

Stories of International ‘Goodness’ During the Armenian Genocide Vicken Babkenian

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Genocide Studies is a discourse strongly associated with mass death, destruction and systematic human rights abuse. Other than the Holocaust, as historian Paul Bartrop observes, “Little work has been done in respect of goodness during genocide.” He further adds that “one might despair at the predominance of evil in the world over the relatively few chronicled acts of goodness.”¹ The Armenian Genocide is one such example where the majority of the historiography focuses on evils committed.

While recent scholarship has emerged on America’s humanitarian response to the Armenian Genocide thanks to works such as Peter Balakian’s *The Burning Tigris* and Merrill Petersen’s *Starving Armenians*, the wider international response to the catastrophe has received little attention by historians. This is rather surprising considering that over 50 countries had participated in some way in the collection of funds on behalf of the destitute Armenian refugees and orphans. It was at the time an unprecedented demonstration of transnational solidarity and goodwill towards victims of a major disaster. This article explores some of the many stories of international compassion and generosity which helped save the Armenian people from near extinction.

The Armenian Relief Movement

The Armenian relief movement had its beginnings during the 1890s when thousands of Armenians were massacred by Ottoman troops and Kurdish tribesmen. News of the atrocities had caused great consternation throughout the English-speaking world, in particular the United States. Much of the sentiment emanated from the near century of American Protestant missionary presence among the Armenians. The influence of American Protestantism had in some ways “whitened’ the Armenians - commonly referred to as the “Anglo-Saxons of Eastern Turkey.”² The missionaries provided the main source of vivid, on-the-scene accounts of the massacres which were channelled to the international press. Historian Anne Wilson notes that three essential messages emerged from these narratives. The first was the narrowly religious nature of the conflict. The second was the notion that Armenians deserved American sympathy for being Christians and western in their cultural orientation. Finally, the message flowed from missionary pens that Armenian women were uniquely victimized by a social order that left them vulnerable to sexual molestation by their rulers.³

Suzanne Moranian best describes the way the media expressed the humanitarian narrative during this period: “The reports and commentaries were gripping. They seized the heart and were high human drama. The plot repeated in the American media for years was a basic one: good versus evil. The press championed the underdog fighting the oppressor, who naturally hated his prey. The Armenians were portrayed as the innocent martyred Christians whom the ... Turks victimized. Americans identified with the Christian Armenians.”⁴

The movement encompassed religious, liberal and secular aspects; however, much of the grassroots support came from members of the evangelical churches and missionary societies. Gary Bass attributes British and American activism to a free press, a vigorous public sphere, and an influential number of liberal intellectuals whose ideas about human solidarity embraced not only fellow Christians, but all humankind.⁵ At the helm of the Armenian relief movement were prominent American abolitionists, suffragists, Unitarian clergymen and social reformers who viewed the massacres as another chapter in the struggle for human liberty and social justice. The event prompted Clara Barton, the founder and first president of the American Red Cross, to spearhead a relief effort in 1896 which helped save the lives of thousands of Armenians in Ottoman Turkey. It was the organisation’s first major international mission, giving rise to what Peter Balakian calls “the modern era of American international human rights relief.”⁶ These relief measures were a mere dress rehearsal for what was to occur two decades later.

Responding to the Armenian Genocide

News of the large-scale systematic massacres and deportations of Armenians by the Ottoman Turkish government during World War One (WW1) caused outrage and indignation throughout the western world. The humanitarian response was sparked by a telegram sent by the United States ambassador to Ottoman Turkey, Henry Morgenthau, to the Secretary of State in Washington on 6 September 1915. Morgenthau reported that the “destruction of the Armenian race” was “progressing rapidly” and he proposed the formation of a relief fund in the United States to ‘provide means to save some of the Armenians’ who had survived.⁷ In response to his appeal, an emergency meeting was held in New York on 16 September 1915 by a group of civic, business and religious leaders. They formed the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR), with headquarters in New York. Steps were taken immediately to organise volunteer committees in every state in the nation to maximise the Fund’s outreach to the American people. The ACASR was eventually incorporated by an Act of Congress in August 1919 and renamed Near East Relief (NER).

Britain soon followed America’s lead and in October 1915 the Lord Mayor of London, Charles Johnson, inaugurated the Armenian Refugees (Lord Mayor’s) Fund at Mansion House. In British cathedrals and churches it became the practice to designate a Sunday in February as ‘Armenia Sunday’, and to give the proceeds of the collections to Armenian relief.⁸ By the end of WW1, British charities had raised tens of thousands of pounds for the Armenian refugees. During this time Armenian relief

funds were also established in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore and Canada which were linked to the British and American relief committees.

The end of WW1 provided an opportunity for the NER to establish orphanages and rescue shelters for the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. In early 1919, a flotilla of ships' were sent from America to the Near East which the *New York Times* described as containing the 'largest contingent of missionaries, doctors and relief workers ever sent overseas on such a mission.'⁹ The party comprised of over 250 members with equipment for 15 hospitals – food, clothing and portable buildings – 60 motor trucks and other material donated by the American Red Cross and NER organisation. By the early 1920s, the NER had established over 200 orphanages, rescue shelters and hospitals which provided relief for more than 500,000 Armenian refugees which included about 130,000 orphans.¹⁰ More than 1,000 Americans had volunteered for relief work in the Near East – more than half of them women. It was an unsurpassed achievement, remarkable even by today's standards, accomplished through the pioneering of philanthropic techniques that continue to be used today. The NER has since provided a model for many of today's most well-known development organizations—including USAID and the Peace Corps.

In order to raise the large sums needed, the NER used massive media campaigns consisting of newspaper articles, public events, posters, advertisements, and even films. These propaganda campaigns deployed particular strategies and portrayals which were meant to evoke emotion and elicit sympathy. The first film to be commissioned by the NER and produced in Hollywood was called *Ravished Armenia* or *The Auction of Souls* – as it was known outside of America. It was based on the story of Aurora Mardiganian, an Armenian girl who had survived the genocidal campaign against her people. While only one of the nine reels of the movie has survived, a book titled *The Auction of Souls: The Story of Aurora Mardiganian*, first published in 1918, supplies the screenplay.¹¹ It opens in an Anatolian village on Easter Morning, 1915, with the large Mardiganian family preparing for the forced deportation. On the road, Aurora is continuously molested and she finally apostatises in order to save her mother but to no avail. At a certain point during the exodus, 16 girls in the caravan are 'crucified' on crude crosses—the most sensational scene in the film. Aurora is finally rescued and taken to Russia, where she embarks on a Norwegian ship for the United States. According to film historian Leshu Torchin, it was the first movie ever made explicitly as a work of advocacy for humanitarian relief.¹²

Another fundraising technique that the NER pioneered was the production of a coupon booklet by one of its subcommittees – The Lenten Sacrifice Committee. The Committee was headed by Major-General Leonard Wood, the Chief of Staff of the United States Army and at one time Military Governor of Cuba. Wood declared that "Americans will not willingly allow a child to starve; they only need to be shown how to save lives and the means are forthcoming." The booklet begged the question, "What is Your Verdict ... 115,000 little children await the verdict of America as to whether they shall have life or death." The booklet contained sixty \$1 removable coupons with 60 unique pictures of the Armenian Genocide printed on one side. It

was stated that each coupon purchased would prolong the life of a child for one week, five coupons would give life to a child for a month, and sixty coupons would give life to a child for a year.¹³

The booklet attempted to transform a vast and distant horror into a sympathetic cause in which Americans could channel sentiment into action. A passage in the booklet reads: "If you rescued a child from drowning today, you will be hailed as a hero ... It is just as much within your power to save a child from death as if one were drowning in your sight, and you should leap to his rescue. But the child whom you can save through the suggestions of this little booklet is dying a slow and agonizing death from starvation and needs your help infinitely more ... You may never see this child whom you have saved." Tens of thousands of the coupon booklets were sold throughout the United States by fraternal organisations and friends of the NER. The first lady of the United States, Florence Harding, and the President, each pledged responsibility for the life of an Armenian child for a year by purchasing a booklet. In both public and private life, the Hardings were staunch endorsers of the NER. In a letter to the NER, Mrs Harding wrote: "I am very glad, indeed, to testify to my keen interest in the work that that is being carried on in behalf of relief of suffering in the Near East. I have had some occasion to acquaint myself with the gravity of conditions in that historic area, and earnestly hope that the efforts now on foot for its amelioration may produce results that will testify to the humane interest and sympathy of the American people."¹⁴

The Internationalisation of the Armenian Relief Movement

In late 1921, the executive committee of the NER decided that time had come to internationalise the relief effort. As part of their strategy, they enlisted the services of the Rev. Dr. Loyal Lincoln Wirt, a Congregational minister and a well-known social visionary. His task was to help establish Armenian relief committees across the globe to form what he called 'a chain of mercy from one end of the world to the other.'¹⁵ Recognising the link between visual images of suffering and compassion, Wirt was equipped with photographs and moving pictures which illustrated the suffering of the Armenians. One of them, called 'Alice in Hungerland,' tells of the adventures of a young American girl, Alice Durya, who accompanies her father during his relief work among the Armenian orphans. The film, divided into two sections, includes scenes of children in America - happy, healthy and well fed and of children in the Near East - 'parentless, homeless, ragged, starving and ill.' Alice witnesses children "lying dead in the street for want of actual food," and others "living in caves with dogs because there was no roof in all that desolate land to shelter them."¹⁶ Wirt would use these images of Armenian suffering during his talks in order to elicit sympathy and contributions.

On 14 January 1922, Wirt embarked upon his humanitarian mission from San Francisco. His first port of call was Waikiki, Hawaii, where he was warmly received at a reception held in his honor at the royal palace. At the event, an Armenian relief committee was formed with the Governor of the island Sanford B. Dole as its chairman, and the wife of well-known Hawaiian historian, Dr William D. Westervelt, its secretary. Under their guidance, Wirt was sent to every town on every island

appealing on behalf of the suffering Armenians. Wirt noted that 'in every community committees were set up and a thorough canvass for funds inaugurated.' On the day of Wirt's departure from Hawaii, he was given a cheque for \$50,000 from the committee which was twice the expected quota from the island. Hawaii's Armenian relief committee continued to generously contribute funds and by the late 1920s had successfully collected over \$200,000 (about \$2.8 million dollars in today's terms) which was seen as an amazing achievement.¹⁷

His next destination was Japan where he arrived in February, lodging at the Imperial Hotel Tokyo. There were quite a number of Americans and Europeans in Japan at the time and it was to this community that Wirt addressed his appeal. He succeeded in forming a general committee, composed of American businessmen and missionaries, with the American Ambassador, Charles Beecher Warren, as chairman. The Armenian relief movement began to gain momentum and at foreign social groups, lodges, clubs, churches, and garden parties, Wirt was invited to speak.

While Wirt's mission was successfully progressing, word was received through the Rev. Gilbert Bowles, a long-time American missionary in Japan, that a group of leading Japanese men were interested to learn about Wirt's mission. Bowles was held in high esteem by the Japanese, and no foreigner had a better command of the Japanese language. Under the guidance of Bowles, Wirt was taken to the Imperial Bank and ushered to the director's room. Acting as an interpreter, Bowles introduced Wirt to a number of personages including Viscount Shibusawa, a leading banker and vice-minister for foreign affairs. Sitting at the head of a long table, Shibusawa asked Wirt "who the Armenians were and why they needed help." After a little geography and history, Wirt described the details of the atrocities committed against the Armenians and their current plight. Shibusawa interrupted and asked, "Why did you not come to us with your appeal?" He added, "Was it because we are Buddhists and you thought we would not help Christians in distress? We have read your speeches as reported in the Japan Advertiser [an English-language daily] and we thought we would like to help, even if we have not been invited to do so. Unknown to you, one of our Japanese papers published your appeal, and here is your result." Shibusawa handed over to Wirt a check for \$11,000 (about \$140,000 in today's terms).¹⁸

Shibusawa accepted the chairmanship of the newly formed Armenian Relief Committee of Japan, which was headquartered at 1 Uchiyamashita Cho, Kajimachi, Tokyo. The Rev. Gilbert Bowles was designated as secretary of the fund. Shibusawa immediately wrote a letter to about 100 Japanese leaders with the aim of arousing their interest in the Armenian relief appeal. Contributions for the fund began to come from all classes of Japanese society—from ordinary people to government ministers, leading businessmen and royalty. A Japanese girl's school assumed the full responsibility of two Armenian orphans. Prince Tokugawa Yoshihisa joined the relief campaign and sent a generous amount of money to the relief committee. He also took a leading part in supervising and distributing literature on the Armenian relief appeal to all members of the House of Peers. With the help of Wirt, an Armenian relief committee had also been established in the Philippines headed by the

American Governor General of the Philippine Islands, General Wood. Colonel Frank R. McCoy, General Wood's aide, assisted in setting up meetings throughout the islands and in gathering funds for the NER. According to Wirt, "the American and European residents gave generously, and the Filipino people themselves gave from their meagre store."¹⁹

Wirt continued his journey and arrived in Australia in May 1922 where he was warmly received by the country's religious, civic and political leaders. Wirt spoke of the dire needs of the Armenians, explaining that "half the nation had been exterminated." He went on to describe how he had seen "dead children thrown into the gutter where they were picked up and carried away in carts like rubbish. Some of the children were in terrible condition from eating grass ... Cholera and typhus were rampant and thousands were starving."²⁰ He proposed that the Australian government provide a 'mercy ship' for supplies to be sent to the Near East with goods donated by the people of Australia. Wirt continued his journey to the other states and made a brief visit to New Zealand, where he was received with equal support. The Australian prime minister, William Morris 'Billy' Hughes, in supporting the relief effort, promised 'that free freight would be provided by the Commonwealth Steamers' for the goods collected by the relief committees.²¹

As a result of widely publicised appeals, the first of a series of shipments of relief supplies was dispatched aboard the Australian Commonwealth Government Steamer, Hobson's Bay, on 6 September 1922. The cargo, which included flour, tinned milk, clothing, leather and woollen material, was blessed by Archbishop Lees with the assistance of clergy from other denominations before it was moved from the wharf at Prince's Pier, Port Melbourne. Over the side of the steamer a great banner was hung, proclaiming 'Australia's gift to the starving children of the Near East.'²² Before returning to the Near East to accompany the shipment, Wirt had succeeded in forming relief committees in every state in Australia and had brought them under NER administration. He expressed his delight at the result of his mission, which had far exceeded his greatest expectations: "I have never seen anything like the generosity of the Australian people. I look upon it all as more beautiful than anything else in my life."²³ In the annual report to the US congress for 1922, the general secretary of the NER stated that Australia's contribution during the year amounted 'to approximately \$100,000' in US dollars.²⁴

The Armenian relief movement was also embraced by many other nations and communities. Despite a devastating famine in China in 1921, Armenian relief committees were formed in Peking, Canton and Shanghai in 1922. The well-known American missionary in China, the Rev. Elwood G. Tewksbury, became the central committee's chairman which was headquartered at 5 Quinsan Gardens, Shanghai. Earlier, in the American city of Indianapolis, a joint fund raising event had been organised for Armenian relief and the Chinese Famine Fund. Lady Anne Azgabetian, the wife of a prominent Armenian, spoke to the audience with great eloquence on the plight of her people and their current needs. Deeply touched by her plea, the head of the Chinese mission in the United States, Sao-Ke Alfred Sze, who was present, contributed a large sum to the Armenian appeal.²⁵

An Armenian relief committee was also established in Korea with the U.S. Consul, Mr Miller as chairman. Renowned American medical missionary, Dr Oliver R. Avison, along with many other Americans and Europeans became members of the Committee. At a Summer Sunday school at Scrai Beach, Korea, a sum of money was collected during a special Sunday devoted to the Armenian children. According to Wirt "Out of their poverty, the Koreans gave to the Near East Relief."²⁶

In Cuba, General Pedro Betancourt, the Cuban secretary of Agricultural, became the president of the Armenian relief committee which was established in Havana in early 1923. Members of the executive committee included Colonel Eliseo Cartaya, General Eugenio Sanchez and Mr Pedro Luis Schellen of the National City Bank of New York. The committee enthusiastically pledged to raise over 7,000 bags of raw sugar, money and clothing for the NER. The Cuban Red Cross made the initial contribution of 500 dollars in gold, as well as the allowance of an office at its headquarters to be used by the Armenian relief committee. The Cathedral School for girls in Vedado, Havana, became the first organisation to donate clothing. Most of the children were very young, but not one failed to contribute clothing, toys or money. The New York based NER organisation acknowledged that despite Cuba's political upheaval at the time, a large number of the Island's most influential men and inhabitants "found time in their busily occupied days to share with the United States in one of the finest charities the world has ever known."²⁷

A captivating story of compassion and generosity came from another South American nation. A college of 320 girls in Santiago, Chile, decided to sacrifice dessert for a whole month and to contribute the money saved to the NER. So the 320 girls gave up cake and pudding and other dainties (and the girls have been known to like this part of the meal best) for a month and there wasn't one complaint. It was reported at the time that when "the check was sent, deep love went with it" and "new bonds united Chilean and Armenian girlhood."²⁸ In deep Africa, the Rev. J. D. Mbengo-Nyangia, a minister of the Independent Church in East Bank Location, South Africa, with a congregation of about 250 indigenous Kaffir folks, sent to the NER a "contribution of money to buy food for the hungry people of Armenia." A NER publication noted: "This money lost none of its value in travel, nor did the kindness that inspired the act drop any of its richness by the roadside. Rather, the remote thought and its practical spokesman bear a quality of picturesqueness that intensifies their value and usefulness."²⁹

African Americans who themselves were struggling for civil liberty, also participated in the Armenian relief campaign. In May 1921, during the Missouri Methodist Episcopal Conference, a resolution was adopted which demonstrated the solidarity of the African American community with the suffering Armenians. It read partly as follows: 'We are still conscious of the continued cry for help that comes from the Christians of Armenia to the Christians of America. We know how they have faced deportation, starvation and death ... We want to help them until they are able to help themselves.' Each of the 26 ministers at the conference pledged to support an Armenian orphan on behalf of his church to feed for a year. The sum of US\$1560

(about \$25,000 in today's terms) was donated by the ministers in support of 26 Armenian orphans.³⁰

The large number of global Armenian relief committees prompted the formation of the International Near East Relief organisation in 1923 which had its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. Member nations included the United States, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, France, Germany, Japan, China, Cuba, Korea, Philippine Islands, New Zealand, Sweden and Switzerland. The International NER organisation held their meetings annually just prior to the meetings by General Assembly of the League of Nations.

The First Celebrity Humanitarian

Back home in the US, the NER organisation had recognised the effectiveness of celebrity endorsements in mobilising the general public towards humanitarian causes. In 1921, world famous child actor, Jackie Coogan, along with other members of the theatrical profession, donated some of their unwanted clothing to the 'million and half ragged, starving' Armenian refugees who were facing a bitter winter in that year. This act of kindness caught the attention of the directors of the NER, who dubbed Jackie as an "infant phenom" turned "philanthropist."³¹ Jackie's career as a child actor in silent films began with his role at the age of seven as Charlie Chaplin's irascible sidekick in the film *The Kid* (1921), and his role in Frank Lloyd's *Oliver Twist* in 1922. It was a time when America was becoming an increasingly image-driven society and there was an insatiable hunger for entertainment. Dubbed "the most famous boy in the world" at the time, Jackie was also one of the first stars to be heavily merchandised with several products such as peanut butter, stationery, dolls and records etc. It was during the pinnacle of his fame that Jackie, through his celebrityhood, was recognised as being a potentially powerful and effective advocate for philanthropic causes.

The executive committee of the NER approached the Coogans requesting permission to enlist Jackie as part of an innovative fundraising strategy. In granting approval, Jackie's father stated that he wanted "Jackie to see and realize some of the hardships and suffering other children of his own age have had to endure ... to bring home to him a realization of the common duty of all mankind to one another." In 1924, Jackie was commissioned by the NER to spearhead a modern "Children's Crusade" throughout the U.S. in an appeal to the children of America for a million dollar shipload of foodstuffs for the destitute orphan children in the Near East. It involved an initial cross-country American fundraising junket, in his own private railroad car, ending in New York. Jackie proclaimed: "We who are in this Children's Crusade of Mercy must do our best for these orphan children. We shall do for them as we should like to have them do for us if we were orphans. The Children's Crusade must provide food for those inside the orphanage doors and relieve the sufferings of those outside."³²

In each town Jackie visited, he received an ovation prompted partly by admiration for the boy himself and partly by the enthusiastic approval of his mission. The mayor of Boston gave him the key to the city. In Brooklyn, August 16 was declared "Jackie

Coogan Day”, and over 100,000 boys and girls crowded the city’s park. In Albuquerque, New Mexico, he was made a Medicine Man of the Navajo Indians. The stations of every town through which his train passed were crowded to capacity by his admirers both big and small. And almost everyone who came to greet Jackie brought with them gifts – cans and cases of milk, boxes and packages of food and money. Jackie’s tour received unprecedented media coverage in the U.S. through newspapers, movie magazines and newsreels.

This national tour was followed by an Atlantic voyage to Europe in September where Jackie was greeted by enthusiastic crowds in London and Paris. While in Rome, Jackie had a private audience with the reigning pontiff, Pius XI, who gave Jackie his papal blessing and bestowed upon Jackie a silver medal bearing the papal coat of arms, engraved in gold. His destination was Athens which housed thousands of Greek and Armenian refugees. Jackie personally handed over the bills of lading for over one million dollars (about thirteen million dollars in today’s terms) worth of relief cargo for distribution to the refugees and orphans. In the presence of Greek and American dignitaries as well as over 7,000 orphans, Jackie was decorated by the Greek government with the Silver Cross of the Order of St. George, given in recognition of his humanitarian work. On his return to the U.S., Jackie was welcomed by the Governor of New York, Lieutenant George R. Lunn, and was enthusiastically greeted by huge crowds in Time Square.³³ A moving picture on Jackie’s humanitarian journey was produced by the NER titled Jackie in the Near East which was screened throughout the U.S. and across the world.

By 1929, the NER had successfully raised over \$110 million and rescued more than a million Armenians, Greeks and Assyrians from certain death. In that same year, U.S. President Calvin Coolidge eloquently summarized what the humanitarian relief endeavour had meant to America and its people: “The volunteer relief committee was, from the beginning, a National organisation of the United States, manned by our people and incorporated by a special act of congress in 1919 as the Near East Relief. It was National because it received its support from all our people and was endorsed by Congress and all our Presidents throughout its history; and, in its widely extended work of life and child saving, it represented the true spirit of our country ... it clothed the naked, fed the starving and provided shelter, care and practical schooling for more than a hundred and thirty thousand fatherless waifs left as a wreckage from the Great War ... No private enterprise ever undertaken by Americans and in the name of America has accomplished more to arouse, in the minds and hearts of all the peoples of the countries in which this organisation has carried on its operations, a sincere regard and even affection for America.”³⁴ The activities of the NER had been so widespread in America that it was reported at the time that there is “scarcely a child in the United States who has not, through church or school, helped to feed and clothe the children of the Near East.”³⁵

CONCLUSION

The global response to the Armenian Genocide represents the world's first major international humanitarian relief effort, and the United States played a leading role in achieving this landmark event. Sadly, despite the well documented story of American and international goodness during the Armenian Genocide, the history is little known and does not form part of the global collective memory of WW1. Perhaps an explanation can be found in a passage from a work by Paul Shackel on the relationship between power and collective memory, in which he suggests: "public memory is more a reflection of present political and social relations than a true reconstruction of the past."



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Genocide Monument Unveiled in South Australia

For the first time in history, on May 20, 2012 in Adelaide, South Australia, descendants of the original Christian inhabitants who survived the Turkish Ottoman Empire's genocide united for justice and recognition.

Elena Harrison, President of the Armenian Cultural Association of South Australia Inc., the small but vibrant Armenian, Pontian-Greek and Assyrian Universal Alliance communities unveiled a monument in recognition of the 1,500,000 Armenians, 800,000 Greeks of Asia Minor, 500,000 Pontian Greeks and 800,000 Assyrians, all Christians, who were massacred or deported from their ancestral lands through a series of genocides by the Ottoman Turks, between 1915 and 1923.

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Notes

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