
Reviewed by Gershon Shafir

*Bread from Stones* is very well thought out, written, and put together book, all the way from the evocative title, through the vast amount of original data collected in half a dozen languages in rarely tapped archives, to its eloquent and nuanced argumentation, all of it animated by the revulsion from the morally reprehensible genocide at its center but always from within the historian’s discerning perspective.

Professor Watenpaugh gives us a new chronology, the interwar period, a novel geographical focus, the shattered Ottoman Empire, and a new focus on the old victims, the Armenians. The Ottoman Empire already in the second half of the 19th century served as the site where Western humanitarian intervention, frequently in the service of imperial interests, was practiced. The book’s focus is on the intensification, as well as redefinition of humanitarian intervention as assistance to the genocide’s surviving trafficked and kidnapped Armenian women and children. This books also accomplishes what is widely urged but rarely accomplished – the joint study of East and West. By focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean as a region of interaction between the Ottomans, their subjects, and the Western Great Powers, he shows it to be a site of cultural and humanitarian innovation. Finally, Professor Watenpaugh not only suggests an eye-opening parallel between the origins of humanitarianism and human rights, the former in response to the Armenian genocide, the letter in reaction to the Jewish Holocaust, but also connects them by pinpointing the mutual influence of humanitarianism and human rights. Though both partake in a common conception of shared humanity, eventually they diverged as to the proper way to address the systematic mass abuses of victim groups.

In *Bread from Stones*, Professor Watenpaugh has established a new and rigorous standard for the study of one of the defining moral economies and social imaginaries of our time, modern humanitarianism. To start with, he carefully separates the thread of humanitarianism as a phenomenon on its own right from nationalism and colonialism. He is also part of the new scholarly approach which refocuses the origins of human rights by emphasizing its relative novelty but gives additional depth to this view by highlighting the connection between the failures of humanitarianism and the growing attraction of human rights. Finally, he seeks to remove from the objects of humanitarian assistance the bland bureaucratic labels of refugee, sufferer, orphan, and, whenever possible, recognize their distinct voice and agency.

In particular, I appreciated his efforts to “disentangle—but not disconnect—humanitarianism from colonialism” and nationalism (p. 3). Throughout the volume Watenpaugh demonstrates the emergence of humanitarianism as one strand of the secular, management-oriented, scientific, apolitical, bureaucratic, and professional ethos of Western liberalism. He, consequently, distinguishes between the dynamics and logics of colonialism and humanitarianism but remains sensitive to their manifold connections. While recognizing the novelty and distinctness of humanitarianism, he never overlooks the many forces by which it was buffeted, shaped, and used and consequently concludes that it was “a minor force,” mostly one of resistance. Though interwar humanitarianism sought to be apolitical and neutral, a substitute for politics, it was shaped by the major political forces of the age, and remained a bone of contention between western promises of universalism and the nationalist claims of the newly-formed Turkish state that it was
unjustly singled out. Highlighting this tangled web, allows Professor Watenpaugh to shed light on the present day entrapments of humanitarianism by militarization and corporatization of humanitarian actions and intervention.

Watenpaugh not only disentangles humanitarianism from colonialism; he is at his best when he disentangles humanitarianism itself. Humanitarianism, as he demonstrates, is played out between the poles of universal compassion for the sufferer and the more selective, frequently sectarian, humanitarian imagination which allows the self-same sufferers either to be drawn into the circle of care or be denied care and even exposed to barbarism beyond imagination. Modern humanitarianism is, therefore, the unexpected offspring of genocide, an attempt to correct the inhumanity inflicted on genocide victims by repairing their humanity and communities. But the other pole of humanitarianism, its universalism is hardly simple compassion for the distant stranger; in fact, to view a group as deserving compassion, and therefore care, it first has to be ‘unstrangered.’

In sum, *Bread from Stones* offers a rich social and cultural overview in the service of a historical and intellectual genealogy of modern humanitarianism. The book serves up a complex narrative with many parts, each component articulated both on its own terms and as part of a larger picture.

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