- 4 Hadawi, "Sodomy, Locusts, and Cholera," 21. See also Tamari and Nassar, *Al Quds*, 190, and Tamari, *Year of the Locust*, 29 March 1915, 93-94.
- 5 Hadawi, "Sodomy, Locusts, and Cholera," 21.
- 6 Tamari, *Year of the Locust*, 9 May 1915, 118.
- 7 "Remarkable Details From American Consul on Palestine Locust Plague," *New York Times*, 21 Nov. 1915. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/97761122?accountid=28213>. Accessed 26 November 2013.
- 8 Tamari, *Year of the Locust*, 23 April 1915, 107.
- 9 Hadawi, "Sodomy, Locusts, and Cholera," 21-22.
- 10 G. E. Bodkin, "The Locust Invasion of Palestine During 1928," *Bulletin of Entomological Research*, 20:2 (August 1929): 131.
- 11 This question of the interplay between war and the expansion of the role of the state is highlighted in the introduction to Heike Liebau et. al., eds., *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 22.
- 12 The Library of Congress American Colony collection site includes a general history of the colony: <http://www.loc.gov/collection/american-colony-in-jerusalem/articles-and-essays/a-community-in-jerusalem/>. Accessed 25 November 2013. For an overview of the American Colony Photo Department and the role the colony's store played in offering photographic documentation of biblical sites and typological images of the local population to Western consumers, see Barbara Bair, "The American Colony Photography Department: Western Consumption and 'Insider' Commercial Photography," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 44 (Winter 2010):28-38.
- 13 For an overview of the locust album and the locust plague, and a link to the electronic copy of the album, see <http://www.loc.gov/collection/american-colony-in-jerusalem/articles-and-essays/the-locust-plague-of-1915-photograph-album/#the-locust-plague-of-1915-photograph-album>. Accessed 25 November 2013. The Photographic Album of World War I in Palestine and Sinai is available at: <http://www.loc.gov/item/mamcol000128>. Accessed 25 November 2013. For analysis consult Issam Nassar, "John Whiting's Album of the Great War in Palestine," *Jerusalem Quarterly* 53 (Spring 2013), 42-49.
- 14 Mia Gröndahl, *The Dream of Jerusalem: Lewis Larsson and the American Colony Photographers* (Stockholm: Journal, 2005), 213.
- 15 John D. Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague Being a Description of the Recent Locust Influx into Palestine, and Comparing Same with Ancient Locust Invasions as Narrated in the Old World's History Book, the Bible," *The National Geographic Magazine* 28: 6 (December 1915): 511-550.
- 16 For background information on Larsson and Whiting, see Bair, "The American Colony Photography Department," 34-37.
- 17 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 535-536.
- 18 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 513.
- 19 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 536.
- 20 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 533.
- 21 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 521.
- 22 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 529-533 and 543.

- 23 For the position of foreigners during the war and the status of the press and censorship see Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire*, 24-26; and Mazza, *Jerusalem*, 88-91 and 120.
- 24 Abigail Jacobson describes the American Colony's complex relationship with American, Ottoman, and German authorities and its attempt to preserve its place as a "neutral ground" in wartime Jerusalem in "American 'Welfare Politics': American Involvement in Jerusalem During World War I," *Israel Studies* 18 (Spring 2013): 65-68. For an overview of American Colony relief efforts see Bertha Spafford Vester, *Our Jerusalem: An American Family in the Holy City, 1881-1941* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1950), 231-241.
- 25 Letter from the American Colony to Edward F. Loud, May 30, 1918 Part I, Box 3, Folder 8: American Colony in Jerusalem Collection, Manuscript Division, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mamcol.077>. Accessed 25 November 2013.
- 26 This genre has been well documented in scholarship on Palestine, but for specific application to photography see Bair, "The American Colony Photography Department."
- 27 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 528-529.
- 28 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 516-521 and 542.
- 29 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 547-550.
- 30 Whiting, "Jerusalem's Locust Plague," 545, 546 and 549.
- 31 *The National Geographic Magazine* 28 (December 1915). Catherine A. Lutz and Jane L. Collins, *Reading National Geographic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) provides a history of this publication and its important role in shaping the way that Americans in the twentieth century viewed the world. They note that the magazine was "on the boundary between science and pleasure," and this combination of purposes is evident in the points of focus of Whiting's article. Lutz and Collins, 24.
- 32 For the Matson Photograph Collection see <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/collection/matpc/>. Accessed 25 November 2013.
- 33 Bodkin, "The Locust Invasion," 131-139.
- 34 Bodkin, "The Locust Invasion," 123.