

WOMEN ON A MISSION! SCANDINAVIAN WELFARE AND THE ARMENIANS IN THE OTTOMAN EMPIRE, 1905–1917¹

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In the Ottoman Empire, the Armenian population had a special place in various Western missionary enterprises. From the massacres in the 1890s till the interwar period, Western missionaries—together with secular organisations like the Red Cross and the Near East Relief, were an important part of the forces that were rebuilding and attempting to preserve what was left of Armenian society. Missionaries with vital connections to Western state authorities could operate relatively safely and independently, unlike men and women from local communities who often depended on money, supplies and infrastructure from the outside in order to help the destitute. Thus the missionary can be seen as a forerunner for the present-day development/aid worker.

This essay will look at the missionary's role in times of emergency and her contribution to Armenian society in the period from the late 1890s to the end of the First World War. The study will be based on a Norwegian nurse and deaconess, Bodil Biørn (1871–1960), one of several Scandinavian missionaries from the Lutheran Female Mission Workers' organization (Kvinnelige Misjons Arbeidere, KMA) based in Eastern Anatolia. These Norwegian, Danish and Swedish missionaries worked for the German mission Deutscher Hilfsbund für Christliches Liebswerk im Orient.

Patricia Grimshaw reminds us that: “The tension in the mission project apparent between, on the one hand, concern for universal human rights that few of their contemporaries nourished, and on the other, the arrogance bred of Western cultural imperialism, underpinned mission activity across the British Empire....”² Although the Nordic countries

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² P. Grimshaw, “Faith, Missionary Life and the Family” in *Gender and Empire* (ed.) P. Levine, Oxford 2004, pp. 261–262.

never were colonial powers in a strict sense of the term in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Grimshaw's "contentious dilemma" is of course relevant when evaluating Scandinavian mission history. Even so, this essay will argue that in order to have an impact, the missionary would have to restrain her cultural arrogance, and develop empathy with and understanding of the religious, social and political conditions that determined the local population's conditions of life. This necessitated a will to work with indigenous people, men and women,—who had their own agencies for choosing to cooperate with Western missionaries. Thus my focus will not merely be on the missionary's strategies for welfare, but also on this encounter as a complex interaction with local peoples and political and social developments in the 'field'.³

Aid-work among Armenians after the 1894–96 Massacres

The massacres of the Armenians from 1894–96 under Sultan Abdülhamid and, later, the genocide of the Armenians during WW1 loomed large in American and European consciousness and social and political life during a span of four decades.⁴ This was also true for the Scandinavian countries, where the priest Ernst Lohmann and his brother Johannes Lohmann from the Deutsche Hilfsbund played central roles as advocates for the Armenians. In the late 1890s, the Lohmann brothers toured in Scandinavia, where they spoke at public meetings about their experiences among the survivors of the massacres.⁵ Several Scandinavian intellectuals wrote about the Armenian conditions in the Ottoman Empire. Danish KMA was established partly as a response to the Armenian plight. The Norwegian branch, established in 1902, also gave priority to this aid-oriented work in Turkish Armenia.

³ On American mission to Ottoman Armenia, see S. Moranian, *The American Missionaries and the Armenian Question: 1915–1927* (PhD. diss., University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1994) and H. L. Kieser, "Mission as a Factor of Change in Turkey" in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 13, no. 4 (2002): pp. 391–410.

⁴ P. Balakian, *The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response* 2003 xviii; Matthias Bjørnlund, "Et Folk Myrdes": Det Armenske Folkemord i Danske Kilder" (MA thesis, University of Copenhagen, 2005), p. 18.

⁵ M. Bjørnlund, "Before the Armenian Genocide: Danish Missionary and Rescue Operations in the Ottoman Empire, 1900–1914", *Haigazian Armenological Review* 26 (2006): pp. 141–56.