

Near East Relief and the Rescue of “Absorbed” Armenian Women, 1915-21

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In the publicity campaigns, pamphlets, and monthly magazine of the American charity Near East Relief, one regular feature was the rescue of the Christian Armenian women and children who had been abducted or sold during the deportation marches into Turkish, Kurdish or Arab homes and forcibly converted to Islam: indeed, it became a rallying cry for American aid and action until at least 1923. One article, entitled “Those Who Turn to Us in Hope,” in the Near East Relief’s magazine *The New Near East*, described the situation in 1921:

Hidden away in Mohammedan homes, varying from the palatial abodes of rich Turks to the tents of wandering Arabs, are Christian Armenian girls, numbering ... 63,800. ... Imagination pictures life in the harem as degrading in the extreme according to Western standards. The intolerance of Mohammedan towards Christians adds to the degradation of these girls the horrors of relentless persecution. It has been our imperative duty, as Christians, to effect their release wherever possible.¹

Near East Relief sponsored the rescue and rehabilitation of these women and children, either by taking in those who appeared at the doors of their Rescue Homes or by actively setting out with search parties to locate and bring them back.² By 1920 or earlier, Near East Relief was operating eleven of these Rescue Homes throughout the lands of the former Ottoman Empire.³ Despite this, discussion of the rescue operations and rescued women in the institutional records of Near East Relief—records of committee meetings, annual reports, and correspondence with donors—is markedly absent, and the brief references which do appear display a certain disinterest in the issue.

This paper reconstructs how the rescue of Armenian women fit into the Near East Relief’s overall project of aiding Armenian (and other Christian minority) refugees, by

tracing the changing focus of the relief operations between the first meeting of the Committee in 1915 through to its shift in 1920 away from providing general relief to concentrating its funds on Armenian orphans and on developing an Armenian national homeland, and explores why, in 1920, the organization wound down the rescue of women and children—especially women—from Muslim households.⁴

Near East Relief began life as the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief, quickly absorbing the workload of other organizations working in the Near East at the time—including the Persian War Fund and the Syrian-Palestine Relief Committee—and working in cooperation with the American Red Cross and the American Relief Administration.⁵ The first meeting of the Committee in September 1915 initially aimed to raise \$100,000, but as its secretary, Samuel T. Dutton, put it, the Committee was soon to consider “some rather large plans” for the relief of the Armenians in Turkey, Russia and Persia.⁶ At the beginning the emphasis was—necessarily—on the general relief of the refugees. The publicity material and (irregularly-published) newsletter *Bulletin* were full of descriptions of the needs of the survivors, often printing dire and rather lurid reports received from the relief workers in the field. The *Bulletin* of May 24, 1916 estimated that well over one million refugees, largely women and children, needed immediate and general relief across the former Turkish Empire, from food and clothing to medical intervention and shelter.⁷ That same *Bulletin* also mentioned, as a particular category of refugees, the “numbers coming forth from their places of concealment or from the houses of certain friendly Kurds or from their captivity in Moslem harems.”⁸

However, amongst these calls for funds to help keep the destitute and starving Armenians alive, the Committee also emphasised from the beginning, the need to help the refugees become self-supporting wherever possible.⁹ As one relief worker wrote from Erivan (Yerevan) in 1916,

Besides help to the sick in Erivan I started a number of artisans in their trades, furnishing kits of tools to carpenters, cobblers, silversmiths, etc. or by enabling a tailor to buy a machine, or giving a baker an outfit. An artist was provided with paints that he might put on canvas the grand Ararat, which has a ready sale; another obtained his desire for a number of raw sheep-skins, from which he and his wife will pull the wool, selling the hide and wool separately day by day and living on the profits. This was a man who was a well to do property owner in Van.¹⁰

This early resolve to provide the refugees, from the orphans to the former social elite, with means of self-support, remained a cornerstone of the relief policies and is considered in the official brief of Near East Relief after its incorporation by an Act of Congress in 1919:

To provide relief, and to assist in the repatriation, rehabilitation, and re-establishment of Armenians, Syrians, Greeks, Jews, and other needy peoples of the Near East: to provide for the care of orphans and widows, and to conduct any schools, industrial enterprises or operations of a philanthropic character which may, in the judgement of the corporation, be necessary to promote the social, economic and industrial welfare of those who through no fault of their own have been rendered destitute or dependent directly, or indirectly, by the vicissitudes of war.¹¹

Up to this point, the issue of women in the Rescue Homes appears only very infrequently in the early committee records and publications, although figures given in later reports would suggest that thousands must have been taken in during these years. Nevertheless, these women, resident for some time in Muslim homes, but now after escaping or being found and returned to the Armenian community, fit very clearly into the stated aim of “repatriation, rehabilitation, and re-establishment.” The necessity of providing general relief to the many hundreds of thousands of destitute Armenians while the war was still being fought largely prevented this goal of rehabilitation and repatriation (the issue of an Armenian homeland was not politically settled for many years).

The Armistice provided the opportunity for Near East Relief to send out more personnel and supplies, and begin its program of reconstruction. A \$30,000,000 campaign was launched in America in order to meet the rehabilitation refugee and child needs in the Near East¹² (and ten million of that alone was raised in the first half of 1919).¹³ Major steps forward were made: the supply ships and trains brought the cost of food down, medical

supplies were distributed amongst the stations, the relief operations were streamlined and coordinated under regional administrations, and a major survey was organized in order to assess the general conditions and needs and plan a program of rehabilitation and reconstruction.¹⁴ The area remained unstable—Turkey warred against the new Republic of Armenia in 1920, the French mandate forces in 1920 and 1921, and Greece between 1919 and 1922 (culminating in a series of forced population exchanges in 1922)—and thus, since in the summer of 1919 it therefore did not “seem practicable to repatriate large numbers of Armenian, Greek and other refugees in Western Asia,” the Committee began to focus on developing industrial relief for the refugees, organizing sewing-shops, and carpentry workshops (and so on) which employed the refugees, taught them a trade and the proceeds helped to reduce expenditure.¹⁵

Yet by early 1920, it became obvious that the need for the general relief which the Near East Relief was dispensing—feeding, clothing, and housing the refugees, which was in effect, merely keeping them alive—was not likely to abate in the future. Dwindling donations from both the public and private philanthropists inaugurated campaigns which emphasised that in Near East Relief’s field of operations, the war was not yet over.¹⁶ “HUNGER KNOWS NO ARMISTICE,” proclaimed one poster, which showed a desperate mother with her two children. This was also reproduced on the back of a pamphlet with words from Committee member Rabbi S. Wise, “The Armenians must be kept alive—Don’t get tired. We have done so much, let us do just a little more.”¹⁷ This can largely explain why, on February 19, 1920, the Executive Committee made it general policy that Near East Relief “should seek to withdraw completely from general relief work with the coming harvest, and should leave to the governments in control of the areas, as largely as practicable, all responsibility for repatriation and rehabilitation expenses.”¹⁸ While orphans were to be returned to relatives or

other religious agencies if possible, Near East Relief would continue to operate and budget for orphanages, but with regard to the Rescue Homes, the Committee decided that:

Responsibility for the care of women and girls now in our rescue homes, or who may later be released from Moslem homes, shall as rapidly and as far as possible be left to funds and agencies, or upon such religious or secular organizations as may be able to assume their support, wholly or in part.¹⁹

Up until that point, it had been recommended by the Commission sent to survey Near East Relief's field of operations, that rescued women and children should receive the same care as orphans, including "moral and religious training"—they were reintegrated back into the Armenian church and taught the Armenian language—as well as teaching them a trade.²⁰ By the end of 1921, only seven Rescue Homes were still operating.²¹ Although Near East Relief continued to support and instruct the women who were already in the Rescue Homes, and those who arrived later, the focus was now quite squarely upon the orphans.

Indeed, the Committee saw in the orphanage work the real potential for "both the saving of lives of little children and the resuscitation of a people, if not of a nation."²² Charles V. Vickrey's report following his tour of Near East Relief operations in the summer of 1920 found the orphanage work to be "by all odds the most encouraging and inspiring" of all the relief activities,²³ and concluded:

It may be doubted if any American organization has ever had an opportunity equal to ours in shaping the future of the Near East. The 100,000 children now under our care, wisely guided will become the leaders in a New Era in the Old World. They will be the trained agriculturists, the mechanics, merchants, manufacturers, bankers, educators, lawyers, doctors, governors and rational leaders of the New Near East.

The Committee was quite explicit that the object of this training was not to "Americanize" the children, but to train them for "industrial and agricultural lives in the Near East and for good citizenship under the governments in charge of their areas."²⁴ From this point on, the appeal letters and *The New Near East* articles began to refer to the children as "The Hope for the Future."²⁵ The opening line of a February 1922 center-spread entitled "The Resurrection of a Race," declared that "Armenia's hope is in her children. Through them, and them only,

can she hope to rise again,”²⁶ while a year later another center-page spread was filled with portrait shots of Armenian children, entitled “The Raw Material From Which Near East Relief Hopes to Mold Leaders for a Reconstructed Country.”²⁷ (A policy decision was made to emphasise “the child” over “the orphan,” likely because this gave more of a sense of moldable “raw material,” rather than the baggage “orphan” carried).²⁸ At this time Near East Relief was also becoming increasingly involved in large-scale projects for the industrial and agricultural development of the Republic of Armenia.²⁹ This decisive shift from general relief and the care of adults, rescued girls, and orphans, to an overriding focus on the children was, in a sense, the culminating fulfilment of Near East Relief’s original goal of ensuring self-support, repatriation, rehabilitation, and re-establishment.

Why, then, was it so easy to discontinue the rescue of the Armenian women kept in Muslim homes? In part, this is difficult to determine, since there is no record of any in-depth discussion of the matter and Near East Relief personnel and committee members’ reactions and recommendations seem to have varied quite widely from person to person and across time as well. Nevertheless, perhaps an indication is given in the section on Rescue Homes in the Near East Relief “Handbook,” published in October 1920, in which the opening paragraph argues that “The enslavement of Christian girls, as it has been practiced in Turkey during the past five years, has no parallel in modern history. Civilization has been tattooed with the stigma of impotency”—going on to make the case for the release of the girls from the “clutch of the Turk”—a “typical report” at the end of the section writes that:

As for the rescuing of the innocent Christian children from the hands of barbarians, no word of comment is necessary. Our experience has taught us that every minute that passes and leaves our children and women in the barbarian homes, wipes out part of the national and religious traits of their characters. The children are bred in Moslem manners, are given a thoroughly Islamic religious and superstitious training, and when we go to rescue them, they often deny their nationality and religion for some time.³⁰

In 1920, roughly five years would have passed since these girls were taken into Muslim homes and of course the years would continue to pass. From this perspective, they were

becoming less and less “redeemable” and their rescue less and less worthwhile each day. In fact, from the dispassionate and rather offhand way they are referred to in some internal correspondence, one might sense that the attraction was in the rescue itself of these Christian girls and in the publicity material it generated, rather than their subsequent rehabilitation and re-integration. The director of the Beirut operation, writing about the drive to reduce costs, mentioned that “some one hundred forty girls ... have been disposed of in one way or another.”³¹ The cost of such rescue appears in some account sheets under heading, “Administration: tours, guards, reclaiming girls, legal exp. [sic], etc.”³² Barton writes, rather unfeelingly, that “work was given as an antidote to their previous experiences and to enable them to gradually become self-supporting.”³³ Therefore, at a time when Near East Relief was trying to cut back expenditure and was shifting its focus to the “reconstruction of the Armenian nation,” it is perhaps not so surprising that the Committee began to wind down the rescue operations of these girls who were symbolically already (and becoming increasingly) difficult to reintegrate into a new and reconstructed Armenian nation.

This episode—a brief one in the history of Near East Relief, but life-changing for the girls and their descendants³⁴—has plenty to say about the interaction of humanitarianism, gender, and ideas about race and nation in the years following World War I. Although the lack of clear discussions make any conclusions tentative, it could be argued that while Near East Relief rescued many thousands of Armenian girls from Moslem homes, the project was wound down when savings needed to be made, in part because of unease over the symbolism now firmly attached to these girls and their experiences—the defilement of the Armenian female body—and the fundamental incompatibility of that symbolism with the image, pursued wholeheartedly by Near East Relief, of a renewed, reconstructed, and implicitly “pure” Armenian nation.

This report forms part of the research for a longer article I am currently completing, which explores in greater depth how relief workers and organizations responded to the issue of rescuing and reintegrating the Armenian women who had been taken into Bedouin homes and tattooed on their faces and hands according to Bedouin customs (in order to denote familial and tribal belonging). I am very grateful to the Rockefeller Archive Center's Grant-in-Aid program for supporting this section of my research.

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ENDNOTES:

¹ *The New Near East*, June 1921, p. 15.

² For a personal account, see the discussion in Stanley E. Kerr, *The Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with Near East Relief, 1919-1922*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1973, pp. 43-48; The League of Nations organized a rescue operation along similar lines from 1921 to 1927; see Keith David Watenpaugh, "'The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920-1927." *The American Historical Review* 115: 5 (2010), pp. 1315-1339; Armenian organizations were also involved: see Vahé Tachjian, "Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide." *Nations and Nationalism* 15: 1 (2009), pp. 60-80.

³ Near East Relief, 1920 Report to Congress. Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (LSRM), Series 3, Box 8, Folder 103.

⁴ Executive Committee Meeting, February 19, 1920. RAC, Near East Foundation (NEF), Box 1, Minutes, 1919-1920.

⁵ Besides James L. Barton's own account, *Story of Near East Relief, 1915-1930*. New York: Macmillan, 1930, a solid and standard history of the Near East Relief is given in chapter 3 in Merrill D. Peterson, *"Starving Armenians": America and the Armenian Genocide, 1915-1930 and After*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004, pp. 51-88.

⁶ Samuel T. Dutton to Jerome D. Greene, October 27, 1915. RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Archives (RF), Record Group (RG) 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 6, Folder 721.

⁷ *Bulletin No. 5*, p. 12. RAC, RF, RG 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 76, Folder 718.

⁸ *Bulletin No. 5*, p. 7. RAC, RF, RG 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 76, Folder 718.

⁹ The Committee's "Plan for Relief of Refugees in the Caucasus," dated November 16, 1915, made this one point of its five-point plan: "To establish means of self-help through agricultural implements, industrial tools, material for handicraft, and transportation to industrial centers." RAC, RF, RG 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 76, Folder 721.

¹⁰ *Bulletin No. 5*, p. 12. RAC, RF, RG 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 76, Folder 718.

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- ¹¹ RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1915-1919.
- ¹² See Barton, *Story of Near East Relief*, p. 109.
- ¹³ Minutes of the Executive Committee, June 9, 1919. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1915-1919.
- ¹⁴ See Barton, *Story of Near East Relief*, pp. 115-119.
- ¹⁵ “Resolutions Adopted by American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief,” June 2, 1919. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1915-19.
- ¹⁶ Charles V. Vickrey to Hamilton Holt, March 18, 1920, p. 4. Rockefeller Family Archives, RG 2 OMR, Series Q, Box 41, Folder 356.
- ¹⁷ RAC, NEF, Box 137. Emphasis in the original.
- ¹⁸ Executive Committee Meeting, February 19, 1920, p. 5. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1919-1920.
- ¹⁹ Executive Committee Meeting, February 19, 1920, p. 6. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1919-1920.
- ²⁰ See Barton, *Story of Near East Relief*, p. 119.
- ²¹ Report of the Near East Relief to Congress, December 31, 1921, p. 8. RAC, NEF, Box 134.
- ²² Executive Committee to Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, n.d. [1921], p. 5. RAC, LSRM, Series 3, Box 9, Folder 104.
- ²³ Charles V. Vickrey, “Preliminary Report: Observations in Central Europe and the Near East,” July-September 1920, p. 12. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1920-1921.
- ²⁴ Report of the Orphanage Committee, p. 4, Appendix F, June 24, 1920. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1920-1921.
- ²⁵ Executive Committee to Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, n.d. [1921], p. 5. RAC, LSRM, Series 3, Box 9, Folder 104.
- ²⁶ *The New Near East*, February 1922, centerfold.
- ²⁷ *The New Near East*, February 1923, centerfold.
- ²⁸ Minutes, Board of Trustees meeting, June 24, 1920, p. 3. RAC, NEF, Box 1, Minutes 1919-1920.
- ²⁹ See Shaloma Gauthier and Davide Rodogno, “The Near East Relief’s Caucasus Branch Operation (1919-1920).” RAC Research Report, 2011, available at: www.rockarch.org/publications/resrep/gauthier-rodogno.pdf. See also Paul Monroe, R.R. Reeder, James I. Vance, et al, *Reconstruction in the Near East*. New York: Near East Relief, 1924.
- ³⁰ “Handbook,” October 1920, pp. 39-40. RAC, NEF, Box 134.
- ³¹ Managing Director, Beirut, to Charles V. Vickrey, April 7, 1921, p. 3. RAC, LSRM, Series 3, Box 8, Folder 103.
- ³² Summary of the Receipts and Expenditures of the Relief Committee at Urumia, Persia, January 1 to September 30, 1915. RAC, RF, RG 1.1 Projects, Series 100, Box 76, Folder 721.
- ³³ See Barton, *Story of Near East Relief*, p. 179.
- ³⁴ There is currently a great interest in Turkey in so-called “hidden Armenians,” the grandmothers and great-grandmothers who had been “absorbed” into families and lived their lives as Turks, keeping quiet about their earlier identity for fear of discrimination. See Ayşe Gül Altınay and Yektan Türkyılmaz, “Unravelling Layers of Gendered Silencing: Converted Armenian Survivors of the 1915 Catastrophe.” In Amy Singer, Christoph K. Neumann and Selçuk Akşin Somel, editors, *Untold Histories of the Middle East: Recovering Voices from the 19th and 20th Centuries*. New York: Routledge, 2011, pp. 25-53. See also Fethiye Çetin, *My Grandmother: A Memoir*. London, U.K.: Verso, 2008.