*Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism.* Oakland, University of California Press, 2015

Keith David Watenpaugh

By Dawn Chatty

This is a very timely and carefully researched contribution to the literature which has emerged to mark the centenary of the First World War. The title alone lays the foundation for its subject matter: the desperation of people (especially children) caught up in war, poverty, deprivation, massacres, death marches, and genocide. The reference to bread and stones is not only attributed to the New Testament, but also can be found in Armenian, Turkish and Arabic folklore. With this backdrop, Watenpaugh draws the reader into his text by prefacing the two beginnings of his work: first, a humanitarian report by Karan Jeppe, written in Baalbeck, Lebanon, in1922, after the collapse of efforts to repatriate the vast population of Armenian refugees to their homelands in Anatolia; and, second, a friendship with Ann Z. Kerr who introduced Watenpaugh to her father-in-law, Stanley E. Kerr’s, Near East Relief work and his book, *The Lions of Marash* (1975), along with other family archives, letters, photographs, and memoirs.

*Bread from Stones* was written as the modern ‘Middle East’ descended into a humanitarian disaster that, in the degree of suffering and international complicity as well as indifference, resembles that which occurred during and following World War I. It is tempting to draw parallels between past and present: the immense flows of forced migrants across international borders, the even larger scale of internally displaced people, the drive to contain the population in the region of conflict, the rise of smuggling, trafficking, and sexual violence across the Middle East. As Watenpaugh reflects, these “echoes resound across the same territories of inhumanity and humanitarian response” (2015:xv).

This book explores humanitarianism’s role in the history of human rights in the 20th century and addresses how the concept of shared humanity informed bureaucratic, social and legal humanitarian practices. While humanitarianism existed before the early 20th century that Watenpaugh addresses in this book, in previous periods humanitarianism was more closely tied to notions of charity for the poor and less well-off, as well emerging from understandings of religious duty and obligation. The Eastern Mediterranean is where much of modern humanitarianism was born. With the collapse of the three great Empires – Russian, Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian at the close of the First World War, waves of displaced persons and the new borders between states forced the international community – in the form of the League of Nations – to manage the conceptualization and iteration of the ‘refugee’. The sheer scale of the post-war effort needed secular, professional and bureaucratized intergovernmental forms of aid and development to replace the independent missionary-based charity of previous times. This book describes that process and analyses the way in which human rights discourse came to be one of the fundamental cornerstones of modern-day humanitarianism.

Chapter One sets out the intellectual and social context of Western humanitarianism in a comprehensive and transnational way and allows the author to disentangle humanitarianism from colonialism in the region, restoring a measure of agency to the objects of the Western humanitarian agenda. A key argument here is that modern Western Humanitarianism represents a significant shift from the work of Protestant Christian missions and missionaries in the non-West. The author argues that in the lead-up to World War I, it was the Ottoman state’s absence from the sphere of care for non-Muslims that led a collection of Protestant missionaries from Scandinavia, Germany, Great Britain and the United States to become deeply involved in the education, health care and social development of the community of largely early or ‘primitive’ Christians. There is certainly truth in these associations, but as likely it may well have been that the ‘Capitulations’ of the Sublime Porte in Constantinople ceded much of that responsibility to the West centuries before and found that the majority Muslim population of the Empire was not serviced by these Western institutions.

Chapter Two addresses international relief in the Wartime Eastern Mediterranean between 1914 and 1917, beginning with the *Year of the Locust* in 1915 and the way it contributed to widespread starvation, plague and death as part of the larger dislocations of war made worse by the British and French blockade of Beirut. Eventually international aid and food supplies reached Jerusalem through privately funded committees such as the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief. Even in these early years, the humanitarianism expressed by America and Americans was a form of colonial paternalism without the brutality of foreign rule. As Watenpaugh writes, it presaged the emergence of a philanthropic coalition that brought Progressive-era social scientific reformers together with old school missionaries.

Chapter Three follows the evolution of humanitarian knowledge as it was formed from the reports of the era around the treatment of non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire – largely Armenians. It examines the reporting about the Hamidian Massacres of the 1890s, the Adana massacres of the 1900s, the 1914-1918 death marches, and massacres of Western Anatolian Armenians and the dire conditions they suffered.

Chapter Four examines the development of the American Near Eastern Relief and the growth of American Humanitarian Exceptionalism between 1919 and 1923 which focussed almost exclusively on the ‘refugee child’ and Armenian orphan. The American humanitarian effort at this point was just emerging as a quasi-colonial political project to transform the New Near East.

Chapter Five focusses on the rescue of trafficked Armenian women and children and the paradox of Modern Humanitarianism between 1920 and 1936. This rescue movement, Watenpaugh elucidates, reflected a collision between emerging Western expectations of how women and children should be treated (i.e. not enslaved) and late 19th and early 20th century Ottoman concepts of domestic patriarchy, property and the social positon of non-Muslims.

Chapter Six addresses the practical failures of Modern Humanitarianism between 1923 and 1939, and focusses entirely on Armenians and the Armenian nation state that failed to come into being. While it is true that Armenian national aspirations were abandoned by the League of Nations, it was also a time when other national aspirations such as that of the Kurds and the Assyrians were also abandoned.

Chapter Seven then takes up Modern Humanitarianism’s troubled legacies between 1926 and1948. The effort to transform the Near Eastern Relief’s mandate from addressing the suffering caused by war and genocide into one which rather generally focused on development problems - social and health problems of the Near East- is addressed in the book’s concluding chapter. In many ways it predicted what, in contemporary terms, would be called a ‘rights based’ development from traditional humanitarian practices.

This is an immensely important book shedding new light on the study of the modern Western humanitarian impulse in the Near East and set primarily in the elaboration of the Armenian Genocide and post-genocide survival. It is a book which will find a strong readership among social scientists, historians as well as the general public.

References

Kerr, Stanley E. (1975) The Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with American Near Eastern Relief 1919-1922. Albany: State University of New York Press.