

The Perceptions of the Near East Relief Nurses during the Armenian Genocide: Neutrality, Modern Humanitarianism and Future Aspirations

It is acknowledged that modern humanitarianism tied to the promotion of human rights started in Europe at the conclusion of the Second World War, the Holocaust and the United Nations Conventions on Human Rights and Genocide Prevention^{1,2}. Yet, some scholars link the birth of modern humanitarianism to the Armenian Genocide and the rescue efforts of the League of Nations³. It is known that the American Red Cross and the Near East Relief were two organizations that subscribed to neutral oriented humanitarian philosophies.

The Near East Relief was the largest organization that addressed the humanitarian needs of the victims of the Armenian Genocide. The Genocide had resulted in thousands of refugees comprised of sick, wounded, widowed, orphaned and displaced Christian minorities of the Ottoman Empire and the Armenians comprised one of the largest minority groups that were targeted alongside the Greeks, Arabs, Syrians, Assyrians, Chaldeans and others. American and Canadian nurses were among the many Near East Relief humanitarian workers who traveled to the Near East region and participated in the relief work in the frontlines of an unfolding disaster. Even before the incorporation of the Near East Relief in the United States in 1919, many North American nurses maintained an active participation in the humanitarian relief efforts rendered by the American Red Cross and before that the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions who had a substantial presence in the Ottoman Empire in the early 19th Century through missionary work and ran schools, clinics, hospitals and workshops⁴.

...the people were dying of starvation, dysentery, and typhus, -200 a day, requiring 20 carts to carry out the dead. Part of the town had been blown up by the Turks when they left last December. The streets swarmed with refugees, over 60,000 of them, and I never imagined such desolation and misery, -living skeletons walking or crawling on the filthy, muddy cobblestones, many of them blind with hunger...All of those [not already blind with hunger], who could see went with their eyes glued to the ground hoping to find a morsel of food; so intent were they, even the little children, that they never noticed us. I saw boys of five grubbing in the grass of the cemetery for roots to eat. They were eating dog meat in many of the shelter houses. On Good Friday we went to Igdir, a forlorn village, indeed, where they have been digging up the dead to eat. I saw the opened graves and a few of the bones left in each grave, and some of the clothes which had partly covered the dead-in one a garter of twisted rags. At Erivan, just a week to-day, one of your nurses, Edith Winchester, died of typhus, and was buried in the Armenian cemetery among the flowering locusts. with majestic snow-crowned Mount Ararat looking down on the new grave of an American Red Cross nurse who gave her life for the Armenians...

Blanche Knox, September 1919, American Red Cross nurse from Philadelphia, US

In my masters thesis ‘North American Nurses’ transnational relief efforts during the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1923’ I found traces of a possible tension between politically neutral oriented organizational philosophies and perceptions of individual humanitarian personnel including nurses who took on roles such as rescuing of genocide survivors, advocating the international community to intervene, denouncing child marriages, child transfers and forced conversion to other religions, as well as advocating to protect the Armenian nation linking the suffering of

individual Armenians to collective cultural and ethnic annihilation⁵. This aspect warrants further study of the role of nurses as well as the organizations' agenda and policy around the alleged stance of neutrality. Nowadays, these actions categorically fall under the very definition of modern humanitarianism and promotion of human rights. If these traces are substantiated by a larger study, it can lead to a better understanding of modern humanitarianism with a possibility of tracing its beginning to at least half a century earlier period than the largely prescribed mid twentieth century and to the Near East rather than Europe, through the actions of individual US and Canadian nurses.

My master's thesis nurses between 1915, 1923, an arbitrary date and *the American Canadian Nurse* and explore relevant some nurses' strong victim groups while

...There are whole orphanages of these children out there now... I'm very glad to say that through Near East Relief, aid is still going to these, the victims of German greed, and age-old Christian indifference...

Helen Teal, August 1921, a public health registered nurse from Ohio, US

explored the experiences of the peak of the genocide, and marking the end of the genocide, *Journal of Nursing, the Globe* were utilized to material. There are traces of opinions siding with minority engaging in political activism

calling on their respective governments to intervene to stop the massacres perpetrated against these groups. The latter suggests a tension between neutrality (a core value of the ARC and NER) and the actions of nurses taking sides in conflict by, for instance, advocating intervention to stop massacres. Furthermore, American and Canadian nurses collaborated transnationally with relief organizations from around the World such as those from Australia and Europe. An international and transnational collaboration is an additional attribute to modern humanitarianism. Additionally, they helped rebuild the lives of thousands of refugees through skills training and capacity building as they helped establish schools and workshops to train widowed women and orphaned children. Currently conducting a more in-depth analysis of this nursing work and advocacy, this research will inform scholarly debate about humanitarianism and contribute to Canadian, American and health history.

...On the eve of my departure for the Near East to serve as best I may the suffering people of Armenia, I wish to make this personal appeal to my friends and to Canadian citizens generally to do all in their power at home to support the cause in which I have enlisted. The appeal of the starving thousands of Armenia and other countries of Western Asia must not and cannot be ignored by the Christian people of North America. Reports reaching the National Headquarters of the Armenian Relief Association show that hundreds of thousands of adults and at least 250,000 homeless little children are in need of our aid. Without food supplies from Canada thousands of these people must perish from starvation. I deem it a privilege to have this opportunity to do my share in saving lives, administering to the welfare and upbuilding of these people. You at home also feel that your part, the most important of all, is likewise a privilege. You may not be able to go, but you can give. On your generous hearts everything else depends...

Emma Wood, January 26, 1920, a nurse from Ontario, Canada

Finally, there is some evidence related to the role of nurses in organizations that hoped to bring a permanent change to the Near East by establishing American style education and health care system for the benefit of future generations following the Armenian genocide and the First World War. While nurses' work seems to have valued neutrality in some instances, they also

called for foreign intervention to stop violence against minorities. The latter suggests differences in the understanding and enactment of humanitarianism. Hence, how humanitarianism in early twentieth century is viewed can be explored by a study of how the nurses took up their work within these organizations.

¹ Calhoun, Craig. 2008. "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action." In *Humanitarianism in Question*, edited by Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, 1st ed., 73-97: New York: Cornell University Press.

² Mayers, David. 2015. "Humanity in 1948: The Genocide Convention and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights." *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, 446-472.

³ Watenpugh, Keith David. 2010. "The League of Nations; rescue of Armenian Genocide survivors and the making of modern humanitarianism, 1920-1927." *The American Historical Review*, 115 no. 5 1315-1339.

⁴ Yacoubian, Hrag. 2017. North American nurses' transnational relief efforts during the Armenian genocide of 1915-1923 Master's thesis. University of British Columbia. Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0355479>.

⁵ Ibid

Hrag David Yacoubian is a PhD student at the University of British Columbia. Yacoubian has nursing and healthcare backgrounds. Currently, he is studying the history of North American humanitarian organizations and nurses involved in relief efforts during and in the aftermath of the Armenian Genocide. His research and studies are supported and funded by the University of British Columbia, British Columbia Graduate Scholarship Fund, the Armenian General Benevolent Union, the Canadian Association of the History of Nursing and the British Columbia History of Nursing Society.