

Research Article

The Humanitarian Activity of American "Near East Relief" Organisation Among Western Armenian Refugees in 1915-1922

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of Western Armenians were subjected to genocidal policies carried out by the Ottoman Empire. These policies resulted in significant human losses and widespread deportations. Thousands of Western Armenians, particularly women and children, lost their families and support networks, leaving them orphaned and displaced. The Armenian diaspora required a coordinated programme of humanitarian and social assistance, which began to be implemented not only by Armenian charitable organisations and individual benefactors, but also with the involvement of various international institutions and missionary groups. In this context, the 'Near East Relief' organisation played a particularly significant role through its large-scale, systematic activities, making substantial contributions to the social protection, education and healthcare of displaced populations. The Near East Relief organisation's legacy significantly impacted the socio-economic development of the region, improving local economies and promoting educational advancement. Its programmes aimed to provide humanitarian aid and ensure long-term social stability in the area. During its fifteen years of operation, the organisation demonstrated a high level of humanitarianism and responsibility, contributing to the region's comprehensive development. Over its fifteen years of activity, Near East Relief grew into a major organisation that invested more than \$116 million in saving Armenian refugees and 132,000 orphans. This powerful humanitarian institution spared no effort or resources during and after the Armenian Genocide, providing refugees with food, clothing and shelter. Combined with the humanitarian support of the American government and people, the efforts and resources of Near East Relief made it possible to save hundreds of thousands of Armenians and other people in need in the Near East from imminent destruction. Near East Relief's advocacy and practical measures made a significant contribution to protecting and supporting tens of thousands of refugees and orphans resulting from the Armenian Genocide, further strengthening the organisation's importance in the region. The study combines historical-comparative and analytical methods to achieve the goals and objectives set by the authors.

Keywords

Near East Relief, USA, J. Barton, C. Dodge, American Missionary Organizations, American Red Cross, Armenian National Care

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1. Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century, the majority of Western Armenians were tragically subjected to the genocidal policies of the Ottoman Empire. During this dark period, countless Armenians, particularly women and children, were left orphaned and forcibly exiled from their homes. The responsibility for providing shelter, care, and support for these displaced individuals fell not only on Armenian charitable organizations and the individuals who directed and funded them but also on numerous international agencies and missionary groups. Among these, the "Near East Relief" organization stands out due to its vast and impactful efforts in addressing the crisis, providing crucial assistance to Armenian refugees and survivors on a large scale.

Since the mid-19th century, American missionaries have played a significant role in educational efforts across Western Armenia. During the Hamidian massacres and the atrocities against Armenians in Cilicia in 1909, these missionaries established orphanages and hospitals, with vital support from the American Red Cross. Their humanitarian work laid a crucial foundation for subsequent efforts. This mission was further carried out by the Near East Relief Society, which swiftly mobilized to assist Armenians in need during the Armenian genocide in 1915-1923. They focused on rescuing and caring for orphaned Armenian children from the forced migration routes, thus establishing the early groundwork for Armenian orphanages that would serve as pillars of support in the years to come [1].

2. The Activities of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief

During the mass killings and death marches of Armenians in 1915, the American Ambassador in Constantinople, Henry Morgenthau, sent telegrams to the US State Department stating that "the destruction of the Armenian race in Turkey is rapidly progressing", urging the formation of a committee to raise funds for saving some of the Armenians. On September 14, Foreign Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions J. Barton wrote to Cl. Dodge that the Armenians should be helped because they had no one to speak for them and it is undoubtedly time for the voice of Christianity to be raised [2].

Morgenthau's alarm call became the basis for the creation of a major relief organization. As a result, a group of progressive individuals was formed on 16 September 1915 to study the Armenian problem and it was also decided to establish a committee to raise funds for Armenian refugees and orphans. During the meeting, the needed amount of money was also discussed and it was agreed to raise about \$100,000 [3].

The composition of the Committee was as follows Presi-

dent - James Barton, Treasurer - Charles Crane (President of the Board of Trustees of the Women's College of Constantinople), Secretary- Samuel Dutton (Treasurer of the Women's College of Constantinople and Secretary of the World Peace Fund). Through the efforts of the latter, a charitable organization was formed, which in the course of its activity was reorganized and had various names. In September 1915, the "American Committee for Armenian Relief" merged with the "Palestine-Syrian Relief Committee" (which had been operating since December 1914) and was renamed "The American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief", operating under this name until 1918 [4].

The members of the Committee established contact with the US State Department, as a result of which the documents relating to the issue were placed under the control of the Committee. They were allowed to familiarize themselves with all the telegrams relating to the social, religious and physical situation in the Near East and were ready to intervene actively. They believed that the structure should not be politicized, but should be an absolutely neutral and purely American organization [5]. Committee members travelled across the United States, meeting with local business and government officials and spreading the information among the public [6].

The information was distributed primarily through newspapers and posters sent to all companies involved in the production of billboards throughout the United States. Its purpose was not only to solicit help from a wide range of government and business circles, but also to inform the American public about the horrors being perpetrated against the Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire [7].

The American Senate and House of Representatives welcomed the initiative of this organization, and in 1916 the chambers of the US Congress passed a joint resolution asking President W. Wilson to designate a special day for a national discussion of the plight of the Armenian people and to ask Americans to generously support the relief programme. This was followed by President W. Wilson's proclamation on August 31, 1916, declaring October 21, Saturday, and 22, Sunday, as "Days of Benefit", during which American citizens organized a fund-raising and brought their assistance to Armenian and Syrian orphans and refugees [8].

Although the original purpose of the committee was to help the Christian peoples of the Near East, such as the Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks, as a result of the First World War, the committee set itself the task of helping all the suffering peoples of the Near East on the basis of need rather than religion. Kurds, Turks, Tartars, Arabs and Persians also benefited from its aid. The Committee was organized to help and save the suffering humanity scattered from Constantinople to Teheran, from the Caucasus Mountains and the Black Sea to the Mediterranean and Egypt, reaching as far as the Arab regions [9].

During the First World War, the Committee's main task was to organize the rescue and care of refugees and defenseless

children. In 1915, after the mass killings of men and the arrest and persecution of intellectuals, the Armenian population was forcibly deported. The US Consul in Aleppo, J. Jackson, reported that there were about 150,000 Armenian refugees in the regions of Aleppo, Deir-el-Zor and Damascus, who, having fled the Turkish threat, had been deprived of everything: clothing, food, money. Referring to the situation of the Armenian refugees in this region, the chairman of the Relief Committee, J. Barton, rightly stated that the aim of the Turkish authorities was to destroy these unfortunate people, to exile them to places where life was unsafe [10]. Humanitarian aid programs were launched, providing food, clothing, shelter, and medical care in an effort to help the surviving remnants of the Armenian people rebuild their lives after the genocide.

American aid to the Near East during World War I was truly great. Thousands of refugees and orphans who had been on the verge of death survived thanks to the help of the Relief Committee. B. Dodge, from the American University of Beirut, describes the Committee's activities as follows: "America has done a wonderful service. People all over Syria bless the name 'America'. Those of us who have spoken, lived and worked with poor mothers and sick fathers can understand what American aid means. Only those who have seen little children wrapped in rags can understand what food, clothing and shelter mean to them" [11].

Only a few months after its foundation, this organization had more than fifty centers in Constantinople, Izmir, Marzvan, Ayntap, Diarbekir, Urfa, Kharberd, Erzurum, Trabzon, Bitlis, Van, Tabriz, Urmia, Aleppo, Beirut and Damascus. Both during and after the war, the sole purpose of this organization was to organize refugee camps, hospitals, orphanages and to provide them with food.

Despite the fact that the United States entered the war in 1917 and diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire were broken, the Turkish government did not hinder the organization's humanitarian activities, as they also benefited the underprivileged Turkish society. J. Barton noted that the success of the committee's work in Constantinople and in the provinces depended on its ability to establish friendly relations with the Turkish governors so that children could be rescued. Then he argued that every Relief Society worker who stayed on to serve the weak and helpless by collecting little orphans, rescuing girls and women, feeding the hungry and fighting disease played a heroic role in the tumultuous events of that time. The Relief Committee was the only hope for thousands of orphans and refugees; even the smallest help they received enabled them to survive the hardships of life.

3. The Activities of the Near East Relief Committee, 1918-1922

In 1918, a resolution of Congress renamed the American Committee for Relief in Armenia and Syria to the American Committee for Relief in the Near East, and expanded the

scope of its humanitarian activities to unprecedented proportions [12].

On 6 August 1919 this humanitarian organization was reorganized into the Near East Relief by a decision of the US Congress. So, the American Committee for Armenian Relief (16 September 1915 - 20 November 1915) was reorganized to the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (20 November 1915 - 27 June 1918) and the last one - to the American Committee for Near East Relief (27 June 1918 - 6 August 1919) [13]. The Near East Relief was not only the first American international humanitarian relief effort of its kind, but also, through the systems it established in the United States and internationally, the prototype for most modern humanitarian fundraising efforts. Following the signing of the Mudros Armistice between the Entente Powers and the Ottoman Empire on 30 October 1918, a special \$30 million campaign was launched in the United States to help rehabilitate refugees and orphans who had fled to the Near East. Efforts were made to purchase and ship various supplies to the Near East: medical equipment, medicines, food, clothing, and to recruit personnel. The relief committee emphasized the creation of rescue homes for women and girls rescued from Muslim harems, where they would receive the same care as orphans, and the organization of craft enterprises to teach orphans and rescued women crafts and provide them with work. Although the Committee was concerned with the care and protection of refugees, their return to their former places of residence or, within the limits of available resources, their resettlement in new places, it was primarily concerned with the care of orphans.

From the report of Davis Arnold, the head of one of the branches of Near East Relief Society, it is clear that from the time of the Mudros Armistice until July 1919, the Relief Society gave about 25 million dollars in aid to the refugees, of which only 200 thousand dollars went to the refugees of Constantinople [14].

Each orphan received one gold coin per month. The Committee's activities at the orphanages included providing shelter, food, clothing, medical care and education. In addition to Armenian orphans, Greek, Turkish and Jewish orphans also found refuge in the orphanages that were opened.

In January 1919, the American Relief Committee sent the first cargoes and a number of medical workers to the Near East and the Caucasus. In addition to food and clothing, the delivery of appropriate medical supplies to the Near East was particularly important. Hospitals were opened in Aleppo, Constantinople, Izmit, Samsun and Trabzon under the auspices of the Relief Society. The refugees and orphans who survived the tragedy were malnourished and exhausted from disease. Living in deplorable conditions, they were victims of epidemics and numerous infectious diseases. The Committee's main task was to restore the health of the orphans in the orphanages. Every orphanage had its own hospital. Even the menu was controlled by the medical department. The most common diseases were favus and trachoma. Many of the

children were suffering from Favus, a dangerous scalp disease, when they entered the orphanages. The majority of the orphans suffered by trachoma, an acute infectious eye disease often referred to as the "curse of Asia" [15].

The charity's activities were also of great help to the Armenian National Orphanage of Constantinople and, as the Armenian Patriarch of Constantinople, Zaven Yeghiayan, noted, the organization continued the work of the American Red Cross by supporting the Armenian National Orphanage [16]. The Armenian National Foster Care of Constantinople, lacking sufficient funds, had difficulty even taking care of the orphanages in Constantinople, so the Welfare Fund provided great assistance, especially to the Armenians in the provinces. The Armenian National Foster Care separated the most needy orphans and handed them over to the Welfare Fund. The Armenian National Foster Care of Constantinople, lacking sufficient funds, had difficulty even taking care of the orphanages in Constantinople, so the Welfare Fund provided great assistance, especially to the Armenians in the provinces. The Armenian National Foster Care separated the most needy orphans and handed them over to the Welfare Fund [17].

In addition to the orphanages under its jurisdiction, the committee also provided food and clothing to the Armenian National Orphanage in Constantinople. Since the material resources of the Armenian National Orphanage were gradually exhausted, Near East Relief committee began to double the amount of aid from American Armenians to the refugees, which, from January 1921, amounted to 20 thousand gold coins per month [18]. Referring to the activities of the Relief Society, Teodik wrote that there were very honest and dedicated people in this society who worked 18 hours a day with American punctuality. Some of them spoke very pure Armenian and showed so much affection and care for the Armenian immigrants and orphans that they seemed to be Armenians and living ideological examples of sacrificial patriotism [19]. Dr. Peet, Treasurer of the Constantinople Relief Committee, wrote that their relief work was assuming proportions unimaginable a few months ago... at present (this is about 1919) they have more than 300,000 Armenians on their relief lists, mainly women and children, another 200,000 people from the Greek and Turkish communities need help, making a total of more than 500,000 people.

In order to ascertain the main needs of the region, the President of the Relief Society, J. Barton, went with a special commission to Constantinople, Syria and Palestine. During his trip to Western Armenia, J. Barton, referring to the situation of the Armenians in the provinces, noted that the Armenians in the inner provinces were few in number, that there were no disturbances of the peace, no massacres, but that the Christian population was terrified [20]. Committees were also sent to Van, Bitlis, Erzurum and Trabzon to gather information about the Armenians in the region. Their reports made it clear that there were almost no Armenians left to look after in these areas, which had been depopulated. It became clear that there was no longer any need for assistance to the

east of the Mardin-Kharberd line. These reports once again documented the reality of the exodus of Armenians from the Armenian provinces as a result of the genocide. This was due to the fact that the Relief Society concentrated its activities mainly in Constantinople and in the Near East.

The president of the Relief Society, J. Barton, stated that his organisation was a non-political structure, not directed by the American government, and only associated with it in so far as it delivered American aid to the needy on ships provided by the American government. He noted that the Americans had not used white bread and sugar for a long time, and that these savings were being used to help the Armenians in need. The survivors of the Armenian genocide found it difficult to return to the provinces with no security guarantees, so the task of feeding and providing work for them also became the responsibility of the Relief Fund. Those who ignored the sense of fear and insecurity and returned to their homes tried to rebuild their lives with the help of the Relief Fund. In an interview with a correspondent of the New York Times, J. Barton stated that the aim of the American Commission was not only to feed and clothe the Armenian diaspora, but also to return the Armenians to their homeland and to reorganise and rebuild the country... [21]. Thus, according to Barton, the possible borders of the Armenian state should have been drawn as follows: the northwestern border to the Black Sea, the southwestern border from Sebastia to Tarsus on the Mediterranean, the northeastern border from the Black Sea to Tiflis and from there to the southern side of Lake Van, and from Aleppo to Antioch on the Mediterranean. In fact, the American project called for Armenia to have a port on both the Black Sea and the Mediterranean.

From December 1919, the Relief Society supplied 3,000 loaves of bread a day to orphans in Constantinople, completely free of charge, and from August 1920, 500-700 loaves of bread for 6 dahekanis to refugees. In addition to food, the refugees were provided with clothing, bedding, medicine, soap and coal. Teodik notes that the Relief Society not only supported orphanages and refugees, but also took care of the health problems of the rural population [22].

Members of the organisation noted that if you stop an orphan in the evening and ask him where he is going, he will tell you that he is looking for a place to sleep. All winter they have been sleeping on corners and in the streets, without blankets, in rags. The charity provides them with bread and hot soup two or three times a week. The orphans who wander the streets and are taken to orphanages are more or less safe. Often three or four people sleep under one blanket, but they are protected from the weather and learn some kind of craft.

In 1919, the "Case Committee" of the Relief Fund, set up by Miss Phillips, did a great job in distributing benefits to the widows of Constantinople who had fallen into extreme poverty as a result of the war. The "Case Committee" opened its branches in the following districts of Constantinople to organise the distribution of benefits: Shishi, Feri-Gyugh, Bankalti, Bera, Feritie, Ghalatia, Khasgyugh, Peshiktash,

Gatdyugh, Palat, Ketik-Pasha, Magri-Gyugh, Arnavut-Gyugh, Verin Bospor, Skutar, Ortagyugh, Gum-Gapu, Yeni-Gyugh, Samatia and Yeti-Gule [23]. This committee not only provided assistance to women, but also very often awarded school scholarships to children from poor families. M. Eplighatyan, head of the Armenian National Relief of Constantinople, highly appreciated the activities of the "Case Committee", noting that one cannot deny the blessed activities of the latter, thanks to which about 2000 Armenian families were able to provide for themselves.

The charity did not limit its activities to caring for orphans and refugees wandering the streets, but also rescued dozens of Armenian orphans, women and girls from Muslim homes, returning them to their identity and handing them over to the Armenian National Guardianship. The daily "Hayrenik" wrote that most of the orphans under the charity's care were artisans, and many of these orphans were survivors of Turkish orphanages [24]. Through the charity's efforts, shelters were opened for Armenian girls rescued from refugee camps, where they were given 50-60 Ottoman khurush (Turkish currency unit) a day in exchange for manual labour. It should be noted that the Armenian National Delegation has always been consistent in its work to educate orphans. G. Noratunkyan talked about it with J. Barton. The Near East Relief committee even presented a program for the national education of Armenian orphans, which was readily accepted by the structure for consideration, with the aim of giving Armenian orphans an Armenian education and making them good Armenian citizens. The concern of the Armenian National Delegation was not unfounded, since in the orphanages sheltered in Greece and under the care of the Relief Society, the intervention of the Greek ruling circles to educate the Armenian orphans in the Greek spirit was often observed, even to the point of exerting pressure on the Relief Society officials.

To solve the problem of housing and feeding hundreds of thousands of refugees, support was needed at both the governmental and international levels. The Relief Society received help from the International Red Cross, which sent \$3 million in 1922, later rising to \$6 million. During this time, the Relief Society stopped helping adults and focused solely on caring for orphans.

4. The Transfer of Armenian Orphans from the Ottoman Empire to Syria and Lebanon

On 7 February 1922, Armenian leaders and Relief Society members met in Aleppo to discuss the transfer of orphanages within the borders of the Ottoman Empire to Syria and Lebanon [25].

The reasons for moving the orphanages abroad were the anti-Armenian policy of the Kemalists, the Greek-Turkish war that broke out in 1922, and the fact that the Turkish government required the committee to take care of both

Christian and Turkish orphans equally, while the relief fund also provided great assistance to needy Turkish families in the form of money, food and clothing, often providing them with shelter.

In 1922, about 12,000 Armenian orphans from Marash, Ayntap, Adana, Kharberd, Urfa, Malatya, Mardin and Tigranakert were transferred to the orphanages of Antelias, Jbeil, Ghazir, Mamltein, Nahr Ibrahim and Saida. In 1923, about 18,000 Armenian and Greek orphans from Cesarea, Konya, Marzvan, Sebastia, Samson, Trabizon and Izmir were transferred to Greece. With the active intervention of the Relief Society, the Armenian orphans who had taken refuge in the Ottoman Empire were finally transferred to the orphanages of Soviet Armenia, Greece, Lebanon and Syria, where they received care and attention. In addition to food, they received intellectual and spiritual care, as well as physical care and the necessary means to fight for life: crafts and vocational training [26].

In 1923, one of the most effective initiatives of the Near East Relief committee was the establishment of the "Golden Rule Sunday" Committee, which was founded in the United States on the initiative of C. Vickrey, a member of the Committees's Board of Trustees, with the aim of carrying out a propaganda program for the implementation of the benefits. C. Vickrey said that. The "Golden Rule" event would give wealthy people the opportunity to understand the situation of the poor, the strong to empathize with the weak, and fortunate children to grasp the lives of the unfortunate [27]. Every American was asked to make it a habit to eat plain on this one day and to donate what was left over from their table to the Relief Fund. From 1923, due to limited financial resources, the Committee largely withdrew from general relief work and concentrated its efforts on the care and education of orphans.

5. Conclusions

Between 1915 and 1922, the Near East Relief Committee undertook a vital humanitarian mission in response to the genocidal policies and mass deportations that took place within the Ottoman Empire during that period.

The organisation's legacy had a significant impact on the region. It established a vast network of orphanages, educational centres, and vocational training programmes, providing vital support to thousands of orphans, refugees, and other vulnerable individuals. These programmes aimed to provide immediate rescue and relief, as well as to foster long-term social stability in the region.

The extensive involvement of American society in the activities of the Near East Relief Committee set a precedent for organising international humanitarian interventions and was one of the earliest sources of 20-(th)-century humanitarian policy. This contributed to the development of new standards in global humanitarian aid.

In summary, the humanitarian activities of the Near East Relief Committee among Western Armenians from 1915 to

1922 can be highlighted as follows: this organisation was established in the United States in response to the mass extermination and deportation of Armenians, Assyrians and Greeks in the Ottoman Empire. The committee undertook the following missions:

1. Humanitarian mission -The committee's primary objective was to rescue, care for and rehabilitate the displaced, orphans and impoverished. This work was carried out by American activists and missionaries who devoted themselves to serving humanity despite numerous hardships and often falling victim to various illnesses and accidents. During and after the Armenian Genocide, this major humanitarian institution spared no effort to provide Armenian refugees with food, clothing, and shelter.
2. Rescue and care of orphans - The committee was responsible for rescuing and caring for around 132,000 orphans. They established large-scale orphanages in Constantinople, the Caucasus, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iran, Greece and other places. Thanks to the efforts of the Near East Relief and the humanitarian contributions of the American government and public, hundreds of thousands of Armenians, as well as thousands from other vulnerable populations across the Near East, were saved from imminent destruction. The Near East Relief's advocacy and practical initiatives significantly contributed to the assistance of tens of thousands of refugees and orphans who survived the Armenian Genocide.
3. Organisation of a logistical network - the committee set up an efficient international aid delivery system involving ships, trains and local committees. The organisation operated through diplomatic missions as well as missionary stations to ensure the distribution of aid.
4. Financial support - Over approximately fifteen years, the committee raised over \$116 million through public campaigns, philanthropic donations, fundraising events and media outreach in the United States. These funds were dedicated entirely to helping those in need.
5. Reorganisation of education - The committee's work evolved from immediate relief efforts into a broader initiative for social reconstruction, education, and restoring a dignified livelihood for survivors.

Author Contributions

Mane Koninyan: Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

Astghik Ghazaryan: Investigation, Project administration, Visualization, Writing – review & editing

Lilit Qosyan: Data curation, Supervision, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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