

# **America's Sacred Duty: Near East Relief and the Armenian Crisis, 1915-1930**

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Throughout World War I and its aftermath, hundreds of thousands of refugees across Europe and Asia Minor were the recipients of humanitarian aid. But in the United States one ethnic group in particular, the Armenians, captured Americans' imaginations and prompted the nation to action. Americans worried that Armenians were targeted for extinction, so U.S. cultural and political elites took up this humanitarian cause in the name of their "Christian" citizenship. This was more than relief work in the name of modern goodwill – it was a rescue mission undertaken with solemn vows of the American Christian's duty to protect the poor, starving Armenians. As one fundraising plea put it, "It's a big job and a holy one" to save the Armenians from the Turks.<sup>1</sup> The battle lines were quickly drawn as a "degenerate" and Muslim civilization versus "progressive" and Christian civilization with the Armenians caught in the middle.<sup>2</sup> This movement to save the Armenians did not operate at the edges of American society. As President Woodrow Wilson's ambassador to Germany and advisor claimed, it was the "sacred duty of Christian civilization to save Armenia."<sup>3</sup>

The immense popularity and success of the United States' national humanitarian effort on the behalf of the Armenians and its role as an important episode of American internationalism and progressive idealism has largely been forgotten. This report considers the significance of the Armenian crisis for the American public. What prompted so many Americans to embrace an internationalist program of restoring a relatively small (and arguably obscure) ethnic group to security and even nationhood when many other religious and ethnic minorities faced similar injustices? I contend that Americans rallied to action due to the religious identity of the Armenian refugees and the geographic location of their suffering – the Holy Land, which includes modern day Turkey, Syria, Israel, and Palestine. Americans were called to alleviate the suffering of these 'ancient' Christians because of the perceived ancient ties between the Holy Land and the United States. Fundraisers and relief workers claimed that America's relief efforts would transform the Holy Land because Armenians would be redeemed as they were modernized and Americanized.

### **The Imperative of Rescuing Ancient Christians**

The Near East Relief served as the primary relief organization for displaced and orphaned Armenians, but it was the missionary origins of the Near East Relief that helped shaped American perceptions of the Armenians as ancient Christians with a faith worth emulating. In fact, American missionaries were the first responders to the Armenian crisis, which began in 1894 and then resurfaced in 1909 and 1912 only to return with greater violence in 1915 and 1922.<sup>4</sup> The missionaries' ceased their proselytizing and engaged in relief work as Armenian men were murdered, women and children were forced out of homes, and as the entire community was coerced to convert to Islam.<sup>5</sup>

It was in the midst of this chaos that American missionaries such as James Barton and philanthropists such as Charles Crane and Cleveland Dodge formed a committee in 1915 called the American Committee for Relief in the Near East.<sup>6</sup> By August 6, 1919 Congress incorporated the

committee as the Near East Relief in official approval of the NER's efforts to organize food, medicine, and refugee administration in the Middle East.<sup>7</sup> The NER also enjoyed the support of President Woodrow Wilson, who realized the U.S. government faced limitations in its ability to intervene officially on behalf of the Armenian refugees in the former Ottoman Empire.<sup>8</sup> Wilson pursued a political solution to the Armenian crisis, encouraged the federal government to donate relief supplies to NER, and he also urged Americans to donate money to NER and the Red Cross in multiple, open letters to the U.S. public.<sup>9</sup> President Wilson and Congress' approval signaled the tremendous cultural and political support behind the first modern, national humanitarian effort of the United States, while NER and its missionary leadership provided a compelling narrative to motivate Americans to give.

Records show that the NER portrayed the Armenians as noble, persecuted Christians who were victims of aggressive, Muslim villains. Missionaries gathered intelligence about the Armenian crisis, educated the American public, and then administered the relief. The missionaries played a crucial role in shaping American perception and sympathy for the Armenians. The Armenians' connection to the Holy Land, and their presence in locales once traveled by the Apostle Paul and home to New Testament churches heightened the interest of Americans. The NER realized this and repeatedly emphasized "Armenia is the oldest Christian nation."<sup>10</sup> The Armenians' identity as "ancient" Christians and the American missionaries' eyewitness accounts of the violence against them helped to raise Americans' interest while presenting a compelling case for Americans to act.

An intriguing counterpoint to the American concern for "starving Armenians" was the disinterest and lack of publicity given to the comparable suffering of the Kurdish people, who also endured forced deportations and violence under the Turks. Both Armenians and Kurds were victims of nationalist Turkish violence, but the American sympathy for Armenians far outpaced humanitarian efforts or donations for Muslim Kurds. The Kurdish complicity in anti-Armenian

violence may have been a factor in American apathy to the Kurdish plight.<sup>11</sup> It is worth noting that missionaries were targeted by Kurdish mobs in the 1890s and these events shaped their perspective of the Kurds, who they saw as pawns of Turkish nationalists who were easily incited to violence. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that American sympathy and financial aid increased exponentially when the war victims were Christian while a direct, inverse correlation between U.S. humanitarian interests may be observed when the victims were Muslim.<sup>12</sup> It is estimated that over \$110 million was donated to the cause of Armenian relief and rebuilding.<sup>13</sup> There are no comparable numbers with which to compare Kurdish relief funds because no large-scale fundraising campaigns took place for the Kurds.

The American media reported regularly on the Armenian crisis and mob violence that plagued their villages.<sup>14</sup> The *New York Times* in particular devoted considerable space to the anti-Armenian violence, and the newspapers also interpreted the anti-Armenian violence as deliberate Muslim aggression against Christians. One reporter described the Turkish landscape he encountered as “blood-splashed cities and villages” where “Moslem soldiers and Moslem mobs swept the surrounding country, butchering men, women, and children and violating Christian wives and daughters before Christian churches within a few hundred miles of the place of Christ’s birth, ministry, and death . . .”<sup>15</sup> The Near East Relief took out a full page ad in the *New York Times* warning that the war with Germany had distracted Americans from the Turkish war crimes against Armenians:

We were all so intent upon driving the Hun out of civilization for all time that we had scarce a moment for reflection on the savagery of the Turk, visited on Christian and Jew alike; on men and women and little children who trace their holy ancestry back to the twilight of the Old and New Testaments.<sup>16</sup>

A consensus began to emerge among missionaries, diplomats, successive American presidents, and journalists that the Armenians’ victimhood was notable due to their identity as Christians and their location in the Holy Land.

American missionaries offered up romantic depictions of an ancient, Christian civilization driven from their ancestral land by Islamic latecomers who had usurped the primitive Christians' rightful claim to the land. The NER eagerly seized this interpretation in part because they were led by missionaries such as James Barton, but the organization itself was very mission-minded. A Near East Relief annual report to Congress explained:

The late forced and tragic exodus of these Christians, driven by the Turkish-Kurdish sword from their ancestral home . . . is known to most readers of church and modern history. . . . Near East Relief has not the resources to grapple adequately with all the relief problems of this area, but by the maintenance of orphanages, industries and hospitals it is at least saving the lives of the children and aiding the adults to regain self-support, thus helping to preserve the remnant of one of the **oldest Christian races** known in Church history.<sup>17</sup>

The ancient qualities of the Armenians in peaceful times had made them an ideal audience for the American missionary message of western Protestantism. When violence erupted, their historic and ancient traditions made them pitiable victims of Muslim violence. Not only was the violence against the Armenian Orthodox a modern reenactment of the medieval crusades (albeit with reversed roles of aggressor and victim), it was also a crime against a longstanding tradition with direct ties to the biblical past. This heightened the missionaries' sense of injustice: "These children were born on Turkish soil. Their families for centuries, dating back before the Christian era, and antedating the Turk himself in occupation, have lived in Anatolia. They are literally being shoved off their ancestral homes into the sea – with no place to land."<sup>18</sup> The religious imagery infused the public relations efforts of the Near East Relief, as did their conviction that Armenians were rightful inhabitants of the Holy Land.

Fundraising literature for the NER was explicit in linking the fate of the Armenian refugees to the very future of the Holy Land. One pamphlet published in December of 1924 carried a photograph of Armenian orphan boys in Palestine, and the caption read: "The star marks the spot where the Baby Jesus was born. Today there are 50,000 children in Bible lands who would be as homeless as that other Babe were it not for American generosity. GIVE THAT THEY MIGHT

LIVE.”<sup>19</sup> The modern task of restoring the Armenian people carried with it multiple layers of meaning for the missionaries, relief workers, and the donors who never left the U.S. The very geography of the humanitarian crisis meant something. “At Nazareth boys of twelve, the age of Our Lord when he lived there, are taught the Master’s trade in a shop across the street from the Church of the Carpenter.” The American acts of mercy took on greater meaning given the sacred space that enveloped the project. “In the Holy City – Jerusalem – there are three orphanages. One is housed in St. James’ Armenian Church, another in the Convent of the Holy Cross. The Schneller orphanage does especially fine work with such skilled industries as cabinet making, and also carries on a school for the blind.”<sup>20</sup> This confluence of deserving victims and consecrated locales made for very persuasive fundraising pleas. For NER, the sacred cause of rescuing ancient Christians in a holy place called for dramatic acts of generosity and goodwill.

The Near East Relief went even further with their invoking the image of Christ in their fundraising. NER appealed to Americans’ sympathy for the Armenians who were depicted in terms similar to a crucified Jesus.

Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ was betrayed for thirty pieces of silver and crucified, and to-day, two thousand years later, Christ is still being crucified in the plains of Armenia, where the oldest Christian nation in the world; bent but unbroken under centuries of persecution, and still stubbornly refusing to renounce the Master for the heresies of Mohamed, is literally bleeding to death because no nation has yet had the moral courage to rescue her from the unspeakable horrors of Islam.<sup>21</sup>

The implication was clear. Armenians had withstood the modern persecution of their ancient faith with Christ-like character – how could Americans not contribute money and lend a helping hand?<sup>22</sup> If Americans refused assistance they too would be betraying Christ just to save a few pieces of their own silver.

According to the NER and the missionaries, the Armenians were Christ-like and worthy of these comparisons because of their model piety.<sup>23</sup> At first, the American missionaries and relief workers were surprised by Armenian piety in the face of suffering, and they made note of their

loyalty to the Christian gospel even in the face of death. The innumerable examples of Christian perseverance led the missionaries to interpret the Armenians' behavior, especially the children, as an ideal representation of suffering Christians. Armenian orphans were praised for their joy, commitment to prayer, and generosity in spite of poverty. NER fundraising literature frequently gave examples of the Armenian orphans' spirituality – their daily prayers, commitment to study the bible, and gratitude for the help given them. One testimonial in a NER press release exclaimed:

An amazing thing is the faith and spirit of these people. . . there is also spontaneous religious life among these children. At Sidon, I found the orphans holding a prayer service of their own, not daily, but thrice daily. At Nazareth the boy carpenters used a part of their lunch hour for a devotional service. On the door of the Boy's Club in another orphanage center I saw a sign, written by one of the boys, 'Come here to study the Bible.'<sup>24</sup>

The NER would take up this theme and amplify it by holding up the Armenian orphans as the exemplar of Christian piety and faith.

In sharp contrast to the Near East Relief, the Red Cross' humanitarian missions were deliberately free of religious and ethnic favoritism.<sup>25</sup> The fundraising tactics and public relations language used by the Red Cross to describe the Bulgarian WWI refugee crisis contrasted sharply with the NER methods. The Red Cross did not fashion a back-story that compelled Americans to support Bulgarian refugees, they simply stated the need and relayed a plan for relief work. Where the NER emphasized a glorious past and a promising future for the Armenians and other Christians of the Holy Lands, the Red Cross focused instead on immediate relief of pressing needs with no discussion of cultural rebuilding or moral transformation. The Red Cross specialized in rapid response in order to alleviate dramatic suffering and rarely made public pleas for nation-building efforts.<sup>26</sup> They did occasionally stray from their primary purpose of "palliative relief measures" and acted as international advocates, free from nationalist identity or fealties, on behalf of war victims.<sup>27</sup> The Near East Relief, however, soon made international activism the norm rather than the exception

as they took on a much more ambitious project that was part missionary activism with a bit of nation building all in the name of relief work.

### **America's Ancient Ties to the Holy Land**

The Armenians' identity as ancient Christians soon came to mean that Americans should provide relief, but must also take action with long-term consequences. There was a growing sense that U.S. citizenship had global implications. One public statement voicing support for refugees of WWI in Europe and the Holy Land declared: "We are citizens of the United States and, as such, are conscious of the solemn responsibility of our Christian citizenship."<sup>28</sup> Americans, as Christian citizens, possessed a special burden to enact justice and assist their fellow suffering Christians. Christians were best poised to restore order to the Holy Land given the irresponsibility of Europe. "The work of the Near East Relief has been an act of practical Christianity much needed at a time when the so-called Christian nations have been greatly criticized for fighting with one another."<sup>29</sup> Helping the Armenians was Americans' spiritual and civic duty.

The Near East Relief's romantic depictions of the Armenians emphasized imagined, historic ties between the Armenian cultural heritage and the United States as cause for action:

And yet those countries are the homeland of religion, and the fountain-head of western civilization. Their impoverished peoples are the descendants of those races whose gifts have enriched all western culture. It is fitting for us, their religious and cultural heirs, to repay a measure of our ancient debt with the fruits of our newer civilization.<sup>30</sup>

NER argued that Americans were the modern heirs of the ancient, Armenian people. The Armenian religion and culture, which valued education and hard work, according to the American missionaries and NER, was the forerunner to American religion and culture. Armenians, then, were the ancient forebears who had provided the very cultural antecedents that now positioned America as capable of humanitarian intervention.

Americans had a debt to pay to their fictive ancestors, Armenian Christians. Democracy prevailed in the United States due to American ingenuity and love for freedom, but this democratic



society was beholden to the ancient wellsprings of education that originated in the Armenian's homeland.<sup>31</sup> Democracy required an educated, responsible citizenry. H.C. Jaquith, a NER relief worker, explained how the West's intellectual lineage extended back to the ancient Near East:

Our own educational systems are deeply indebted to the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Hebrews, the Arabs, the Phoenicians and other peoples who have inhabited the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. There is a tradition of learning that still hovers . . . [and] though American missionaries, doctors, teachers and relief workers had never stepped foot in these countries, we would instinctively turn to the Near East to increase our knowledge of these civilizations that have passed, but which in passing have built an intellectual structure which we ourselves inhabit in part.<sup>32</sup>

NER helped construct, or at least encouraged, an imagined heritage for Americans that gave the United States an ancient pedigree and an obligation to foster modern democracy in the land whose educational legacy helped give democracy to the world. And there was no better way to restore the Near East to the glory of its past than through Christian relief and reconstruction. Americans' were following their "God-given mission" to restore the "ancient cradle of our civilization and philosophy and religion" the democracy and cultural achievements it once knew.<sup>33</sup>

Americans' humanitarian work, the NER argued, would not only transform the Armenians but also Americans and then the world in the process. One NER spokesman explained, "We have begun a new thing in international affairs; we have created that great organization, the Near East Relief, which represents Christianity in the councils of nations."<sup>34</sup> This message of American responsibility to the Holy Land and Armenians in particular was new, and it regarded the shared Christian faith of the Armenians and Americans as justification for American intervention in the Middle East. True progress was possible when civilized, modern citizens took up the task of rescuing these ancient Christians:

War, famine, disease, had devastated the land, and hundreds of thousands of helpless and tortured children were whirling in the maelstrom. It was to rescue these children from their living death that the Near East Relief devoted its energies, and it is these children, trained and educated, who constitute the sole hope of these countries whose future as well as their presence, affects the welfare of the world . . . . Can anyone doubt that among these

thousands of children thus influenced, leaders will arise who will, in time, take the government into their hands and bring about a new and more enlightened civilization?<sup>35</sup>

According to NER and its supporters, there was an intimate connection between instilling a Christian moral vision, raising up true Armenian leaders, and promoting global social progress:

Near East Relief is not only a Christian obligation; it is an opportunity to save the children, train them and make them real Christian leaders of the new Near East. This work deserves the continued cooperation and support of the churches of America in the cause of an inter-denominational, international, and inter-racial idealism . . . .<sup>36</sup>

NER's apologetic for American intervention in the Holy Land was essentially an argument for American Christians to realize their global civic duty work for the great racial, ecumenical, and diplomatic progress that would come from their diplomacy guided by Christian morality.<sup>37</sup>

The NER's Christian internationalism was not just empty talk. NER board members acted as key political advisors to President Woodrow Wilson during and following World War I. Wilson eagerly took up the Armenian cause, actively participated in fundraising for the NER, and pursued the political solution of a U.S. mandate over Armenians.<sup>38</sup> The alliance between NER and Wilson on the campaign for an Armenian Mandate is a stunning example of the close cooperation of the overtly Christian NER and the United States government. With their argument for the ancient ties between the Armenian people and the United States, NER and Wilson sought to simultaneously advance Christian philanthropy and progressive internationalism. There was no better way to accomplish both than to officially establish the United States as the political and cultural authority over the displaced Armenians.<sup>39</sup> In 1920 Wilson requested that Congress grant him the executive power to undertake the Armenian Mandate:

The sympathy with Armenia . . . has come with extraordinary spontaneity and sincerity from the whole of the great body of Christian men and women in this country by whose free-will offerings Armenia has practically been saved at the most critical juncture of its existence. At their hearts this great and generous people have made the cause of Armenia their own. . . . I make the suggestion in the confidence that I am speaking in the spirit and in accordance with the wishes of the greatest of the Christian peoples. The sympathy for Armenia among our people has sprung from untainted consciences, pure Christian faith, and an earnest desire to see Christian people everywhere succored in their time of suffering, and lifted from their

subject subjection and distress and enabled to stand upon their feet and take their place among the free nations of the world. Our recognition of the independence of Armenia will mean genuine liberty and assured happiness for her people, if we fearlessly undertake the duties of guidance and assistance involved in the functions of a mandatory.<sup>40</sup>

Congress rejected Wilson's request; nonetheless, Wilson's words evoked the harmony of the internationalists, missionary activists, and progressive foreign policy agendas as he spoke of America's Christian duty and the providential events that had brought the nation to this moment of opportunity and accountability.<sup>41</sup>

A nearly perfect synergy between newspaper articles, NER pamphlets, presidential and Congressional appeals, and Church cooperation persuaded many Americans to take up this international cause. NER recognized this and was quick to assign historic import to their efforts both as a means to drumming up more support and as an apologetic for their work:

The summons to the American people to aid the war-stricken folk of the Near East was the greatest philanthropic appeal in history. Its answer, the organization of the Committee now called the Near East Relief, has made American hearts known from Greece to Mesopotamia.<sup>42</sup>

The Armenian crisis presented the United States with an opportunity to demonstrate their goodwill and desire for peace to the world. And the Near East Relief found plenty of anecdotal evidence to make the case for immediate and dramatic action. For example, the martyrdom of Armenian women, including those who were crucified, was reenacted on film and distributed by the NER in fundraising efforts.<sup>43</sup> These haunting images evoked images of the Gospels' crucifixion accounts. Three women hung from crosses at the hands of imperial authorities just as Jesus and two criminals had in the Roman colonial outpost of Palestine. The film, along with other NER literature and propaganda, cast the humanitarian mission in stark, moral terms. The NER's was relentless in its message – how could American Christians stand by while their ancient Christian ancestors suffered and called out for help?

## **Armenian Redemption Through Modernization**

The Near East Relief made the case for two stages of relief for the Armenians: first, meet their immediate needs of food, clothing, and shelter; and second, repair and rebuild their broken society. Rescuing Armenians from the Turkish violence was the first of many steps to take in a full, cultural renewal for a people that were mired in the past. Armenians could be redeemed as they were modernized. They had proven the value of their Christian faith and overall character, and this made them ideal candidates for American reform efforts. Or as one NER article explained, “Having now saved them, it is up to us to make their lives for them. It is up to us to teach them how to take their places in the world and how to be good citizens.”<sup>44</sup> NER’s program to modernize the Armenians was essentially a project to ‘Americanize’ them, and a modernized, Americanized people would transform the Holy Land in the process.

Restoring the Armenians would require dramatic social changes, and this would call for the assistance of social workers, medical professionals, and educators. The NER was the hub for this missionary zeal that transformed into an international expression of progressive social reform. Missionaries abandoned their past programs of bible education, preaching, and evangelism for industrial education, medical relief, and education focused on citizenship. They argued they could do no less, for “America could not forsake the children . . . she could not with a clear conscience, withdraw her generosity and guidance from the awakening peoples of the Near East.”<sup>45</sup> The NER realized the former goals of evangelizing and Christianizing the Armenians were no longer the sufficient methods to achieve their goal of a modern Near East.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, the NER claimed to do much more than just modernize Armenian society – they were also encouraging a holistic redemption through social progress. And ultimately, only America seemed up to the task since “It seems to be America’s peculiar task to try to bring about reconstruction in the Levant by peaceful and disinterested means.”<sup>47</sup>

According to James Barton and other NER board members, the time was now to help Armenians break free from the past and there was no better way to accomplish this than through educating Armenian children, especially orphans. NER promised great dividends on American investments of time and money into the grooming of the orphans. Barton explained the need for “American-trained children who can be utilized as a mighty leaven to permeate society.”<sup>48</sup> Americanized Armenian children would alter the future course of politics and culture in the region: “The child, the innocent victim of war and racial hatred, the as yet unpoisoned, unprejudiced open mind, the future citizen and arbiter of world destinies has been and should continue to be the chief beneficiary of American philanthropy as expressed through Near East Relief.”<sup>49</sup> NER gave voice to an American exceptionalism in which American relief workers were transmitting to the next generation of Armenians the progressive, democratic ideals that made the United States a moral leader. The Armenian pupils of these American values were not only beneficiaries of these reform efforts but also “ambassadors of good will, unselfish service and world peace.”<sup>50</sup> American humanitarians were essentially missionaries of progressive internationalism since they were preparing orphans to go out

to the various sections of the Near East as apostles of the idealism of America. One cannot look into the faces of the thousands of these children – potential leaders of a new Near East – without being impressed with the strategy of the work, and the contribution toward international good will and world peace that will be made through these international wards, as they take their places of leadership in the Near East.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, the NER’s efforts were a deliberate fusion of Christian service and progressive reform, or as one proponent of NER said, “The principal constructive work in the Near East today is being done by Americans, and the seed which we are sowing will eventually bring forth the only fruit for the salvation of that complicated situation. . . . We are the one voice speaking for the square deal and the Golden Rule.”<sup>52</sup> The NER blended Progressivism’s “square deal” with Christianity’s “Golden Rule,” and the result was a clear example of progressive internationalism in action. The

NER claimed their Christian internationalism had profound foreign relations benefits since “What Dawes Plan did for Europe, Philanthropy is doing in the Bible Lands.”<sup>53</sup>

The NER’s orphanages and industrial and agricultural schools were key to the introduction of social reform to the Near East. The restorative potential of the American relief work in the Holy Land seemed limitless when it was tied to the cultivation of a new generation of citizens through American education: “This American assistance must be continued if the thousands of rescued children are to be brought to useful citizenship.<sup>54</sup> The American uplift of the children into “useful citizenship” illustrated the utilitarian edge to the NER romanticism about the victimhood of the Armenians. The lack of an Armenian nation-state enabled Americans – missionaries, diplomats, and relief workers – to step into a sizeable gap during and after the WW I crisis. Once the situation stabilized and the anti-Armenian violence subsided, the NER determined true ‘citizenship’ was a pressing need of the Armenian people so the pursuit of cultivating modern habits in Armenian children became a chief aim of NER humanitarian work.

The ideal citizenship just happened to duplicate American citizenship, or at least NER’s definition of American citizenship: “Children under the care of the Near East Relief, through their contact with the members of the American staff, have acquired many American ideals and principles.” Armenian orphans were to acquire the American traits of literacy, learned modern agricultural and architectural techniques, and cultivated the personal qualities of self-reliance and independence. Then they would go on to “have a real influence on the communities in which they are living. If they can help to spread the best that America has to offer it will undoubtedly do much to improve their communities.”<sup>55</sup>

Yet another way to redeem the Armenian culture was to modernize its economy. NER established a separate organizational arm – Near East Industries – to manage the marketing and sales of Middle Eastern handcrafts. Near East Industries served a number of functions since it

provided work for refugees in exchange for assistance from NER to prevent long-term dependency, and it was also a way for NER to cover the operational expenses not covered by fundraising. The NEI promotional literature emphasized the cultural awakening made possible through the commercial venture. NEI brochures appealed to American housewives' desire for unique and distinct items, "A Double Opportunity is offered to American women of discrimination. The chance to procure some of the exquisite needlework of the Near East at very moderate prices is combined with the privilege of providing self-support . . . to widowed mothers and to orphans . . . ." Not only would American women be making good consumer choices, they would also support an alternative to charity and hand-outs by making a purchase that would directly benefit its producer and buildup a faltering economy.

But this was much more than economic support, for NEI's "policy is helping the revival of the ancient native hand crafts by giving employment to a great many of the widowed mothers who are trying hard to care for their little ones . . ." <sup>56</sup> NEI celebrated the potentially discordant by trumpeting the unlikely themes of modern American consumerism, boot strap self-improvement, and the restoration of historic cultural traditions of an ancient civilization. NEI also made the argument that without American intervention, the Armenian culture – including handwork - would perish. The NEI marketing emphasized American ingenuity and capitalism's potential to revive ancient traditions and make it accessible to a broader market. In this sense American philanthropic efforts were indistinguishable from the globalizing impulses of the market in this time period.

The NER's vision of helping Armenians leave behind their ancient, primitive past and become full participants in the modern world included a pivot away from the earlier celebrations of Armenians' ancient Christianity. The Armenians' ancient qualities were worth preserving, but in order to become a people capable of leading the Near East into a modern, American-style society and economy the Armenians also must change. That is,

We fit them for many occupations that will carry American methods and the American spirit of work into the life of the Near East. More than 100,000 children have passed through Near East Relief hands. That means that America is impressing itself on the Near East. You and I are molding history.<sup>57</sup>

The NER's prescription for Armenians included an embrace of modern, American values. As we have seen the NER was often vague about what all of this entailed, but the overall message was clear. The Armenians' true redemption had come at the hands of Americans who saved them from the Turks who also had a solution for the Armenians' future. From the Americans' perspective, there was no greater thing they could do than pass on to the Near East, through their chosen vessels, the Armenians, the American way of life.

### **Conclusion**

American humanitarian intervention in the Middle East during the World War One era was inspired by missionary work in the Holy Lands and the careful construction of Armenians' identity as martyrs and ancient Christians who endured persecution at the hands of tyrannical nationalists (who also happened to be Turkish and Muslim). By 1919, American politicians, the media, and the public seemed united in their assessment that America bore a special burden to rescue the Armenians *because they were ancient Christians and Americans' intellectual ancestors and because they were from the Holy Land*. This sentiment garnered support due to the direct appeal to Americans' responsibilities as "Christian Citizens." This conflation of American and Christian citizenship, along with the argument for the ancient, historic claim of the Armenians to the Holy Land rallied Americans to the cause.

But, the NER also made successful appeals to progressives with their argument that Americans were the heirs of the ancient Armenians and that Americans ought to provide basic human rights for the Armenians and in the process rehabilitate them to a democracy. Americans owed the Armenians protection since the Armenians "are of our own race. They have been a tenacious outpost of Christianity from early Christian times."<sup>58</sup> The Near East appeared to be an



obvious place to encourage social progress, and the NER acted as a booster for international progressive reform in the Middle East – “All of these Near East countries are entering upon new periods of intellectual, social and economic change. They are breaking with . . . the past and are seeking new methods of modern education, social health and economic betterment.”<sup>59</sup> The NER prized expert social work in the Middle East as a means of transforming the Armenians and eventually the region into a modern society.

The NER’s relief work was a clear expression of progressive internationalism and reform with many causes, including the failed campaign for an American mandate over Armenians. But even when denied the mandate, the NER pushed on and their plans to redeem the Armenians were just the beginning: “Today, we are learning to view the world as a whole and to develop philanthropy as a tool for human welfare which well may be the lever to lift whole races, if need be, to a higher planes of thinking and living.” The implications of this remarkable fusion of American Protestantism, missionary ideology, Wilsonian Progressivism, and modern humanitarian work turned assumptions about the increasingly ‘secular’ nature of Progressivism on its head. The humanitarian efforts of NER grew out of missionary work in the Middle East, but the relief work was also driven by progressive paternalism intent on modernizing and Americanizing the Holy Lands. The Armenian ‘crisis’ and its implications for American culture and politics have largely gone unnoted because the missionary zeal of the Progressive coalition has also been marginalized or forgotten.

Ultimately the Near East Relief united Americans in a massive humanitarian effort to rescue Armenians that quickly evolved into an unofficial attempt at nation building. With over \$110 million raised, this astounding success can be attributed to the message the NER crafted about the Armenians. Their consistent portrayal of the Armenians as ancient Christians, who were the cultural ancestors of the United States, mobilized Americans into action. The NER’s argument for

America's role in promoting cultural renewal in the Near East resonated with progressive internationalists. The NER's call for global reform was infused with Christian themes, and the appeal to Americans' to fulfill their duties as Christian citizens led to the truly national phenomenon of American support for Armenian nation building.

## End Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "They Shall Not Perish" *New York Times* 1 March 1919 pg. 9.

<sup>2</sup> "The Turk in Europe and His Stay There: More Than 600 Years of Misrule, Destruction, Robbery and Murder," *New York Times* 26 January 1913, pg. C5.

<sup>3</sup> James W. Gerard, cited in Suzanne Moranian, "The American Missionaries and the Armenian Question: 1915-1927" Dissertation (Madison: University of Madison-Wisconsin, 1994): 396.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the Armenian massacres, see Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003). Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus* 6<sup>th</sup> revised edition (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003). Henry Morgenthau, *Ambassador Morgenthau's Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1919).

<sup>5</sup> See Robert L. Daniel, *American Philanthropy in the Near East, 1820-1960* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1970), and Joseph L. Grabill, *Protestant Diplomacy and the Near East: Missionary Influence on American Policy, 1810-1927* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971) for an analysis of the relief work of missionaries as well as the reliance of the U.S. Government upon the missionaries for intelligence gathering and distribution of American supplies to the victims. For a Turkish scholarly perspective on this subject see Recep Boztemur, "Religion and Politics in the Making of American Near East Policy, 1918-1922," *Journal for the Study of Religion and Ideologies* 11 (Summer 2005), 45 –59.

<sup>6</sup> "Telegram from Morgenthau to Sec. of State Robert Lansing, Sept. 3, 1915," Rockefeller Archive Center (hereafter RAC) Near East Relief (hereafter NER) Box 129, File 54. "Minister of War has promised to permit departure of such Armenians to the United States, whose emigration I vouch as bona fide. Destruction of Armenian race in Turkey is progressing rapidly, massacre reported at Angora and Broussa. Will you suggest to Cleveland Dodge, Charles Crane, John R Mott, and Stephen Wise and others to form committee to raise funds and provide means to save some of the Armenians and assist the poorer ones to emigrate, and perhaps to enlist California, Oregon and Washington to transport some of these people direct to their shores via Panama Canal. Morgenthau American Ambassador" Morgenthau played an important role in helping to form NER and then he lent his services as a frequent public speaker and spokes person for the humanitarian mission for the Armenians.

<sup>7</sup> Congressional Record 66, 1<sup>st</sup> Session, 2545-2548, 3012-3013, 3151-3154.

<sup>8</sup> In addition to Morgenthau's role in forming NER, NER internal papers reveal Woodrow Wilson voiced early support for such an organization. "Unsigned letter to Cleveland H. Dodge, April 16, 1926." RAC NER Box 129, File 5. [The likely author is James L. Barton.] "During the war when the great need for relief became apparent, our State Department felt that no one of the existing organizations could undertake the task. You will remember that, at the request of President Wilson, a new committee was formed with grew into the Near East Relief."

<sup>9</sup> "An Appeal to the American People," Letter from President Woodrow Wilson (on White House letterhead), October 29, 1917. RAC NER Box 129, File 54.

<sup>10</sup> "Near East Cablegram" (1919): 5. RAC NER Box 137, File 3.

<sup>11</sup> See American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions records on microfilm, 5.639.3.208, 233, 234, 261, 277, 281, 295 for Kurdish complicity in anti-Armenian raids and mob violence. Americans followed the Kurdish/Armenian/Turkish crisis as early as the 1890s with eyewitness reports from missionaries, Armenian immigrants, and other sources. These are just a handle of articles on the topic: "President Cleveland and the Armenians," *New York Times* 18 January 1894 pg. 4; "Ask Protection by the United States," *New York Times* 19 January 1894 pg. 5; "The Armenian Question," *New York Times* 15 February 1894 pg. 4; "The Eastern Question 4. "Troops and Kurds Massacre Armenians," *New York Times* 10 August 1900 pg. 7. "Severe Fighting in Armenia," *New York Times* 2 May 1904, pg. 1. "Armenian Women Put up at Auction; Refugee Tells of the Fate of Those in Turkish Hands," *New York Times* 29 September 1915, pg. 3. "Lord Bryce's Report on Armenian Atrocities an Appalling Catalogue of Outrage and Massacre," *New York Times* 8 October 1916, pg. X2.

A reoccurring theme in the reporting is the media's condemnation of "Armenian outrage mongers" ("The Eastern Question Again") who exaggerated the violence against Armenians alongside criticism of the Turkish failure to reign in Kurdish mobs and the Turkish willingness to allow the violence. The NYT also printed the objections of the Turkish government, but they also pointed out the Turkish efforts to encourage anti-Christian sentiment among their subjects.

<sup>12</sup> I want to clarify what I am NOT arguing for here. I do not mean to imply that there was reflexive, unthinking hatred of Muslims. There is contradictory evidence on American perceptions of Muslims during this time period. On the one hand, Muslims were revered for their ancient faith, temperance, hygiene and personal piety. On the other hand, Muslims were sharply criticized for their perceived practice (or at least tolerance) of polygamy, their resistance to Christian missionaries, their failure to modernize Islamic society, and the persecution of Jews and Christians in the

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Middle East. There was anti-Islamic bias, but there was also an enduring appreciation for Islamic culture and religion. In short, Americans harbored simultaneously appreciation and dislike for Islam.

<sup>13</sup> In fifteen years (from 1915-1930) the NER raised 110 million dollars, or 1.25 billion dollars by today's currency rates. Near East Foundation, "Near East Foundation Celebrates 90<sup>th</sup> Year" New York, NY: 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The *New York Times* alone published hundreds, if not thousands, of articles on the Armenian crisis. The Armenians' troubles were reported in magazines, newspapers, books, and newsletters. These events in Turkey were noticed and discussed by Americans at length. Balakian (117) gives a helpful overview of the extent to which this Turkish/Armenian conflict penetrated the national consciousness.

<sup>15</sup> James Creelman, "Meaning of the Massacres of Christians by Moslems – The Causes and Responsibility," *New York Times* 25 July 1909 pg. SM2.

<sup>16</sup> "They Shall Not Perish: Official Bulletin of the American Committee for Relief in the Near East" *New York Times* 24 February 1919, pg. 13.

<sup>17</sup> "Near East Relief: A Review for 1922 (Annual Report to Congress) By Charles V. Vickrey, General Secretary," pg. 14. RAC NER, Box 129, File 17.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 21.

<sup>19</sup> "The New Near East December 1924." RAC NER, Box 136, File 3.

<sup>20</sup> "American Hearts in the Near East." RAC NER Box 136, File 3.

<sup>21</sup> "Store Some of Your Money in Heaven! Don't Put It All in the Bank!" Ad, *New York Times* 4 April 1920, pg. XX9.

<sup>22</sup> One book written to expose the crimes against the Armenians was entitled, *On the Cross of Europe's Imperialism, Armenia Crucified*, and there was indeed plenty of biblical imagery to employ such as the comparison between the Roman Imperial government's crucifixion of Jesus and the Ottoman Imperial government, propped up by European Imperialist money and political power, and their 'crucifixion' of Armenians. Diana Agabeg Apar, *On the Cross of Europe's Imperialism, Armenia Crucified* (Yokohama, 1918).

<sup>23</sup> This was a dramatic reversal from the missionaries' first assessment of the spiritual and moral health of the Armenians. See chapter 4 of Sarah Miglio, "Civilizing the World: Progressive Religion and Politics from Chicago to the Middle East, 1890-1925," for the missionaries' changing judgment of Armenian spirituality and the role of the massacres in this shift.

<sup>24</sup> Dr. S.R. Vinton, "Easter-Day in Easter-Land." RAC NER Box 137.

<sup>25</sup> Even while Clara Barton was alive and directing the American Red Cross relief work in Turkey on behalf of the Armenians, there was a different tactic taken in fundraising rhetoric. Barton often clashed with the New York hub of philanthropists who funded American missionaries engaged in relief work prior to the creation of the NER. See David Henry Burton, *Clara Barton: In the Service of Humanity* (Greenwood, 1995): 128-130. She did, however, work alongside missionaries to provide relief to the Armenians. (Balakian, 63-80.) There seems to have been a change in the public presentation of American Red Cross relief after Barton's death in 1912. There is an interesting parallel to NER's ethnic/religious favoritism towards Middle Eastern Christians, and that is the American Jewish Relief Committee, which fashioned a similar picture of biblical allusions to a longsuffering, ancient and holy people. "Bread is the Most Urgent Need" May 1915 (Pamphlet by American Jewish Relief Committee) Rockefeller Foundation RG 1.1 Series 100N File 70 Box 73. "Never before in the centuries story of Israel's suffering and agony has there been distress to equal this. Never have there been so many thousands of homeless wanderers, lacking the most primitive needs of home and shelter. Starvation – not figurative but literal – is their lot. Every day of delay means a day of death. In the name of these unhappy Jews we call upon you to give generously, that these sufferers, mainly women and children may be relieved, and this awful shadow of death be removed."

<sup>26</sup> The Red Cross repeatedly sent reports to the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Fund, a philanthropic fund that donated money to both Near East Relief and the Red Cross. The Red Cross depictions of relief work and the language employed is pragmatic and utilitarian in nature. Where NER used biblical allusion and romantic rhetoric both in their public and private solicitations of funds, the Red Cross relied on plain, straightforward descriptions of their work. (The LSRM continued funding the Red Cross but did not contribute regularly to the NER due in part to the differences in fundraising tactics and relief methods.) See "American Red Cross – Bulgarian Relief" and "League of Red Cross Societies, Kenneth Corley to Beardsley Ruml" May 31, 1926. LSRM Series 3, Box 8, File 91. "Subject Sponsor's Report – Memorial Appropriations to Bulgarian Refugees"

"... the relief program has been highly successful and consisted of the establishment of  
Soup kitchens, especially for orphans;

The distribution of rations to the needy in villages not provided with soup kitchens;

The establishment of Child Health Centers in cooperation with local physicians;

The inspection of sanitary and social conditions of refugee's lodgings with a view to distributing medical supplies and clothing."

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<sup>27</sup> Letter from Ernest J. Swift (Red Cross) to Beardsley Ruml (LSRM) November 29, 1926. LSRM Series 3, Box 8, File 91. Quote from Swift's report on "Bulgarian Refugee Situation: Red Cross Relief Plan for 1926-27," 2. The Red Cross intervened on the behalf of the Bulgarian refugees for a monetary settlement from the League of Nations, and they successfully arranged for the Bulgarian Refugee Loan of 2.2 million pounds. This was an unusual act by the Red Cross, but one they undertook because "From the social point of view, the misery of the refugees appears an opening for revolutionary propaganda and has enabled lawless elements to obtain recruits and support. This is obviously a danger of an international character . . ." (Refugee Report, 4)

<sup>28</sup> Telegram George Durward Adams to Harry Pratt Judson, December 28, 1916. University of Chicago Archives, Office of the President: Harper, Burton, Judson Series 1, Box 55, File 6. (The victims referenced in the telegram included Begians, Serbians, Polish, Armenian, Jewish and Syrian war refugees.)

<sup>29</sup> "Letter from Cleveland Dodge to James Barton, August 1, 1919," RAC NER Box 133, File 7.

<sup>30</sup> James Barton, "Near East Foundation: A Twentieth Century Concept of Practical Philanthropy" 1931, pg. 3. RAC NER Box 129, File 1.

<sup>31</sup> See the Introduction of Sarah Miglio, "Civilizing the World: Progressive Religion from Chicago to the Middle East, 1890-1925," dissertation in progress, for a discussion of John Henry Barrows, ancient democracy, modern duties of citizenship, and practical Christianity.

<sup>32</sup> "American Secondary Rural, Urban, and Extension Education in the Near East" by H.C. Jaquith. RAC NER, Box 149.

<sup>33</sup> Joe Mitchell Chapple, "The Christmas Message," *The New Near East* (December 1924): 12. RAC NER Box 136, File 3. The NER was not alone, of course, in these attempts to assign a direct tie between the Ancient Near East and the United States. There were many variations on this theme including the popular work of James Henry Breasted and his textbook, *Ancient Times: A History of the Early World*. See Bruce Kuklick, *Puritans in Babylon*, Chapter nine, "Orientalists and Their Civilizations."

<sup>34</sup> Charles V. Vickrey, "A Love Greater than Creeds," *The New Near East* (December 1924): 5. RAC NER Box 136, File 3.

<sup>35</sup> Mrs. Alice Hegan Rice, *ibid*.

<sup>36</sup> NER appeal and historical literature, "A Report and Message from Near East Relief to the Religious Bodies New York City 1924." RAC NER Box 137, Vol. 1.

<sup>37</sup> This took on a life of its own, and out of the NER efforts there was a spin-off of "Golden Rule Sunday" led by Charles Vickrey (a NER board member). The idea of Christian internationalism was termed Golden Rule Diplomacy by its adherents, and the phrase appeared repeatedly in NER literature and private correspondence.

<sup>38</sup> Balakian, 349-362.

<sup>39</sup> For more on the Progressives' campaign for America's Christian and national duty to take on an Armenian Mandate see Daniel, 162-165. Moranian provides a careful reconstruction of Wilson's reliance on the missionaries and missionaries-turned-humanitarians counsel as he pursued a Mandate. Moranian, 298-424. See also, Balakian, 349-362 and Grabill, 214-246.

<sup>40</sup> Woodrow Wilson, The White House, May 24, 1920. 66th Congress 2nd Session House of Representatives Document No. 791.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson would try again, even after the mandate failed to meet the approval of Congress. He urged the Democratic Convention via note to include in the party platform that "We hold it to be the Christian duty and privilege of our Government to assume responsible guardianship of Armenia . . ." Balakian, 362.

<sup>42</sup> "American Hearts in the Near East," 1924. RAC NER Box 136, File 3.

<sup>43</sup> There were many films made about the Armenian crisis that were widely shown and distributed. "Letter, Charles V. Vickrey to W. S. Richardson, October 21, 1921." "Near East Relief 1921-1923." LSRM, Box 8, file 100. Invitation to Vickrey to be guest of NER board of Trustees at the Yale Club on 10/27/21 where "reports will be given from representatives of the Committee who have recently returned from a personal survey of conditions in Russia and the Near East, and a motion picture film entitled "Alice in Hungerland" will be shown to portray the work that is being done in the orphanages, hospitals and other institutions of the Near East." One film, "Ravished Armenia" (1919) was also called "Armenia Crucified" and featured Ambassador Henry Morgenthau starring as himself. "Ravished Armenia" featured the story of a young Armenian woman, Aurora Mardiganian, who wrote an autobiographical book in 1918 that inspired the film. This film is lost and NER was unable to secure an archival copy. The book, *Ravished Armenia*, is still available.

<sup>44</sup> Dr. Henry Van Dyke, "Little Craft on the River of Life," *The New Near East* (December 1924): 1. RAC NER Box 136, File 3.

<sup>45</sup> "Near East Foundation: A Twentieth Century Concept of Practical Philanthropy" (1931): 3. RAC NER Box 129, File 1. This shift from religious missionary work to more secular humanitarian work reflected both the specific

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circumstances the NER was working under as well as a more general transition among mainline Protestants to forego theological precisionism for a moral vision that was more ecumenical in nature. See Sarah Miglio, Chapter 4 in “Civilizing the World: Progressive Religion and Politics from Chicago to the Middle East, 1890-1925,” dissertation in progress, for more on this development.

<sup>46</sup> “Letter dated May 11, 1926, Bayard Dodge to Barclay Acheson” in Barclay Acheson Diary, “I understand that the survey is to be concerned with the social and education conditions of the Near East rather than with what might be called evangelistic work. Accordingly, the survey should interest itself in all schools, hospitals and social agencies of the mission, but it should not enter upon religious and ecclesiastical questions.” RAC NER Box 129, File 35.

<sup>47</sup> “Letter dated July 6, 1926 Bayard to Cleveland Dodge.” RAC NER Box 129, File 35.

<sup>48</sup> James Barton, “Near East Foundation: A Twentieth Century Concept of Practical Philanthropy” (1931.) RAC NER Box 129, File 1.

<sup>49</sup> “Near East Relief A Review for 1922 (Annual Report to Congress) By Charles V. Vickrey, General Secretary” (1923): 28. RAC NER Box 129, File 17.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>51</sup> “Near East Relief Report to Congress for 1923,” 26. RAC NER Box 129, File 17.

<sup>52</sup> Henry J. Allen (former governor of Kansas) quoted in “Comments on NER by American visitors to region.” “Near East Relief 1921-1923,” LRSM, Box 8, file 100.

<sup>53</sup> “Making History Through Charity” NER press release, 1924. RAC NER Box 137.

<sup>54</sup> “A Report and a Message to the Religious Bodies 1925,” RAC NER, Box 137, Vol. 2 NER appeal literature 1924-25. American churches and religious communities eagerly endorsed this project. Missionary statesmen and Protestant leader John R. Mott noted, “NER was successfully preparing Armenian orphans for self-reliant, right-minded, Christian citizenship.” This ongoing concern for promoting good citizenship throughout the world was a global expression of a primary reform goal for American progressives. For one case study of the more local efforts of Progressives to cultivate better citizens, see Natalia Molina. *Fit to Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.) Emily S. Rosenberg. *Financial Missionaries to the World: The Politics and Culture of Dollar Diplomacy 1900-1930*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) analyzes the progressive belief in the ability of American commerce to transform and modernize non-western, ‘primitive’ cultures. This same confidence in the transformative power of industrial capitalism could be seen in the agenda of missionary activists in Turkey. See chapter 4 of Sarah Miglio, “Civilizing the World: Progressive Religion and Politics from Chicago to the Middle East, 1890-1925,” dissertation in progress, for an analysis of the holistic reform program of American missionaries.

<sup>55</sup> “Letter from Cleveland Dodge to James Barton, August 1, 1929,” RAC NER Box 133, File 7.

<sup>56</sup> “The Delicate and Unique Handiwork of the Near East.” RAC NER Box 137, Vol. 2. Appeal Literature. “Do you Know that the beautiful handwork for which the Near East is famous, is being revived through the efforts of Near East Relief. In order to provide work and a chance for self-support for the widowed mothers and older orphan girls a wide variety of linens and embroideries are being made and brought to this country. They are sold at cost. An attractive booklet picturing and describing these things will be sent to you if you will fill in the blank below and mail. Near East Industries 151 Fifth Ave. N.Y. City”

<sup>57</sup> “Easter Memorial Plate Form: Why Near East Relief Orphans Say ‘American Thank You.’ RAC NER Box 137.

<sup>58</sup> “Near East Relief Handbook, 1920,” pg. 11. RAC NER Box 134.

<sup>59</sup> “Report to Board of Trustees and Executive Committee of Near East Relief, January 6, 1930,” Dr. James L. Barton, pg. 5. RAC NER Box 134, File “NER Conservation Committee 1929-1930.”