
The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927

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HOUSED IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS ARCHIVE at Geneva is a collection of intake surveys from the Rescue Home in the northern Syrian city of Aleppo. These documents record the histories of some 2,000 Armenian girls, boys, and young women who were rescued—or, more often, rescued themselves—from Arab, Kurdish, and Turkish households into which they had been taken during and after the First World War and as a consequence of the Armenian Genocide of 1915.¹ The story of Zabel is representative of the histories in the home's records.² The daughter of Bedros, Zabel arrived at the home on May 18, 1926, at the age of eighteen. Having been deported along with her family when she was seven or eight, she recalled that she was from Arapgir, a town in Southeastern Anatolia. She told the director of the home, Karen Jeppe, enough that the following information could be reconstructed:

In the beginning of the deportation, Zabel's father was separated from her family and was sent in an unknown direction. Zabel was exiled with her mother, 5 sisters and a younger brother. The caravan which consisted of men, women, boys, girls and infants, was formed to go on foot 3 months, wandering upon the mountains, passing through the villages, crossing the rivers and marching across the deserts . . . The gendarmes had received the order to kill the unfortunate people by every means in their power. Near Veranshehir, they collected all the beautiful girls, and distributed them among the Turks and the Kurds. The rest of the caravan had to go further on in the deserts to die. Zabel had been the share of a Kurd, who married her. She lived there 11 years, unwillingly, til an Armenian chauffeur informed her

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¹ I have adopted the practice in this article of capitalizing the word "Genocide" when referring to the genocide of the Ottoman Armenians.

² Archives of the League of Nations, United Nations Organization, Geneva [hereafter ALON-UNOG], Records of the Nansen International Refugee Office, 1920–1947, Registers of Inmates of the Armenian Orphanage in Aleppo, 1922–1930, 4 vols.

that many of her relatives still were living in Aleppo. Having made her escape in safety, she reached Ras al-Ain, from where by our agent she was sent to us.³

A notation on the next page explains that Zabel was later placed with relatives. The other histories echo her story with unremitting consistency: the children and young people arriving in Aleppo told of deportations, separations, mass extrajudicial killings, and repeated rapes, followed by years of unpaid servitude as agricultural workers or domestic servants, servile concubines, unconsenting wives, and involuntary mothers.⁴

Beyond capturing the raw horror faced by some of the Genocide's youngest survivors, each of those histories is a reminder that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire was accompanied by a humanitarian disaster of world-historical proportions. From 1914 to 1923, a quarter of the empire's population perished from famine, disease, and state violence.⁵ The war and its aftermath created unprecedented numbers of displaced persons: Turkish refugees fled advancing armies in the Balkans and the Caucasus; Ottoman Armenians who had survived deportation to Mesopotamia filled camps and shantytowns scattered along the outskirts of the major cities of the Levant.

Postwar diplomacy, which left the empire fragmented and under foreign occupation, contributed to that disaster. Under the terms of the Treaty of Sèvres (1920), much of Ottoman territory was divided among the victorious Allies, and what was left was placed under strict military and economic control. Parts of Southern Anatolia, Syria, and Lebanon were put in the hands of the French. The British took control of Palestine, Trans-Jordan, and Iraq. Greece seized Thrace and expressed ambitions to add much of Western Anatolia to its territory. The Allies jointly occupied and administered Istanbul, the capital. A new state for Armenians was carved out of parts of Eastern Anatolia and the Southern Caucasus.

Armed resistance against the Western occupation began almost immediately after the armistice, leading to a multi-front war for the control of Anatolia that pitted nationalist Turks against French colonial forces, Armenians, and Greeks. It ended with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1922, the absorption of Armenia into the Soviet Union, and the abrogation of the Treaty of Sèvres by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. These conflicts, too, led to mass casualties and created vast waves of refugees. The drawing of new national borders and the attempt to "unmix" diverse communities made permanent the displacement of Armenian deportees, and culminated in the League of Nations-administered compulsory exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey in 1923.⁶

Despite the evident chaos and uncertainty of the early 1920s, the newly founded League of Nations envisioned a prominent role for itself in the "postwar" Eastern

³ Ibid., vol. 2, no. 961, March 25, 1926.

⁴ A rich literature based on oral history and first-person memoirs has emerged around the topic of rescued captives, most notably Donald E. Miller and Lorna Touryan Miller, *Survivors: An Oral History of the Armenian Genocide* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999); Mae M. Derdarian, *Vergeen: A Survivor of the Armenian Genocide* (Los Angeles, 1997); and Aram Haykaz's autobiographical *Ch'ors tari K'iwrtistani lernerun mej* [Four Years in the Mountains of Kurdistan] (Antilias, 1972).

⁵ Estimates range as high as five million deaths from war, famine, civil violence, and genocide in the period. James L. Gelvin, *The Israel Palestine Conflict: One Hundred Years of War* (Cambridge, 2007), 77.

⁶ On the broad outlines of the political narrative of this period, see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: Creating the Modern Middle East, 1914–1922* (New York, 1989).



FIGURE 1: Photograph of Zabel attached to the intake survey that was conducted upon her admission to the Rescue Home. She is still dressed in the traditional garments of rural Mesopotamia. Courtesy of the United Nations.



FIGURE 2: Armenian Genocide refugees from Anatolia in Aleppo, ca. 1915. Library of Congress, George Grantham Bain Collection. LC-USZ62-88621 (b&w film copy neg.), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

Mediterranean.⁷ It viewed repairing the damage that the war had inflicted on select populations as one of its chief humanitarian obligations and imagined itself a pre-eminent agent of change, bringing peace and security to the region through a moral and political reordering along modern liberal nationalist, Wilsonian lines.⁸ The League's efforts on behalf of deported and displaced Armenian women and children, known collectively as the Rescue Movement, were considered crucial to the fulfillment of these aspirations.

The records of various committees and subcommittees of the League of Nations, correspondence and supporting materials submitted by the League's relief workers in the field, communications with the Ottoman state, and memoirs and histories by Turks, Armenians, and Arabs can help to illustrate the complicated and often paradoxical historical experience of the Rescue Movement as it was conceived and implemented by the League in the interwar Eastern Mediterranean. They show that the rescuing of Genocide survivors such as Zabel—a seemingly unambiguous good—was at once a critical moment in the definition of modern international humanitarianism and human rights *and* a site of resistance to the colonial presence in the post-Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean, a presence that was often defended in the language of progress and civilization. Rescue would also play a role in binding the international community to Armenian communal survival, serve as an *ex post facto* warrant for the First World War, and threaten, nonetheless, late Ottoman ethnic,

⁷ For a discussion of renewed scholarly interest in the League of Nations, see Susan Pedersen, "Review Essay: Back to the League of Nations," *American Historical Review* 112, no. 4 (October 2007): 1091–1117.

⁸ Recent scholarship on Wilsonianism includes Erez Manela's provocative *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).

religious, and gendered hierarchies and the unalloyed dominance of post-Ottoman society by Turkish- and Arabic-speaking Sunni Muslims.

Moreover, the League's rescue efforts confirm how the theory and practice of international humanitarianism had changed by the early decades of the twentieth century. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, humanitarians had sought to alleviate the suffering of others, which could mean early death, starvation, forms of exploitation, and disease. Motivated by an ethic of sympathy and sustained by the sentimental narrative, this early humanitarianism was often made an instrument for religious conversion, especially to forms of Protestant Christianity.⁹ Early humanitarianism was embedded in religiously driven and episodic forms of missionary activity, in abolition, and in attempts to regulate the treatment of soldiers during Europe-based conflicts, the chief example being the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1863.¹⁰ In the context of British, French, and American colonialism, it featured in the "White Man's Burden" and the *mission civilisatrice*, and it was at the core of the military and diplomatic concept of "humanitarian intervention," which, as Samuel Moyn has observed, "often exported to foreign lands the savagery it purported to be banishing from them."¹¹

While still possessing elements of its predecessor, modern international humanitarianism, as embodied by the League, was envisioned by its participants and protagonists as a permanent, transnational, institutional, and secular regime for understanding and addressing the root causes of human suffering.¹² It paralleled the evolution of philanthropy, and was distinct in its reliance on social scientific knowledge-based approaches to the management of humanitarian problems—expanding late-nineteenth-century notions of "scientific philanthropy" on a massive scale.¹³ The

⁹ Craig Calhoun, "The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action," in Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, eds., *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008), 73–97, 78–79.

¹⁰ Western Christian missionary hospitals and schools had been operating in the Eastern Mediterranean since the 1840s. However, that work was generally inscribed in the interstices of the various Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century missionaries tended to view non-Western forms of Christianity, including Armenian Apostolic Christianity, as nominally Christian, often insisting on the conversion of native Christians to Protestantism. The entire enterprise was imbued with a distinctly American and European cultural chauvinism. For recent discussions of the ideological and cultural content of missionary work in the nineteenth-century Arab Middle East, see Ussama Makdisi, *Artillery of Heaven: American Missionaries and the Failed Conversion of the Middle East* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008); and Heather J. Sharkey, *American Evangelicals in Egypt: Missionary Encounters in an Age of Empire* (Princeton, N.J., 2008).

¹¹ "Although hardly a new idea in the *fin-de-siècle*, the civilizing mission acquired greater currency in the age of democratic empire; ruling elites in France sought to reconcile themselves and the recently enfranchised masses to intensified overseas conquest by claiming that the newly restored republic, unlike the more conservative European monarchies, would liberate Africans from moral and material want." Alice L. Conklin, "Colonialism and Human Rights: A Contradiction in Terms? The Case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 2 (April 1998): 419–442, 420. Gary J. Bass, *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention* (New York, 2008). Samuel Moyn, "Spectacular Wrongs: Gary Bass's *Freedom's Battle*," *The Nation*, October 13, 2008, <http://krogers-dev.the.nation.com/doc/20081013/moyn>.

¹² This transition was noted and endorsed at the time. As Frank T. Carlton observed in 1906, "The opening years of the twentieth century are witnessing the development of a new and powerful humanitarian movement. The economic developments of the preceding quarter of a century furnished the germ. This movement is concerned with social settlements, charity work, educational reform, municipal betterment, civil service reform and socialism." Carlton, "Humanitarianism, Past and Present," *International Journal of Ethics* 17, no. 1 (October 1906): 48–55, 54.

¹³ See Merle Curti, "The History of American Philanthropy as a Field of Research," *American His-*

part played by Western civil society and publics—and modern forms of advertising—in underwriting and agitating on behalf of humanitarian projects also distinguished this turn.¹⁴ Further defining it was the emergence of a new and to some extent gendered practice, professional relief work, exemplified by the Western middle-class female relief worker. Indeed, at the League, women, who had often participated in nationally based social reform and peace movements, were channeled into working on issues of slavery, public health, and children, the so-called “Social Questions.”¹⁵ This observation confirms that the general ambit of international humanitarianism derived in no small part from elite Western feminists’ work on behalf of women’s rights, suffrage, and social welfare. Critical as well was its explicit connection to international peacemaking as both a causative and a preventive measure and its alignment with another emerging concept, “collective security,” in the *raison d’être* of the League of Nations.¹⁶ A final element of modern humanitarianism was the anticipation that the international community—itsself a concept of recent origin—could and would take action on behalf of humanitarian concerns.

This connection between intention and action was predicated in the unique case of the Ottoman Empire and the greater Middle East by the outcome of the war and the occupation of the region. The fact of foreign occupation meant that certain kinds and categories of Western-originated humanitarian projects might now be feasible, certainly more so than in the antebellum Eastern Mediterranean, because of the parallel reduction in Ottoman sovereignty. The establishment of the interwar mandate system in the Arab provinces of the empire extended and institutionalized that subordinate status, opening more possibilities for humanitarian action emanating from the West.¹⁷ Ironically, the most internationalist dimension of the League’s larger efforts took place only in the shadow of interwar colonialism; the liberalizing and tutelary agenda of the mandate system created an unprecedented opportunity for the implementation of League initiatives less restrained by questions of national sovereignty because sovereignty itself was held in trust, as it were, by a colonial power and member state.¹⁸ In this sense, modern humanitarianism was in symbiosis with

torical Review 62, no. 2 (January 1957): 352–363. The shift to the “scientific” management of humanitarian crises or disasters accompanied the emergence of the social sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century. See Thomas L. Haskell, *The Emergence of Professional Social Science: The American Social Science Association and the Nineteenth-Century Crisis of Authority* (Baltimore, 2000).

¹⁴ Merle Curti, “The Changing Pattern of Certain Humanitarian Organizations,” *Pressure Groups and Propaganda*, Special Issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 179 (May 1935): 59–67.

¹⁵ Florence Brewer Boeckel, “Women in International Affairs,” *Women in the Modern World*, Special Issue, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 143 (May 1929): 230–248, 232–236.

¹⁶ Dame Rachel Crowdy, head of the Opium and Social Questions Section of the League Secretariat, observed: “You may disarm the world, you may reduce your troops or abolish your battleships, but unless you introduce better economic conditions, better social conditions and better health conditions into the world, you will not be able to maintain peace.” Crowdy, “The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations,” *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs* 6, no. 3 (May 1927): 153–169, 153.

¹⁷ Eric D. Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System: International Politics and the Entangled Histories of Human Rights, Forced Deportations, and Civilizing Missions,” *American Historical Review* 113, no. 5 (December 2008): 1313–1343, 1339.

¹⁸ I discuss the evolution of the mandate system and its reception by Arab liberal nationalists in Syria and Lebanon in my *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton, N.J., 2006); see also Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920–1945* (Princeton, N.J., 1988).

colonialism. However, this does not mean that humanitarianism should be dismissed as merely another facet of imperialism, cultural or otherwise. Rather, it speaks to the need to investigate the relationship between late colonialism and humanitarianism more thoroughly, including the tensions that arise at their intersection. Indeed, the history of the Rescue Movement is a powerful tool for theorizing what happens when the question of human rights and humanitarianism becomes—or is understood to be—a disciplining tool of Western institutions and colonialist agendas.

Similarly, the history of the reception of the Rescue Movement illustrates a critical tension (with considerable practical implications) at the core of modern humanitarianism as it was implemented outside the West. Regardless of its specific content and changes with time, humanitarianism tends to be understood by its protagonists as a doctrine of universal validity in spite of its identifiable origins in Western social and political movements.¹⁹ This tension takes on additional meaning in the project of finding and addressing the root causes of human suffering and injustice.²⁰ The very notion of root causes anticipates a transformational social agenda, which again, like human suffering, draws definition from the human rights imaginary and cultural references of the diplomats, relief workers, agencies, and publics that constitute the international community. Inherent to that project is an impulse to overturn practices, laws, and hierarchies of ethnicity, religion, and gender in a manner and to an extent that might not be universally shared by the broader society in which those causes have taken root.

Identifying root causes elicits a seemingly simple question: What constitutes human suffering? By the advent of the twentieth century, the conceptualization of human suffering had broadened to include social phenomena affecting entire groups or classes—slavery and the abuse of children and women being the crucial examples. The Rescue Movement suggests that this broadening continued but was changing somewhat as the League attempted to add the concept of suffering to its mission to protect minorities and their rights in new nation-states.²¹ In this case, child transfer, involuntary marriage, servile concubinage, and compulsory conversion to Islam fell, along with mass extrajudicial killings, into an expanded category of suffering and simultaneously constituted a violation of cultural or “national” minority rights, where the victim was not just the individual but also the “nation” or “race.” In other words, the rights, in this case, of the Armenian minority entered the orbit of humanitarian discourse and justice claims alongside the suffering of individual Armenian survivors and refugees. This would have profound implications for the international reach of human rights law and jurisprudence, particularly in the

¹⁹ “Modern humanitarianism’s roots are located in the West. Although these values might have universal appeal, or might have become universal as a consequence of interactions and cross-cultural dialogue, the history of humanitarianism reflects many of the tensions that exist between the ‘West’ and the non-Western world. Indeed, one of humanitarianism’s defining traits is the attempt to spread the values and practices of the ‘international community’ to places where they are either absent or dormant.” Michael Barnett, “Humanitarianism as a Scholarly Vocation,” in Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, 235–263, 241.

²⁰ Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering,” 81–82.

²¹ Carole Fink, “The League of Nations and the Minorities Question,” *World Affairs* 157, no. 4 (Spring 1995): 197–205.

formulation of the elements of the crime of genocide.²² Likewise, for the dominant Ottoman society, this had the not wholly unanticipated effect of transforming quasi-legal or at least widely accepted forms of customary domestic and inter-communal practice into elements of human suffering.

Finally, from the perspective of the historiography of the Eastern Mediterranean, the Rescue Movement constituted a collision between early forms of human rights thinking, the rights of religious minorities, women, and children, in particular—and also European notions of ethnic, racial, and religious superiority—with late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Ottoman-Islamic conceptions of domestic patriarchy, property, and the social position of non-Muslims in Muslim society. Understood in this fashion, the reaction to it in places such as Aleppo and Istanbul sheds light on the degree to which Ottoman reform efforts of the previous century, which incorporated the extension of rights of equality and emancipation as part of larger modernization schema, had taken root within Ottoman society and could withstand the multiple and existential crises and widespread social and economic dislocation of the war years.

In taking this first step toward understanding the full richness of the Rescue Movement as a historical problem and the important role it had in the formulation of modern humanitarianism in the wake of the Great War, we can begin the process of bringing the Eastern Mediterranean—and its women and children—into the literature on the global history of humanitarianism. At the same time, we introduce the possibility that contemporary human rights thinking took place within the practice of humanitarianism in the interwar period and at the intersection of refugees, colonialism, and the non-West, refining thereby the prevailing narrative of the history of human rights, which places much of its emphasis on the post–World War II era, the international reaction to the Holocaust, and the founding of the United Nations.²³

AT THE SEVENTEENTH PLENARY MEETING of the League of Nations General Assembly, on September 22, 1921, the Romanian delegate, poet and folklorist Hélène Vacaresco, delivered the Fifth Committee's final report, *Deportation of Women and Children in Turkey, Asia Minor, and the Neighbouring Territories*.²⁴ Established a year earlier, the committee had become a central concern of the League during its first

²² See in particular Raphael Lemkin's discussion of the technique of cultural genocide in his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe: Laws of Occupation, Analysis of Government, Proposals for Redress* (New York, 1944), 84–86.

²³ On this narrative, see Mark Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace: The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations* (Princeton, N.J., 2009), and his earlier "Minorities and the League of Nations in Interwar Europe," *Daedalus* 126, no. 2 (1997): 47–63. As Weitz's "From the Vienna to the Paris System" also makes clear, "the history of human rights [is] a great deal messier than many accounts in this newly burgeoning field suggest" (1315). Far from inscribing a smooth upward line of expanding freedoms and rights, seamlessly connecting Enlightenment ideas with the post–World War II enactment of human rights in international law, the modern concept of human rights is linked, in part, to the form of humanitarianism emerging alongside late colonialism, what Weitz calls "the development of the civilizing mission into a comprehensive program," as well as to the kinds of international politics of minorities practiced in nineteenth-century Europe and the interwar Eastern Mediterranean.

²⁴ ALON-UNOG, 12/15998/4631, *Deportation of Women and Children in Turkey, Asia Minor, and the Neighbouring Territories, Report Presented by the Fifth Committee*, Geneva, September 21, 1921 [hereafter

months of existence. Its work was seen as a preliminary step in implementing the 1920 Treaty of Sèvres between the victors of the First World War and the Ottoman Empire, in particular Article 142 of the treaty, which vacated all conversions to Islam in the period 1914–1918 and required the empire to cooperate with the League of Nations in the recovery of displaced people and generally “repair so far as possible the wrongs inflicted on individuals in the course of the massacres perpetrated in Turkey during the war.”²⁵ The League’s formation of the committee was also a response to the agitation of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom and similar groups, which equated the cause of displaced women and children with the repatriation of male prisoners of war.²⁶

The General Assembly had charged the Fifth Committee with collating the reports by relief workers Karen Jeppe in Aleppo and W. A. Kennedy and Emma Cushman in Istanbul, and recommending remedial actions. Indeed, the committee’s report and supporting materials stand as one of the first and most comprehensive reckonings of the situation facing survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Although concentrated primarily in Eastern Anatolia, and constituting a significant religious and linguistic minority throughout the Ottoman Empire, Armenians had been woven into the fabric of Ottoman society as bureaucrats, intellectuals, artists, and businessmen. At the time of the Genocide—an Ottoman state program—entire villages and cities were emptied of their Armenian inhabitants; the women and children were transferred from the region, and the men were either killed at the outset or conscripted into forced labor battalions and executed sometime later. Many of the deported were sent to Mesopotamia, where they were subjected to mass rape, starvation, and murder.²⁷ Moreover, as Zabel had witnessed, the deportation caravans were lightly guarded, and protecting them was a low priority for the accompanying Ottoman gendarmerie. Ranking members of the military or Kurdish and Arab rural

Report of the Fifth Committee]. See Dzovinar Kévonian, *Réfugiés et diplomatie humanitaire: Les acteurs européens et la scène proche-orientale pendant l'entre-deux-guerres* (Paris, 2004).

²⁵ “Article 142,” *Treaty of Peace with Turkey. Signed at Sèvres, August 10, 1920* (London, 1920).

²⁶ Writing to the League in May 1920, suffragist Helena Swanwick suggested, “This question [of] the enslavement and dishonouring of women and children all over the East as a result of the war is one which might well be taken up by a special Commission of the League of Nations upon which women of standing in the East would be found to take an active part.” ALON-UNOG, 638 12/4631/647, H. M. Swanwick to Robert Cecil, May 20, 1920. Writing to the League a few years later, Emily Robinson, secretary of the Armenian Red Cross and Refugee Fund of Great Britain, argued: “will you also kindly represent the intense bitterness of feeling that has been fostered on many sides owing to the fact that many scores of thousands of Armenian women and children are still detained in Moslem houses, where they have been captive since 1915. The Armistice with Turkey provided for the release of ‘all prisoners of war.’ *Only the men* were released and the terms of the Armistice as regards women have not been carried out . . . The present state of things is hazardous in the extreme to the cause of peace in the East besides being a scandal and a disgrace to the civilization of the 20th century.” ALON-UNOG, R 1763 48/25899/38147, Letter from Emily Robinson, Secretary of the Armenian Red Cross and Refugee Fund (Great Britain), September 28, 1924; emphasis in the original.

²⁷ For a recent discussion of the Armenian Genocide, including its denial, and a review of the current literature, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “Truth in Telling: Reconciling Realities in the Genocide of the Ottoman Armenians,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 4 (October 2009): 930–946. See also Vahakn N. Dadrian, *The History of the Armenian Genocide: Ethnic Conflict from the Balkans to Anatolia to the Caucasus*, 6th rev. ed. (New York, 2004); Donald Bloxham, *The Great Game of Genocide: Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Destruction of the Ottoman Armenians* (Oxford, 2005); and Ben Kiernan, *Blood and Soil: A World History of Genocide and Extermination from Sparta to Darfur* (New Haven, Conn., 2008), in particular chap. 10, “The Armenian Genocide: National Chauvinism in the Waning Ottoman Empire,” 395–416.

people would take children and young women—by force or after bribing their escorts—then deliver them to brothels and orphanages or integrate them into their households in a variety of capacities and at various levels of status.

This style of integration was a common Eastern Mediterranean social practice. However, the number of children and women affected by it during the Genocide was unprecedented. Among pastoralists, rural smallholders, and the landed elite, households often included an array of members, with some related to the patriarch by marriage or filiation alongside a collection of biologically unrelated servants and retainers who belonged, as it were, to the household. Their relationship to the household was one of dependence and included a set place in a gendered hierarchy. Displaced persons without the support or protection of a natal group were situated at the very bottom.²⁸ They had little recourse in cases of mistreatment and could be sold or transferred without their consent. Unrelated girls and boys in the household—regardless of religious or ethnic origin—were sexually available to senior males. Often the girls were considered attractive as wives, especially second wives, because they had no viable family to protect their interests or demand a bride-price, and any children born of these unions would belong to the father and his family. This was the kind of situation that Zabel had fled. Boys were more difficult to integrate and usually worked as shepherds or agricultural workers on the margins of the households.²⁹

Women, girls, and boys taken by Ottoman officers and ranking soldiers were brought into the men's own households or were passed to state officials, who sent—or sold—them to elite and middle-class homes in the major cities of the empire. This was consistent with a mid-nineteenth-century Ottoman policy of placing Muslim refugee girls and boys with elite Ottoman families as “foster children” (*beslemeler*), a process known in Ottoman legal parlance as *evlatlık*.³⁰ The widespread

²⁸ Alan Duben, “Household Formation in Late Ottoman Istanbul,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 22, no. 4 (1990): 419–435, 422–424.

²⁹ Many of the rescue narratives found in the Aleppo Rescue Home's intake forms describe the intensely precarious living conditions that women and children survivors faced in the cities and countryside of Upper Mesopotamia and Southern Anatolia. For example, Loutfie Bilemdjian, daughter of Adour and Mariam, who entered the home in 1926 at age seventeen, had been abducted by a Chechen irregular during the deportations and sold to a Kurd, who then sold her to a wealthy Turk named Mahmut Rasha [or Pasha] in Veranshehir. ALON-UNOG, Records of the Nansen International Refugee Office, 1920–1947, Registers of Inmates of the Armenian Orphanage in Aleppo, 1922–1930, vol. 3, no. 1010, May 18, 1926, 478. Similarly, Fehmi, son of Terthagian, was taken by a Bedouin from a passing deportation caravan at Mardin and sold to a Christian Arab named Habib, who taught him the tailoring trade. Habib subsequently fell on hard times and gave Fehmi to a local Turkish family, who treated him poorly, causing him to flee to Aleppo. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 962, March 25, 1926, 508. Dikranouhi, daughter of Panos, who entered the home at age sixteen in 1925, meaning that she had been six years old at the beginning of the Genocide, explained that her father had died while serving in the Ottoman army, and she was deported with her mother. On the road, a Kurd took them both and forced her mother into servile concubinage. When the mother later fell ill and died, Dikranouhi became a servant in the man's household. When she reached sexual maturity at the age of fourteen, he attempted to take her as a concubine, but she fled and was abducted by an Arab in a neighboring village, where she became an abused maidservant. *Ibid.*, vol. 2, no. 820, September 18, 1925, 523.

³⁰ On the *besleme*, see Nazan Maksudyan, “Foster-Daughter or Servant, Charity or Abuse: *Beslemes* in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *Journal of Historical Sociology* 21, no. 4 (December 2008): 488–512. Several of the narratives collected by the Neutral House, two of which appear later in this article, describe the experiences of children and women who fell into this other category. For a compelling description of the experience of a group of upper- and middle-class Armenian college graduates sold or kidnapped into elite Istanbul Muslim households, see Mabel Evelyn Elliott, *Beginning Again at Ararat*

nature of this practice and its extension to internally displaced children in the immediate prewar period suggests that it came to be viewed as a natural privilege of the Ottoman middle and upper classes and a ready source of inexpensive labor and wives.³¹

However, any strictly materialist explanation can go only so far in explaining the motives for large-scale child transfer. Indeed, transfer of children from the victims' group to the perpetrators' community is common in genocide, but why it takes place is less well understood.³² In this instance, the fact that this happened to the children of a community the Ottoman state had come to consider an internal enemy certainly adds a triumphalist dimension to the effacement of an entire generation of Armenians through their absorption into a larger Muslim and Turkish society; for some, the women and children may even have been considered legitimate war booty, a sentiment captured by the phrase "remnants of the sword."³³ Nevertheless, in both rural and urban settings, the women and children were caught in a legal gray area that afforded them little measure of protection beyond the goodwill of those who held them. Only by escaping and reaching a rescue home or similar institution could they alter their status.

Western humanitarians regarded the Armenian women and children sequestered in these ways as slaves, consistently describing their condition as slavery and citing not just the lack of wages, but also child marriage, forced religious conversion, and subjection to resale or forced transfer as constitutive of their enslavement. League relief workers contributed stories and photographs of rescued Armenian girls to the London-based periodical *Slave Market News*, and Jeppe, in particular, made analogies to the experience of American slavery described in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, not just to illustrate the conditions in which the Armenian captives were living, but also to locate her efforts on behalf of Armenians within a tradition of nineteenth-century movements for emancipation. She and her counterparts in the Eastern Mediterranean and their interlocutors in the West often imagined themselves as inheritors of the abolitionist tradition.³⁴ For the League relief workers, this accepted form of domestic practice was a clear violation of the

(New York, 1924), 24–28, in which Elliott, who was an American physician and the medical director of the American humanitarian organization Near East Relief, describes her meeting with a group of rescued women at a rehabilitation center established by the organization in 1920.

³¹ As waves of Caucasian Muslims took refuge in Anatolia as a consequence of Russian expansion into the Southern Caucasus circa 1864, the Ottoman state placed "unattached" Muslim girls with elite and middle-class Ottoman families in order to forestall their being sold by their refugee parents. Like the Armenian children during and after the Genocide, they belonged to the household, were generally employed as domestic help, and could be used as sexual objects. Ferhunde Özbay et al., "Adoption and Fostering: Turkey," in Suad Joseph, general ed., *Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures*, vol. 2: *Family, Law and Politics* (Leiden, 2005), 5–6.

³² While some recent scholarship has emerged on children who are the product of mass rape, the question of child transfer—which is an element of the crime of genocide—remains largely unstudied. See R. Charli Carpenter, "Surfacing Children: Limitations of Genocidal Rape Discourse," *Human Rights Quarterly* 22, no. 2 (2000): 428–477.

³³ The phrase is used in Turkish human rights lawyer Fethiye Çetin's memoir, *Anneannem: Anlatı* (Istanbul, 2004); English trans., *My Grandmother* (London, 2008), 102.

³⁴ "We have to do with many, who have lived in slavery similar to that of the one in 'The Uncle Tom's Cabin.' They have been purchased and sold more than once, have drudged to obtain only insufficient food and endured much ill treatment." *Ibid.*, 10. Baalbek to Geneva, August 24, 1922, enclosure in ALON-UNOG, Records of the Nansen International Refugee Office, 1920–1947.

basic human rights of the children and women; it was the most pernicious root cause of their suffering, despite the actual material reality of the conditions in which they may have lived. It confirmed both their corporate sense of how out of step Ottoman society was with modern legal and moral norms and why the League needed to aggressively intervene on behalf of vulnerable populations and facilitate their rehabilitation. Equally objectionable were the forced conversions and marriages that accompanied the transfer of the women and children and the situation of “racial chaos” that this presented.³⁵ At stake in the restoration of order was the prevention of any further mixing between “white” Armenians and “Asiatic” Turks; the creation of the “unnatural” unions with Armenian women and girls was an act of miscegenation that they found both offensive and contrary to the moral discipline of modernity. This last objection perhaps explains why there is no evidence to suggest that the League at the time extended any concern to Muslim women and children in the same or similar conditions.

The Fifth Committee’s report focused first on the Aleppo Rescue Home.³⁶ Earlier postwar efforts to locate child and female survivors by the American organization Near East Relief and various Armenian organizations had been successful.³⁷ In general, these survivors were placed with living relatives or housed in *ad hoc* institutions. At the time of the report, however, Jeppe estimated that perhaps 30,000 Armenian boys, girls, and women were still being held in less accessible conditions in the countryside of Upper Mesopotamia, and she had grown concerned about managing the rehabilitation of the large numbers with no relatives who were coming in off the desert or out of brothels.

Jeppe’s career in the Middle East began in 1903, during the late Ottoman period; spanned the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 and the Genocide; and ended in 1935 with her death in Aleppo under the French Mandate. In her early twenties, she had been attracted to a Danish liberal Lutheran movement, which emphasized the importance of national belonging to social development and the achievement of human freedom. Active as a missionary in Eastern Anatolia before the war, she focused primarily on collaborative education and health programs and not on converting people from the Armenian Apostolic Church to Protestantism. Lobbying by Scandinavian delegates to the League—in particular Henni Forchhammer, at the time

³⁵ This idea of “chaos” resonates with similar Indian and Pakistani efforts to reverse the abduction and sequestration of Hindu and Muslim women at the time of India’s partition: “The proper regulation of women’s sexuality had to be restored, and the sexual chaos that mass abduction represented had to be reversed. Thus, the individual and collective sins of men who behaved without restraint or responsibility in a surge of communal ‘madness’ had to be redeemed by nations who understood their duty in, once again, bringing about sexual discipline and, through it, the desired reinforcement of community and national identities.” Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries: Women in India’s Partition* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1998), 108.

³⁶ For a comprehensive description of the rescue movement in Aleppo, see Vahram L. Shemmassian, “The League of Nations and the Reclamation of Armenian Genocide Survivors,” in Richard G. Hovannisian, ed., *Looking Backward, Moving Forward: Confronting the Armenian Genocide* (New Brunswick, N.J., 2003), 81–111.

³⁷ On accounts of early rescue efforts and attempts at reintegration by Armenian organizations, see Vahé Tachjian, “Gender, Nationalism, Exclusion: The Reintegration Process of Female Survivors of the Armenian Genocide,” *Nations and Nationalism* 15, no. 1 (2009): 60–80. As an American Near East Relief official, Stanley E. Kerr participated in several of these rescues from Aleppo, including the recovery of fifty children from a Bedouin encampment. See Kerr, *The Lions of Marash: Personal Experiences with American Near East Relief, 1919–1922* (Albany, N.Y., 1973), 43–48.

the vice president of the International Council of Women—led to her appointment in 1921 as a League of Nations commissioner.

Jeppe's understanding of why these particular women and children should be found and rehabilitated reflected her background and her strong conviction that as a result of the war, modern social reform in the West would be exported to the Eastern Mediterranean.³⁸ She expected that the modern humanitarianism embodied by the League would give it power as a moral agent of change and reverse the calamitous impact of the war on the Armenians as a people, and not just work to provide immediate aid. This reversal was a reaffirmation both of the human rights of Armenians and of her sense of the "human wrongness" of Islam and Muslims. Her optimism aside, she suspected that Armenians could never resettle among Muslims even with international assistance, and that a separate home should be found for them in the Caucasus or Brazil.³⁹ For Jeppe, the process of rehabilitation, as she explained in her report and later supporting documentation, was not just an educational and training process, but rather the means by which the rescued would be turned back into, in her words, "human beings."⁴⁰ The restoration of the Armenians transcended a traditional relief project and was rather an act of restoring the very humanity of those rescued, and by extension society, to a proper moral ordering:

The standard of civilization of the Armenians . . . is on a higher level than that of those beings with whom the young people are forced to associate. Their race is far more developed, which will be most evident from the fact, that the Armenian nation never could sink to Islam but stucked [*sic*] to the Christianity even [when] subjected to the most incredible sufferings . . . There are two things which attract these young people [religion and ethnic identification], even if it is not quite clear to their consciousness. The purer and stronger the character is, the more powerful the attraction. Weak or degenerated individuals yield more easily and become Mahometens.⁴¹

Jeppe's negative attitude toward Islam, which modified over time, was not unique among her contemporaries; however, her commitment to the national survival and development of Armenians was, and is, evidence of a departure in how she conceptualized not just Armenians but also her role in their assistance. Indeed, her earlier career as a missionary educator anticipated the emergence of professional relief work as a form of practice. Her career also confirmed that the institutions of

³⁸ As Matthias Bjørnlund concludes, "She saw herself as an aid worker and rescue worker, and, increasingly, as an activist working for national self-determination for the oppressed . . . Armenians who had been . . . almost completely eradicated by the Ottoman Empire." Bjørnlund, "Karen Jeppe, Aage Meyer Benedictsen, and the Ottoman Armenians: National Survival in Imperial and Colonial Settings," *Haigazian Armenological Review* 28 (2008): 9–43, 9. For a discussion of early Scandinavian relief/mis-sionary efforts in the Ottoman Eastern Mediterranean, see Inger Marie Okkenhaug, "Women on a Mission! Scandinavian Welfare and Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1905–1917," in Nefissa Naguib and Inger Marie Okkenhaug, eds., *Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East* (Leiden, 2008), 57–82. As Okkenhaug observes, unlike American and British Protestant missionaries (and the local Apostolic church), Scandinavians were primarily concerned with addressing the health and welfare of women, especially widows, through education and small-scale commercial development. They also pioneered the use of media in raising awareness of need in their home countries.

³⁹ Karen Jeppe, "Account of the Situation of the Armenians in Syria and of My Own Work amongst Them from the 1st of May til the 1st of September 1922," 18. Enclosure in ALON-UNOG, Records of the Nansen International Refugee Office, 1920–1947.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

missionary work could provide cover for facets of modern humanitarianism, as well as the ease with which some missionaries could make the transition to working for secular institutions.⁴²

Nevertheless, the Rescue Movement—both the method and how it was changing the nature of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims in the shadow of humanitarianism—elicited a strong response among the region's Muslim elite. Exemplary is Kāmil al-Ghazzī's series of complaints about Armenian refugees in Aleppo in his three-volume history *Kitāb Nahr al-dhahab fī tārikh Ḥalab* [River of Gold in the History of Aleppo], first published in 1923.⁴³ A reform-minded Muslim cleric and jurist, Ghazzī was a leading intellectual and representative of the region's emerging Sunni Arab middle class of white-collar bureaucrats, educators, and professionals. After commenting on the financial impact and criminality of some of the approximately 50,000 Armenian refugees living in and around his city, he noted:

There were a large number of Armenian girls and their children living with Aleppines. The Aleppines had given them shelter from the very first moment they took refuge in Aleppo. They had gathered them from the desert and saw to their upkeep and cared for their children. Some took the legally mature girls as legal wives and adopted their children.⁴⁴

For Ghazzī, the origin of these women—whether they had been purchased during the deportations or thereafter, and the fact that they had entered into relationships with Muslim men as a consequence of their vulnerable status as refugees—was irrelevant, although he did acknowledge, “We do not rebuke the Armenian sect for wanting to return their children to their bosom, because this is what their racial traits directed them to do, yet we condemn them for the way that this prejudice aided violence and assaulted friendship.”⁴⁵ To illustrate that “assault,” he related two stories. In the first, an unnamed Armenian refugee woman married to a Muslim man was located by her brother, who demanded that she return to her original husband, who at one time had been thought dead but was in fact alive. The Muslim man refused to release her, “as was his right under Islamic law.” The police arrested the husband and sent the woman to the Rescue Home. Locked away in a rooftop room, she refused all food and drink. Upon being interrogated by an Armenian priest, she stated that if she was not allowed to return to her second husband, she would kill herself. Seeing her resolve, her Armenian family gave up and allowed her to return to her Muslim husband. “So she returned to their house, and she has stayed with him until today, having borne him many more children.”⁴⁶

More troubling for Ghazzī than the seizure of Armenian children adopted by Muslims was that the legitimate children of local Muslims also risked being rescued. One six-year-old boy was taken from his Aleppine Muslim family and placed with an Armenian man despite the testimony of the family's Muslim and Christian neighbors that he was indeed their son. While this particular boy was eventually returned

⁴² Calhoun observes that this phenomenon is also a reflection of the changing nature of religion and religious vocation in the late nineteenth century; “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering,” 79.

⁴³ Kāmil al-Ghazzī, *Kitāb Nahr al-dhahab fī tārikh Ḥalab*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Aleppo, 1991–1993; original ed., Aleppo, 1923–1926).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 3: 557.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3: 558.

to his “true father,” many other children remained with Armenians.⁴⁷ Striking in Ghazzi’s discussions of the Armenian refugees in Aleppo, and the Rescue Movement in particular, is that unlike much of the rest of his book, these particular passages on Armenians and the Rescue Movement lack specific places, names, and dates, and resemble rumors more than historical events and court cases. It is worth noting that Ghazzi, a jurist, did not reflect upon the fact that in the first case, the reappearance of the Armenian husband would have rendered the second marriage invalid, because the wife’s first marriage had never been legally dissolved. Polyandry is equally illegal under Islamic and Armenian canon law. Instead, he asserts in both instances the patriarchal rights of the Muslim man as an absolute and as superior to any other legal or ethical consideration. Regardless, the underlying sentiment is clear: from Ghazzi’s viewpoint, while the multiplicity of agencies or institutions involved in the rescue efforts seemed quite opaque, he did recognize the movement as a serious intervention in established norms of social interaction and hierarchy. For him, rescue was an unjustified and outright illegal intervention in the domestic sphere; but it was also unnatural, in that it upset the moral order on behalf of previously subordinate elements of society—non-Muslim women and children. He viewed these acts of rescue as an unprecedented, unwarranted, and illegal interference in a Muslim man’s home, his *harim*, and a violation of his patriarchal and property rights. His writing about postwar society emphasized similar problems of moral decline, including alterations to the domestic sphere and Muslim/non-Muslim relations. Certainly, however, his conception of “family” and “household,” in which clear categories of slave, free, children, and property were blurred, was at odds with the notions of emancipation and bourgeois domesticity championed by Western humanitarians.⁴⁸

The Fifth Committee’s investigations focused as well on the work of a rescue home in Istanbul, the Neutral House. As indicated by the report, the situation in Istanbul presented challenges similar to those in Aleppo and Mesopotamia. With general lawlessness throughout the countryside, culminating in the post–World War I war for Anatolia, waves of refugees, including displaced orphans, flowed into the Ottoman capital. In their role as League commissioners, Emma Cushman, an American nurse, and W. A. Kennedy, an Anglo-Irish medical doctor, had gained access to registries of Ottoman state orphanages, in which they noted that names of Christian children had been overwritten with Muslim names. They concluded that about 50 percent of all the orphans in the city (5,000) were Armenian in origin, with another 6,000 in other parts of Allied-occupied Anatolia.⁴⁹ Moreover, the commissioners accepted as reliable a figure of 60,000 provided by the Armenian Patriarchate as the number of Armenian children still held in Ottoman orphanages and Muslim homes.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ On the changing nature of the family, and especially the role of women in the interwar period, see Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (New York, 1999), 31–35.

⁴⁹ Beginning in the late Ottoman period, all orphans housed in state institutions were considered Muslims. This was especially the case for foundlings, even when evidence of their mothers’ religious affiliation may have been present. The records of renaming in this case suggest that when orphaned or abandoned older children entered a state orphanage, they were still able to state their original names. The clerks subsequently changed those names in accordance with policy. See Nazan Maksudyan, “The Fight over Nobody’s Children: Religion, Nationality and Citizenship of Foundlings in the Late Ottoman Empire,” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 41 (2009): 151–179, 161.

They also noted that “innumerable women, mostly young, rudely torn from their hearths and homes, compelled to perform the most degrading tasks, are shut up in harems, into which it is almost impossible to penetrate.”⁵⁰ The committee had been especially frustrated in their efforts to gain access to the orphanages.

Of the two commissioners, Cushman had the most extensive background in the region. She was typical of the middle-class female relief workers who emerged during the humanitarian turn of the interwar period. Originally from New York, she was trained as both a schoolteacher and a nurse. In the years before the First World War, she left her job as the superintendent of a Kansas City hospital to assume a leadership position at the American Hospital in the central Anatolian city of Konya. She refused to evacuate during the war, and as a consequence she became the acting consul in Anatolia for several countries. With the onset of the Greco-Turkish War in 1922, she oversaw the evacuation of some 22,000 Armenian and Greek orphans to Greece and Bulgaria. Unlike Jeppe, she seemed motivated less by any clear ideology than by general altruism and professional ambition. More important, engaging in relief work abroad placed her beyond the glass ceiling imposed on American professional women in the early twentieth century, and she was thereby able to achieve levels of responsibility that would have been unavailable to her had she remained in the United States.⁵¹

According to an agreement negotiated between Ottoman, Allied, Armenian, and Greek officials during the first months of the British occupation of Istanbul, displaced or orphaned children and young women whose religious or ethnic affiliation was unclear or even disputed were brought to the Neutral House to be observed by representatives of the Armenian and Greek communities (either secular political officials or delegates of the respective patriarchates), a representative from the Ottoman Red Crescent Society (Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti), and advisers from the British government.⁵² The Armenian delegation included Zarouhi Bahri (1880–1958), a prominent writer and socialite and a founder of the Istanbul Armenian Red Cross. Indeed, Bahri’s memoir contains one of the few contemporary Armenian discussions of the Neutral House’s operations.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Report of the Fifth Committee*, 356.

⁵¹ “Obituary of Emma Cushman,” *American Journal of Nursing* 31, no. 4 (April 1931): 417–419.

⁵² The Ottoman Red Crescent Society, the Ottoman cognate of the Red Cross Society, was founded when the empire ratified the First Geneva Convention in 1865. Little-used until the Ottoman-Russian War of 1877, it was disestablished during the reign of Abdülhamid II and reestablished in the Young Turk revolutionary period in 1911. See Nadir Özbek, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu’nda Sosyal Devlet: Siyaset, İktidar ve Meşruiyet, 1876–1914* (Istanbul, 2002); Özbek, “Defining the Public Sphere during the Late Ottoman Empire: War, Mass Mobilization and the Young Turk Regime, 1908–1918,” *Middle East Studies* 43, no. 5 (September 2007): 795–809; and Henri Coursier, *La Croix-Rouge internationale* (Paris, 1959).

⁵³ See Zaruhi Pahari (Zarouhi Bahri), *Keank’is vepë* [My Biography] (Beirut, 1995). She recounts in her memoir one case from the house. When a very pretty young woman was brought from a Turkish home, Bahri arranged to have her marry rather than be institutionalized. The future husband asked Bahri and his bride to keep her background a secret, even from his parents, presumably to conceal the shame of her rape and lost virginity. The lack of a larger body of Armenian language sources is due in no small part to how recounting the experience of enslavement, kidnapping, rape, and sequestration has tended to evoke a series of responses ranging from shame to outright denial in the Armenian diaspora; only recently have younger, particularly ethnic Armenian Turkish scholars, including Lerna Ekmekçioğlu and Melissa Bilal, begun to address this history through archival and oral historical research. At the time, as Bahri’s story indicates, there were clear practical reasons for concealment in social situations that placed a premium on modesty. It also signals how the rescued women and female children were caught between two patriarchal systems.

As the children often arrived without documentation, observers encouraged them to recall nursery rhymes, prayers, and folk songs in an effort to establish their origin.⁵⁴ Once their status was determined, the children were then returned to the care of their "community." Very few, if any, of the disputed children were ever determined to be Muslim. Claiming bias in the Neutral House's operations, the Red Crescent's first representative, Naziye Hanım, resigned, as did her successor, Nakiye Hanım.⁵⁵

Relief workers also documented the lives of those who were processed at the Neutral House. The cases recall Zabel's story and tell of rape, separation, and enslavement, but in contrast to the stories collected at Aleppo, the relief workers in Istanbul described how reluctant the children often were to admit their Armenian background. Cushman attributed that reticence to a combination of abuse and incentives at the hands of those holding them, noting,

With the girls, experience has taught me that this attitude of mind is usually brought about by gifts of clothing, personal adornments, such as beads, cheap jewelry, etc.; with the boys, it seems to be largely produced by fear, threats, blows, etc., until the child really believes that he is being protected by the Turks from a much worse fate.⁵⁶

The registries at the Neutral House list a child's Muslim name first, followed in the text by his or her original name. The story of Ceman, also known as Verjine, is illustrative of the process that was used to make the determination:

10–11 years old. Brought from [a neighborhood in Istanbul] . . . [Sinan hoca sheyh Nurullah's] house. A very beautiful and charming girl, they have kept her . . . three days in a subterranean den explaining to her that if she tell she is "Giavour" (Christian), the Armenians and the British will kill her. She kept silent under this terror for two days and confirmed that she knew nothing. By and by her terror passed she got used to us and began to relate that she was from Angora [Ankara], her name Virgin [Verjine], father's Vitchen [Vigen], mother's Foulik [?], sister's Josephine. During exile she has gone as far as Aleppo with her family; there, they have separated her from them and brought [her] to Constantinople. She knows the Armenian letters, but cannot speak.⁵⁷

Other entries describe more difficult situations. For example, in the case of eight-year-old Nadiye, also known as Shevester, who was purchased by one Acı Badem Essad Pasha, Naziye Hanım produced a woman who had claimed to be the child's mother but then failed to recognize her. The girl was transferred to an Armenian orphanage. It was this case in particular that triggered Naziye's resignation as the Red Crescent representative.⁵⁸

Like the Rescue Home's efforts in Aleppo, the Neutral House's program elicited strong resentment among Istanbul's elite, including Halide Edip Adivar, the leading Turkish feminist of her day, who was herself deeply involved in wartime relief efforts through her professional association with the Red Crescent and her personal associations with members of the ruling military junta, the Committee of Union and

⁵⁴ ALON-UNOG, 12/15100/4631, Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul to Major Arnold, August 7, 1919.

⁵⁵ ALON-UNOG, C. 281m.218, Letter from Miss Cushman (to W. A. Kennedy), August 25, 1921.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵⁷ ALON-UNOG, 12/15100/4631, Index of Children Brought to the Neutral House, July 1920.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Progress, known in the West as the Young Turks.⁵⁹ During the war, she briefly administered an orphanage in ʿAyn Tura north of Beirut. In her own postwar memoirs, she noted that at the time she had expressed some reservations to Cemal Pasha, the military governor of Greater Syria, about the forced mass conversion of Armenian orphans to Islam. Her concerns about the situation in Istanbul were the reverse, however, and parallel Ghazzī's objections to the apparent illicit transformation of Muslim children into Armenians. Indeed, it is in her writings about the situation of children in the postwar empire that Edip's hatred and distrust of Armenians is most pronounced. Her writing has a texture similar to contemporary antisemitism in the way it elevates the Armenian to a mythical and existential enemy of the Ottomans, even to the point of borrowing tropes from blood libel and child cannibalism in describing a conspiracy to turn Turkish children into Armenians, thus also turning the accusations leveled against the Turks back toward the Armenians themselves. Hence she complains, "when the children were brought in large numbers from the orphanages of Anatolia they were sent to the Armenian church in Koum Kapou, a hot-pot which boiled the Turkish children and dished them out as Armenians." She concludes: "the children who were brought to the [Neutral House] were left in the care of the Armenian women, and these Armenian women, either by persuasion or threats or hypnotism, forced the Turkish children to learn by heart the name of an Armenian woman for their mother and the name of an Armenian man for their father."⁶⁰ She offers no motive beyond fanaticism ("so far even the American missionaries could not go in their Christian zeal") and dismisses the assertion of the "Armenians"—and implicitly those of the League's representatives—to the contrary because "the Moslem Turks do not have the missionary instincts of the Christians of the West."⁶¹

As her discussion of the Neutral House's pernicious role in Istanbul concludes, Edip links it to a question of national survival. Relating the story of young Kâzim, as told to her by the last Red Crescent representative to the Neutral House, Nakiye Hanım, she explains how this young boy who had no papers was determined to be an Armenian despite being able to remember that his father was a Muslim. In protest, as recalled by Nakiye, he had told the commission, "Kiazim is small, Kiazim is weak, his fists cannot protect him, but the time will come when Kiazim will be strong: then he will show the world that he is a Turk." For her, Kâzim's case was "a symbol of the helpless Turkish nation at the moment."⁶² Again, this rhetorical strategy of inversion—depicting the dominant group as the real victim—underscores her sense of how potentially threatening this humanitarian intervention was to the prevailing social order.

Edip's inversion takes on additional meaning in the face of a conclusion drawn in the report that she, alongside other leading Young Turks in conjunction with the Red Crescent Society, was involved in a program to place Armenian children with elite and middle-class Ottoman Muslim families in Istanbul. She herself had played

⁵⁹ Halidé Edib Adivar, *Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (New York, 1926).

⁶⁰ Halidé Edib Adivar, *The Turkish Ordeal: Being the Further Memoirs of Halidé Edib* (New York, 1928), 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

some role in the history of the children being reclaimed by the Neutral House.⁶³ Nevertheless, she may have viewed her actions as within the universe of humanitarianism, and/or possibly a form of charity in the way that boarding schools for American Indian children were once perceived in the United States. Indeed, during the Balkan Wars, the Red Crescent bore some responsibility for administering *evlatlık* placements of Muslim refugees and orphans.⁶⁴ For her, as a committed nationalist, seizing and placing Armenian children in Turkish homes was an attempt to erase national difference in a moment of extreme threat; the fact that the program pivoted on conversion to Islam as an elemental feature of being or becoming a Turk confirmed the relative importance of religion in her broader conceptualization of that identity. Left unacknowledged in her memoir, but on display in the reports on the reclaimed orphans, was that many were being held in the homes of Istanbul's military, political, and religious elite. These were people within her own social class and circle of acquaintance. The customary practice of that class to possess and exploit human beings from subordinate groups had come into plain view, casting doubt on the civility and modernity of Turkey and Turks. Her assertion of that modernity was a major theme of her work, and her reluctance to protect Armenians confirms that class and the persistence of Muslim privilege trumped relevant forms of cross-confessional feminist solidarity. For Halide Edip, as for the Western relief workers, questions of social distinction and religion placed limits on the asserted universal nature of humanitarianism.

Combined, the work at the Neutral House and the Rescue Home and the reports collated in the field, not just at the established centers in Aleppo and Istanbul but also throughout Anatolia and Mesopotamia, led the League commissioners to conclude that sexual and domestic enslavement of women, girls, and boys was a widespread consequence of the war. They also believed that the current Ottoman state was incapable of addressing the problem and that dominant society either ignored or explicitly sanctioned it.

The Fifth Committee's report asked the General Assembly to create a "mixed board"—Turkish (perhaps more correctly Muslim), Armenian, and Greek—to oversee the "reclamation" of women and children and to open additional Neutral Houses in other parts of the empire.⁶⁵ It was clear from the resolutions that the League anticipated a much more vigorous and intrusive inspection regime—backed by force of arms if necessary—that would allow unrestrained access to Muslim homes and Ottoman state institutions. Vacaresco followed the reading of the report with a speech in which she excoriated the Ottoman state in general and vilified the "Turk" in particular for the maltreatment of Armenian orphans, children, and young women. In an illustrative passage, she explained to the General Assembly,

You all know the story: women withering in their youth in the degrading languor of the harem, children torn from the bosom of their family and cast violently from one race into another, trained to serve those who are bent on the extermination of their own race, and perhaps some

⁶³ ALON-UNOG, 12/15100/4631, W. A. Kennedy, "Interim Report," August 25, 1921, 3.

⁶⁴ Hüsni Ada, "The First Ottoman Civil Society Organization in the Service of the Ottoman State: The Case of the Ottoman Red Crescent" (M.A. thesis, Sabancı University, Istanbul, 2004), 100–101.

⁶⁵ *Report of the Fifth Committee*, 359–360.

day doomed to fight in the ranks of their enemies, each one a new Oedipus trained to kill his parents with his own hands.⁶⁶

The speech was interrupted several times by applause and was followed by a standing ovation.

Vacaresco's speech, the report, and other work by the League show the degree to which fixing the problems caused by the war and the Genocide was a moral imperative consistent with what the League regarded as its mandate. It is telling evidence, as well, that the international community in the form of the League had concluded that the Turks—here both an ethnic designation and a code for Muslims—were implicated in an ongoing crime against humanity and that their collective responsibility had placed them beyond the pale of civilization. Or as Kennedy noted in the report to the League, “an entire people is an accomplice to this crime . . . Rape, violence, fraud, the force of inertia, bad faith—all are employed by men who manifest a particularly odious form of fanaticism in carrying off women and children to captivity and degradation.”⁶⁷ This conclusion—that the entire Turkish nation, as imagined by the international community, was at fault—provided part of the underlying justification for not rendering assistance to Muslim women and children in similar conditions. Indeed, the fact that the right to be rescued in practice applied specifically to Armenian and Greek (white/Christian) women and children confirms the contingent and circumscribed nature of allegedly universal human rights conceptions at the moment.

The Ottoman government responded to Vacaresco's speech and the League's proposals in a series of pamphlets, including *Cemiyet-i Akvam ve Türkiyede Ermeni ve Rumlar* [The League of Nations and the Armenians and Greeks of Turkey], and through its legation.⁶⁸ These rejoinders demonstrate that the Ottoman leadership believed they were being held accountable for what in practice was the quasi-legal treatment of not just women and children, but the women and children of what they saw as an ungrateful, and seditious, minority. A letter from the Ottoman ambassador in Switzerland, Cevat, to the Assembly dated March 31, 1922, encapsulates the outrage:

The whole Assembly of the League of Nations, that League of universal brotherhood, moved by Mademoiselle Vacaresco's lyrical talent applauded her expressions of hatred; and though it was far from accurately informed and far from possessing any knowledge of *the East and its customs*, it responded to this isolated challenge, and, without hearing the accused party or giving him an opportunity to defend himself, without weighing the significance of its action or measuring its consequences, it endorsed the judgment of the poetess, which slandered and cruelly attacked an honest and honourable people, which has been persecuted for centuries and always been vilified as the persecutor. Can such a procedure be called justice—a pro-

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 360.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 358–359.

⁶⁸ *Cemiyet-i Akvam ve Türkiyede Ermeni ve Rumlar* (Istanbul, 1921), published simultaneously in English and French. Quotations taken from the English translation. Throughout the text, passages deny that slavery persisted or that the transfer and sale of young women and children had occurred. For example, “We claim very openly and positively that other than the Greek and Armenian servants who in return of definite salaries customarily stay in the houses in CONSTANTINOPLE, there is not a single Greek or Armenian woman or child kept forcibly in the Turkish families . . . [It is] obvious that the incidents published about Turkey with mean intentions are nothing other than mere imagination and dirty calumny” (29–30).



FIGURE 3: American Committee for Relief in the Near East (Near East Relief) poster, "Lest They Perish: Campaign for \$30,000,000," by Wladyslaw T. Benda, ca. 1917. Based on photographs, posters such as this, which emphasized the vulnerability of Armenian women and children, were employed by Western humanitarian organizations to generate political and monetary support for relief programs. LC-USZC4-10121 DLC (color film copy transparency), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

cedure the disastrous consequences of which affect *not merely individuals but a whole peaceful and peace-loving nation?*⁶⁹

This sentiment is reminiscent of the responses to the efforts of the Rescue Home and Neutral House by Kāmil al-Ghazzī and Halide Edip in taking offense at the mere allegation of complicity in human slavery and child transfer, rejecting any culpability and inverting the very accusation to claim the status of victim. Regardless, the collective response points to how interwar humanitarianism was interpreted and received in elite Ottoman and post-Ottoman Turkish and Arab Muslim circles in the Middle East. As the Ottoman diplomats were declaiming in public the violation of their national sovereignty, defending prevailing social practices in a rhetoric of cultural and perhaps even religious exceptionalism, and denying the overwhelming evidence of enslavement, rape, and forced conversion, in private these same men faced the prospect of being forced to open the doors of their own homes to foreign inspection, and having what they considered property—foster children, servants, or additional wives—seized if the League had its way. For them, this humanitarianism was not a self-evident moral good but rather an anti-Muslim, anti-Turkish cudgel.⁷⁰

FOLLOWING THE POLITICAL AND MILITARY SUCCESSES of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and his nationalist allies in 1922–1923, the conditions under which the Neutral House had been constituted and the inspection of Muslim homes had been conceivable no longer existed. The Treaty of Lausanne affirmed Turkey's unmitigated national sovereignty, and while it included gestures toward the rights of minorities, they were unenforceable. This outcome had been anticipated by professional diplomats at the League at the time of the Fifth Committee's report—a moment when much of Anatolia was already in the hands of nationalist forces. One of those professionals, Thanassis Aghnides, had, from the outset, even labeled the entire enterprise “a pious wish devoid of all practicability.”⁷¹

Conditions in Aleppo, which had become the most populous city in French Mandate Syria, allowed the Rescue Home to continue to function—reinforcing the link between the success of modern humanitarianism and the prevailing forms of late colonialism. Indeed, by 1927, Jeppe concluded: “practically all the deported women and children, detained since the war against their will among the Moslems, will have

⁶⁹ ALON-UNOG, RG 638 C.181.m.99.1922.IV, Djevad to Secretary General, Geneva, March 31, 1922, 4; emphasis added.

⁷⁰ A measure of the reach of this attitude throughout the Muslim world was the degree to which South Asian Muslims lobbied the British Empire on behalf of the Turks in the lead-up to the Treaty of Lausanne. Indeed, in parallel to the way in which Western Protestants had taken up the cause of the Armenians, the South Asian Islamist intellectual and later founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami, Abu al-A'la' al-Mawdudi, authored pamphlets defending Turkey with titles such as *The State of Christians in Turkey* (1922) and *The Tyrannies of the Greeks in Smyrna* (1922). Cited in Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *Mawdudi and the Making of Islamic Revivalism* (Oxford, 1996), 19.

⁷¹ ALON-UNOG, Records of the Nansen International Refugee Office, 1920–1947, internal document no. 9771, Memorandum to the Secretary General, “Relationship between the Resolution Adopted by the Assembly of the League of Nations at Its Meeting Held on Wednesday 15 December, 1920 (Morning), and Article 142 of the Turkish Treaty,” Geneva, December 18, 1920.

been offered an opportunity to return.”⁷² The following year's report noted that all of the women and children who had entered the Rescue Home that year had been smuggled across the Syrian-Turkish border, meaning that no additional survivors had been located in Syria itself. While about 75 percent of those who entered the home eventually found living relatives and left the facility, others remained, and Jeppe turned her focus toward using it as a center for training and rehabilitation. Her efforts mirrored those by the international community to create the institutional framework for resettling refugee populations rather than seeking to restore them to their ancestral homeland.⁷³

An element common to both those opposing and those promoting rescue was the abstraction of women and children into nationalist, conservative, and humanitarian discourse, as empty vessels into which anxieties and beliefs about change, national honor, and civilization could be poured. Vacaresco's speech and Edip's memoir are perhaps the best examples of how this abstraction took shape. For the first, the treatment of Armenian women and children achieved an elaborate symbolic value as an example of alleged Muslim depravity, the inherent guilt and backwardness of Turks, and the general moral disorder and chaos of the war; for the second, it was a brutal reminder of how low Turkey's fortunes had fallen—and in part at the hands of a disloyal internal “other.” Indeed, the emblematic role of the virtuous Armenian woman as victim of the rapacious, terrible Turk and requiring rescue by the West was a leitmotif in the publicity and fundraising campaigns initiated by Near East Relief and other missionary and nongovernmental relief organizations during the war.⁷⁴

Beyond the implications that this process has for the historian's efforts to recover women and children survivors as discrete historical actors, by infusing their rescue with this constitutive meaning, politicians and diplomats impeded the work of humanitarians and the extension of direct humanitarian assistance to the very people who were most in need.⁷⁵ The ideological and cultural meaning of rescue and the immense symbolic value of the women and children defined humanitarianism and the League's role in the Eastern Mediterranean as it underscored a loss of Turkish national prestige and Muslim social control and preeminence. The Ottoman reaction to the Fifth Committee's recommendations, which rejected not just the proposals but also the underlying facts, left no ideological or ethical space in which humanitarian

⁷² ALON-UNOG, Publications of the League of Nations, IV.Social. 1927.IV.6, *Report of the Commission for the Protection of Women and Children in the Near East*, 1.

⁷³ This shift was also a feature of League efforts at “population unmixing,” and a manifestation of the conclusion that restoring refugees to their homes in formerly multiethnic empires contradicted the established policy of rationalizing nation-states. Weitz, “From the Vienna to the Paris System,” 1338.

⁷⁴ See Peter Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* (New York, 2003).

⁷⁵ This process of emblemizing anticipates a phenomenon observed by Liisa Malkki in the way the international community treated Hutu refugees in 1970s Tanzania. For Malkki, bureaucratic humanitarian intervention transformed the political and social categorization of the refugees in a profound manner that had far-ranging implications for their assistance. “Refugees stop being specific persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child . . . The problem is that the necessary delivery of relief . . . is accompanied by a host of other, unannounced social processes and practices that are dehistoricizing. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims.” Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization,” *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (August 1996): 377–404, 378.

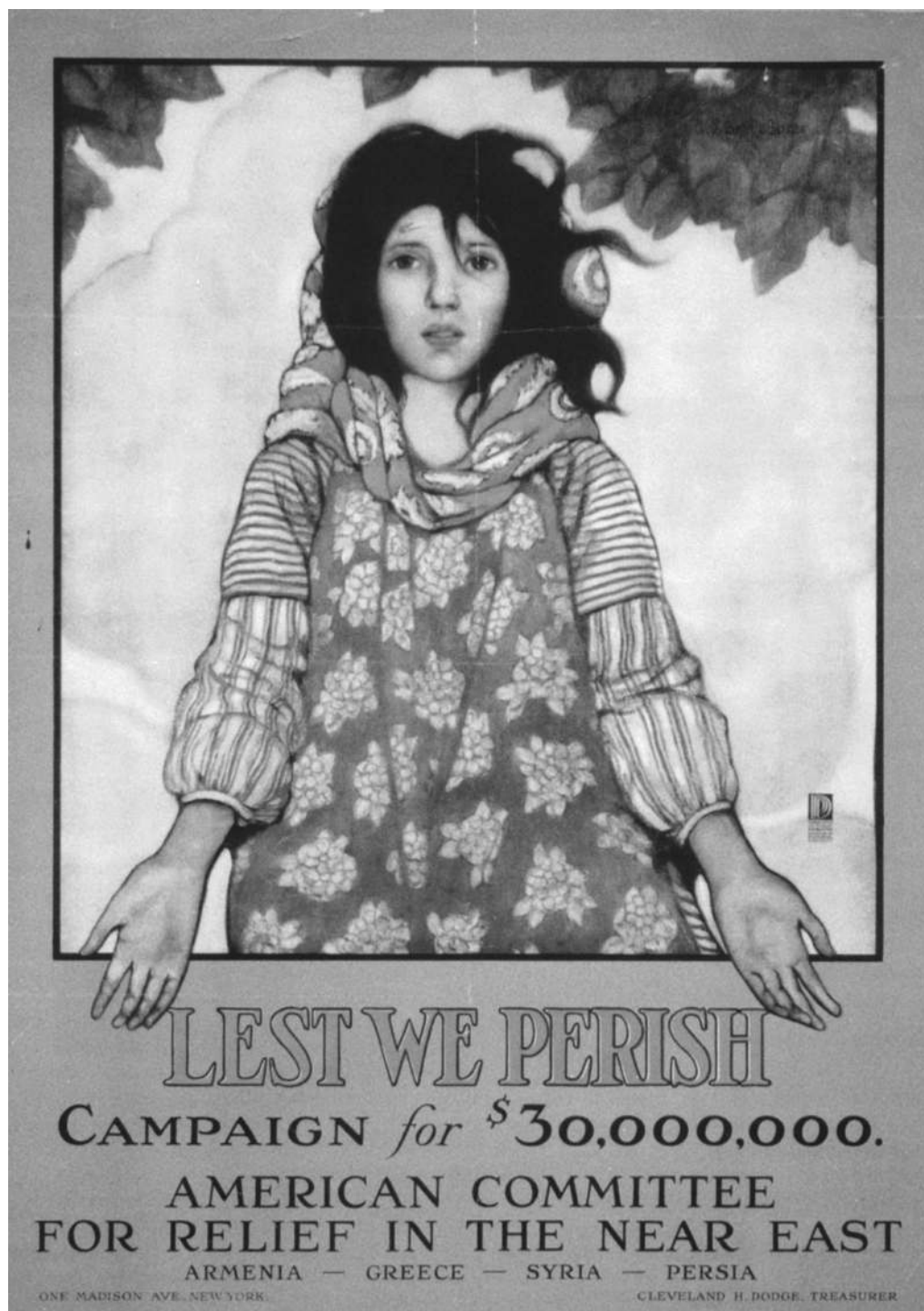


FIGURE 4: American Committee for Relief in the Near East (Near East Relief) poster, “Lest We Perish: Campaign for \$30,000,000,” by Ethel Franklin Betts, ca. 1918. The image of a slightly disheveled, seemingly abandoned, though still beautiful girl in need of saving by the West was a recurring image in the promotion of Armenian relief campaigns. LC-USZC4-1343 (color film copy transparency), Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

concerns and compassion would be overriding principles; consequently, few rescues or family reunifications were effected in the Republic of Turkey.

As the process of recovery in Anatolia ended, the Armenian children and women survivors who remained there assimilated. These *gizli Ermeniler* (hidden Armenians), as they are known in Turkey, started their own families and produced descendants. Estimates of the number of contemporary Turks who have at least one Armenian grandparent range as high as two million, although the costs of revealing Armenian ancestry in public are potentially so high as to preclude the possibility of arriving at an accurate number. Excised from official Turkish history, this demographic reality has garnered increasing attention nonetheless, with discussions of Armenian heritage having become interwoven with efforts at Armenian-Turkish reconciliation and official acknowledgment of the Armenian Genocide.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ See Ayşe Gül Altınay and Fethiye Çetin, eds., *Torunlar* [Grandchildren] (Istanbul, 2009), for a collection of oral history memoirs of the grandchildren of "hidden Armenian" women. Çetin's 2004 memoir also tells about her discovery that her grandmother, whom she knew growing up as Şeher, was born with the name Hranuysh and was a child survivor of the Genocide. Çetin retells Şeher/Hranuysh's story in a way that is hauntingly reminiscent of Zabel's: after the men and older boys of her village of Havva were executed, the women and children were sent on a march toward Mesopotamia. Among the horrors she witnessed en route was her grandmother drowning two of her infant grandchildren only to then fling herself into the water after them. Eventually Şeher and the other girls in the caravan were separated and "adopted" by various officers, she by a Colonel Hüseyin. Later she learned that her brother Khorēn, renamed Ahmet, had been sold to a local farmer and worked as a shepherd. Their father, who had emigrated to America before the war, returned to Aleppo, where he located her mother. He sent word via smugglers to both of his children for them to join him. Khorēn did, but Hranuysh, now named Şeher and married to a local Turkish man, was unable to do so. Nevertheless, she maintained some contact with her family until the 1950s. A respected and beloved grandmother, Şeher/Hranuysh practiced Armenian rituals, including the baking of a sweet bread, *çorek*, at Easter, which she shared with other former Armenian women in the village; she and other former Armenians never quite fully assimilated and maintained in forms of practice a memory of their origins. As an adult, Çetin renewed contacts with her American-Armenian cousins. *Anneannem: Anlatı* (My Grandmother), 58–97 (references to English translation).

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