

Human Rights versus Humanitarian Aid – and Compromises: The Case of MN Missionaries during the Armenian Genocide

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BACKGROUND

- Humanitarian aid organizations were evicted from Darfur when they had engaged in what Doctors without Borders calls *témoignage* or bearing witness (Savelsberg. *Representing Mass Violence: Conflicting Responses to Human Rights Violations in Darfur*: University of California Press, 2015).
- The subsequent caution and rejection of International Criminal Court interventions has led to active conflict between MSF and Human Rights NGOs. Many publications by MSF workers attest to the tension they experience between the principles of delivering aid and bearing witness (e.g., Weissman, F., 2011. "Silence Heals... From the Cold War to the War on Terror, MSF Speaks Out: a Brief History").
- The conflict is not zero-sum. Interviewees report about instances where diagnostic work by humanitarian aid organizations later helped the pursuit of justice and human rights. These include the certification of instances of rape that were later used in judicial proceedings or documentations of injuries that could only have been inflicted from helicopters, and that were later used in human rights campaigns.
- The proposed research builds on these findings and expands to the Armenian genocide.
- The Thomas and Carmelite Christie Papers at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS) lend a great hand in exploring the involvement of missionaries in humanitarian work and in alerting the world of human rights violations. Sarah Carmelite Christie was a Congregational missionary in Turkey from 1877 to 1920 and ran the St. Paul's College, during World War I.

OBJECTIVES

- Identifying the potential conflict and compromise between bearing witness of violation of human rights and providing humanitarian aid during Armenian genocide.

METHODS

- Qualitative methods were used to analyze Carmelite Christie Diaries.
- A total of 12 transcribed copies of diaries between 1915-1919 were carefully read and analyzed.
- The data collection process was chronological; each diary entry was read and categorized into one of the themes.
- Themes decided for coding included: bearing witness, providing relief support, compromise between bearing witness and providing humanitarian aid, and conflict between bearing witness and providing humanitarian aid.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

- Bearing Witness**
 - Armenians deported to Külek Station and forced to live in horrifying conditions: "drinking water is bad, no fuel for boiling, bad smells everywhere, no suitable food, weather very hot, air full of dust. **Many die at camp every day.**" Moreover, hospitals available were only used for soldiers who were ill, **but not for others.** There were doctors (Turks) for soldiers. If appealed to for exiled who are ill, they replied, **"let them die."**
 - "Awful accounts come to us from those in camp at Külek Station.** One of our church men assist in the soldiers' hospital at Külek and so sees the people camping about. He tells of a family of 12 who were gathering grass and roots and boiling them for food. **We are doing relief work through this man, and he tells us of our gifts as received by people who burst into tears, and ask if God sent help direct from heaven?.....we hear of terrible things, and of massacres. Oorfa has again been desolated in this way"** (p24).
- Relief Support**
 - Amidst laws that penalized those who provided any kind of support to exiles, Christie was determined to help the *poorest of the poor*. Throughout the war, she made small concessions and negotiations with authorities to keep the college afloat.
 - "Another woman came, who spoke good English, was educated in Con'ple...has been camping with a crowd of Brousa exiles near Rasim Bey's factory... Her 4 children are neglected and left to the mercy of strangers.... **I gave money and some of Miner's old clothes, and an English Bible,** hers having gone with her clothing" ... "A young mother came to show me her breast in bad shape from an abscess which was discharging. **I washed with syringe and antiseptic, and gave clean clothes and sent her to Dr. Salibiah"** (p20).
 - "The Armenian orphan girl who ran away from people who abused her and tried to work her ruin, is safe in Mersine. **I abetted her escape and helped to get her in safety.** Some of the things we do, if told in "missionary reports" would add considerable to the interest" (p21).
- Conflict**
 - While bearing witness, Christie made desperate attempts to notify those around her about the horrible conditions in Armenia.
 - Barriers in providing relief support to the exiles included: censorship and thorough examinations of letters, and abuse of power by the Turkish government and the fear instigated by it through laws.
 - "A little gift of mine in an envelope to Ages for Christmas was kept because I had written a few words on a slip of paper about it, and enclosed. Four "officers of the Law" were present at the examination. After this thorough search for money, letters, cartridges, etc., the customs official said, "Now pack up" ... **While doing so, they managed to pack into the trunks many letters to be mailed in America,** and various small trifles they had on their persons" (p15).
 - "Our papers come with the important pages cut out. Sometimes a paragraph escapes the censor's eye, and we learn by it that America is learning at last of the persecution and outrages and massacres that are going on all over this country, and of the merciless manner in which the wholesale deportation of the people is being carried out"** (p36).
 - "Mr. Nute emptied his purse into their hands, not counting the money, which was conveniently all in small change. **Let us hope no officer saw the transfer.**" (p79).
 - Christie highlights the abuse of power by the Turkish government and the fear instigated by it; the diary contains information on building possession politics, wherein the government asks for the use of halls for regimental soldiers and officers, as a hospital during the cholera and typhus epidemics, and as quarters for English prisoners of war. Good Armenian houses were also being taken over as barracks. Moreover, the government issued laws to find and deport as many Armenians as possible (especially in the year of 1915).
 - "The Kommandant of the regiment in our Hall has begged us for Brewer Hall for petty officers, and wanted our little hospital for himself. Fearing to offend and perhaps get our teachers and the few boys still with us here into trouble, we yielded and brought all furnishings over to this building" (p 32,33).
 - "Mr Debbas advised against Miss Webb's trying to take the two girls in refuge here to Adana just now. **There are fearful threats against those who give shelter to exiles..**We are told that the **Govt wants to find every hidden exile to send them all away quickly as the trains are needed to transport soldiers"** (p34).
- Compromise**
 - Bearing witness to these violations in fearful political climates propelled Christie to "work underground" and work towards providing help by hiding refugees, abetting escape of exiles, getting them jobs as government workers, and giving money, food and clothing.
 - "During the forenoon, people came continually in behalf of people ill or in hiding, and we helped all whose cases we could verify. **Our work is done secretly, and mostly through agents, and I have yet to hear of a case where we were deceived"** (p38).
 - To keep the "underground work" going, she kept quiet about certain wrongdoings (or abuse of power) of the Turkish government in the interest of keeping relief work going. Moreover, in order to avoid attracting the attention of the government, she had to pick *who* and *how much* she could help.
 - "Although Remzi Pasha gave the prisoners into our hands, and said they were to be well cared for, the Turkish govt gives only the rations given to their own men, and the extras, as sugar, tea, rice, beksimets, clothing etc. are paid for by the English govt through our US consul. But the Turks call it all Red Cross work, and we let it pass so. The Turks claim the men as under their care as their prisoners, although the trouble is ours, and the extra expense is paid by English govt. **Anything to please the Turks** since we have the opportunity to make the prisoners more comfortable" (p89).
 - "One of our former students has a small shop centrally located, and we have put a bag of flour into his stock of groceries. **We give out tickets to the poorest, numbered and dated, and the receiver name written and my initials. On presentation, each one bringing his ticket gets 10 lbs of flour...**The number of tickets given tells us when the bag is empty. When all is gone, we shall send another bag, if the government doesn't get onto our scheme" (p47).

FUTURE WORK

- Research will be expanded to help find ways to mediate the conflict identified by analyzing:
 - correspondences initiated by Christie available at MNHS.
 - The Treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire 1915-1916: Documents Presented to Viscount Grey of Fallodon* by Viscount Bryce, which highlights eyewitness accounts on the atrocities faced by Armenians.

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