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## **ACTIVITIES OF THE NORWEGIAN MISSION IN ALEXANDROPOL: THE STORY OF ONE MISSIONARY\***

**Key words:** Norwegian mission, Alexandropol, Genocide, American orphanage, Source of Light, hand-knitted socks, foster mother, Fridtjof Nansen.

### ***Introduction***

In the autumn of 1920 Armenia was invaded by the Turkish nationalist forces. The war-torn country was on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe. The arrival of 500,000 refugees exacerbated the chaotic situation; thousands were starving to death. Since the government could not meet the needs of its people, it allowed the American Near East Relief Committee (ACRNE) to assist them. This decision spared the people of Armenia from absolute annihilation<sup>1</sup>.

Along with ACRNE, other small European organisations arrived in Armenia, conducting humanitarian activities within their capabilities.

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<sup>1</sup> Hovannisian 1971, 144.

Among them, the Norwegian Women's Missionary Organisation (NWMO) took its modest place. Having settled in Alexandropol, under the leadership of Bodil Catarin Biorn, this organisation played a great role in saving homeless orphans from the clutches of hunger.

In this article, we have tried to present the history of the humanitarian activities of the Norwegian Women's Mission and its leader during the Alexandropol period by combining the memories of former orphans and missionaries.

### SCANDINAVIAN WOMEN'S MISSION IN WESTERN ARMENIA

NWMO was the first independent women's missionary organisation in Norway. Founded in 1902, it aimed to improve the lives of women in *foreign lands*.<sup>2</sup> The founders of the NWMO were influenced by women's missionary organisations in North America, Britain and Germany that emerged in the late nineteenth century<sup>3</sup>. NWMO missionaries were upper-middle class, mostly highly educated, professional women who shared an understanding of a personal calling to missionary work. The few women who chose to work in Western Armenia defined their missionary vocation as closely related to the healing of suffering Armenians after the Hamidian massacre of 1894-1896.

Bodil Biorn was one of the women who worked for the NWMO. Trained as a nurse in Oslo and in Berlin, she worked in both American and German institutions during her first year in Turkey from 1905 to 1906. At the same time, she studied Armenian. Biorn then moved to Mush where, on the eve of World War I she ran the polyclinic of the German Asylum. In 1914-1915, Biorn and her Swedish colleague Alma

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<sup>2</sup> Bockelund 1950, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Naguib, Okkenhaug 2008, 57-81.

Johansson cared for soldiers in Red Cross hospitals. When the Genocide began, Biorn and her colleagues became part of an illegal network to help Armenians. The war forced them to become aid workers, war correspondents, and part of a network opposing the Ottoman Empire's war against the Armenian people<sup>4</sup>. These women, unmarried and without children of their own, felt a deep connection to the Armenian people. Having lived through war and genocide with the Armenians, they could no longer imagine a quiet, safe and comfortable life in Europe.

After the war, the Turkish government banned missionaries from entering the country, so the missionaries followed the Armenian refugees who moved to Syria, Egypt, Greece, etc. Tokda and Biorn came to a resolution that Bodil Biorn's new vocation would help Armenian orphans in Armenia.

The war and the Armenian Genocide led to a refugee crisis in Transcaucasia by 1915. In 1918, the independent Republic of Armenia was established. "The burden of a few hundred thousand homeless and unemployed refugees was enough in itself to cause an economic maelstrom", writes Hovannisian on the situation during the first year of the republic. By the summer of 1919, after a season of drought, 200,000 people – 20 per cent of the republic's population – had died. ACRNE became the only hope for salvation in this situation. By 1921, when the independent republic was replaced by the Soviet state, the Committee had taken on the care of some 100,000 orphans in Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Greece and Constantinople. In 1921, the ACRNE Committee was responsible for the care of some 100,000 orphans in Armenia, Syria, Palestine, Greece and Constantinople.

Co-operation with ACRNE proved crucial for Biorn. The Soviet

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<sup>4</sup> Byornlund 2006, v. 26, 141-142.

government did not allow missionary organisations or individuals in Armenia. The only way Biorn could work in Armenia was to cooperate with ACRNE. When Biorn arrived in Yerevan in the early spring of 1922, the famine was still raging. American relief workers reported that during the harsh winter months, there had been several instances of people becoming so desperate from hunger that they had resorted to eating human flesh. "Officials said they were doing their best to prevent this, but people were losing their minds from hunger."<sup>5</sup> In April of that year, ACRNE staff based in Alexandropol reported terrible hunger among refugees and orphans in the mountain villages of central Armenia. Returning from a five-day horseback trek through twenty villages, Committee staff member C.A. Downer reported that food had dried up throughout the region. People tried to make bread from all sorts of substitutes, including flax chaff and sawdust, extracted undigested substances from old waste and gave them to their children. Due to malnutrition, health conditions were critical, with a quarter of the adults incapacitated and bedridden. Downer concluded that only one in fifty residents was normal<sup>6</sup>.

It became imperative for Biorn to organise aid as soon as possible. If the local Armenians in the villages were suffering from hunger and disease, the situation of refugees in the cities was even worse. However, the authorities were not prepared for this, and Biorn spent the first two months of her stay in Soviet Armenia negotiating with government officials about where to open a Norwegian orphanage. After two months, Biorn, who spoke fluent Western Armenian and had lived among Armenians for more than 10 years, was able to reach an agreement with the officials.

Even before the orphanage opened, Biorn began distributing

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<sup>5</sup> Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), LSRM, 104-111/3, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

wheat to widows who had migrated from Mush. The food distribution, financed by Norwegian women, saved dozens of families from starvation in April-June 1922, but it did not solve the problem completely. Large numbers of homeless children slept in the streets. In her letters, Biorn wrote that she often couldn't sleep at night because of the crying of hungry orphans. These reports led Norwegian donors to contribute 900 Norwegian kroner for a year's rent for the orphanage<sup>7</sup>.

The lack of suitable buildings in Yerevan forced Biorn to look for another place to found a shelter. That's when the local authorities offered her a large house with a garden in Alexandropol (now Gyumri).

## THE NORWEGIAN ORPHANAGE

Alexandropol was a “showcase” district of ACRNE. This was due to the good housing conditions provided by the Cossack Post, former Russian military barrack that housed over 5,000 children. The American orphanage and hospital, more like a village, was located about 1.5km from the town. It consisted of about forty stately and substantial stone houses surrounded by extensive fields. The community also had schools and courses in agriculture and crafts for older children. In addition, on the opposite side of the town was another group of barracks, Polygon, which housed 20,000 refugees<sup>8</sup>. As the League of Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Fridtjof Nansen, a Norwegian explorer and humanitarian, visited Leninakan (formerly Alexandropol) in 1925. The facilities where orphaned children were kept made a strong impression on

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<sup>7</sup> National Archives, Oslo, PA 699, KMA, 0028. **Kvartalshilsen** 1922, 38.

<sup>8</sup> **Yarrow** 1920, 3-6.

him.<sup>9</sup>

ACRNE cared for boys and girls, most of them under the age of eleven, who were placed in orphanages or cared by local people who received financial support from ACRNE.

After the genocide, according to historian Lerna Ekmekcioglu, unmarried girls and boys, regardless of their age, were considered orphans if they had lost a parent, usually their father, and if they had no male relatives to rely on. Orphanhood and the breakdown of family structures were closely linked. To some extent, orphanhood meant a lack of support from the family, on whom, before the disaster, the individual depended for everything<sup>10</sup>.

Biorn's ideal of a Norwegian orphanage was to recreate a family. She wanted to create a small orphanage that would aim to rehabilitate the most vulnerable children in a family environment. It would be a qualitative addition to ACRNE's extensive work with refugees. According to Biorn, ACRNE's mission was invaluable, but their orphanages were too large to be a true home for the children. The large luxury villa she rented in Alexandropol allowed Biorn to create an orphanage of her own design. The house had ten rooms, two kitchens, and gardens to the front and back. Biorn was practical and had plumbing installed – “one of the most important things in an orphanage”<sup>11</sup>. She named the orphanage Lyskilden (“Source of Light”).

The orphanage created jobs for the local population. Biorn hired two “kind and skillful” Armenian women: one to cook and the other to look after the children. The cook's name was Azniv Janercharyan and she was from Bitlis, where she had lived comfortably in a

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<sup>9</sup> Nansen 1962, 123-124.

<sup>10</sup> Ekmekcioglu 2016, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 8.

wealthy family until 1915. According to Biorn, she was a loyal worker, a quiet and kind woman. Her husband was killed in the massacre, but her five children survived. As a widow forced to support a large family, she was fortunate that several of her children remained in American orphanages, and she was able to support the rest by working as a cook<sup>12</sup>.

“The Source of Light” could accommodate up to thirty-six boys between the ages of four and ten. The weakest children were found by Biorn and her staff outside one of the ACRNE canteens. In many cases, mothers or other relatives living in extreme poverty begged Biorn and her staff to take care of their children. Soon there were thirty-five children in the orphanage: all of them weak, sick, and extremely malnourished<sup>13</sup>. Skin diseases, stomach and intestinal disorders were common among the local population due to malnutrition. Mabel Evelyn Elliott, an American physician who worked at the American Women's Hospital in Alexandropol in 1921–1923, reported that there was not a single healthy child among the 40,000 orphans in American care. They were all suffering from infectious diseases.<sup>14</sup> Similar health problems plagued the Norwegian orphanage, with many suffering from severe abdominal bloating caused by a diet of grass and “greens.”

Food shortages were a major threat to the existence of Armenian orphans. ACRNE struggled to find enough food to distribute and had strict rations. Although there was supposed to be enough food for each child under their charge, many children went hungry. Biorn also had to ration food, even though she had enough provisions for the children. Nefissa Naguib writes about nutrition

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<sup>12</sup> National Archives, Oslo, PA 699, KMA, 0028. **Kvartalshilsen** 1936, 6.

<sup>13</sup> National Archives, PA 699, KMA, 0028. **Kvartalshilsen** 1923, nr. 1, 2.

<sup>14</sup> **Elliott** 1924, 176.

and food distribution among refugees, “While food deprivation breaks the human spirit, feeding others provides human meditation, care, and healing for others. Unravelling the many facets of humanitarian food distribution .... is a complex process in which truthfulness and sentimentality must be constantly evaluated. Nevertheless, when we consider the simple act of feeding others, something rich is revealed.”<sup>15</sup>

Biørn did not cook or feed the children herself; Armenian women took care of that. However, every day she took meals together with the children and the staff. The fact that the foreign woman who headed the orphanage preferred not to eat alone shows that food was important not only as a help, but also as a social interaction, which implied eating together in everyday life. For this, the orphans affectionately called her “Mama Katharina”. Food was also discussed in letters to the headquarters in Norway, where reports from Armenia were published. Members of the NWMO and other interested readers received a detailed picture of the shelter's warehouse filled with food for the whole season: vegetables, potatoes, flour, fat, tinned meat, beans, tomatoes<sup>16</sup>. This reassured the Norwegian women donors that their money was being spent on sustainable farming.

It was important for Biørn to limit the number of children and to accept only the sickest and weakest, as a quiet and closed environment and proper nutrition were essential to the healing process. During their stay at the orphanage, the children received full nutrition, medical attention and care. After recovery, the children returned to their families or other carers. It was important to create a sense of home for children living on the streets. Keeping

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<sup>15</sup> **Naguib** 2017, 645.

<sup>16</sup> National Archives, KMA, PA 699, nr. 0028. **Kvartalshilsen** 1923, 2.



warm during the winter months was part of this strategy. And in this respect, the Biorn shelter differed significantly from others. For example, during a visit to the ACRNE shelter, Fridtjof Nansen noticed that the children's bedrooms, although large, clean and bright, were not heated<sup>17</sup>. In a region where snow lies for five months and winter temperatures drop to minus 25 degrees Celsius, living in unheated dormitories was unacceptable even for a polar explorer.

## ORPHAN CARE

Biorn describes in detail the work she and her colleagues did in the long evenings. For example, making woolen bed linen was a common activity for Norwegian women. In Norway, wool was essential to keep people warm during the long winters. Norwegian women knew how to knit; girls were taught knitting at school from an early age. Women supporting missionary relief work knitted socks and jumpers for the Source of Light children. This voluntary needlework created an imaginary link between their own world and that of the Armenians. According to Liisa H. Malkki, knitting and sewing for the distant sufferer “was a giving of one's skill, time and self to help others and linking this to the skill and giving of others. It was a way of imagining himself as a member of the living world and as something greater than himself”<sup>18</sup>. This was a way of seeing himself as a member of the living world and as something greater than himself. In the context of Source of Light, hand-knitted socks and jumpers kept Armenian children and their relatives warm at a time when most Armenians, refugees and orphans had no clothes.

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<sup>17</sup> Nansen 1962, 122.

<sup>18</sup> Malkki 2015, 161.

In 1919, the American Red Cross donated 754 tons of clothing to Armenia. Despite this, many still could not afford winter clothing, and old American clothes were “far more valuable than money”<sup>19</sup>. Biorn encouraged Norwegian donors to send warm clothing to Armenia, specifying that the recipients would be forty Mush families living in and around Alexandropol. Biorn assured supporters that their gifts would be delivered safely and facilitated personal connections between donor and recipient.

Boxes of clothes and toys played an important role, both materially and psychologically, in the transnational connections between Norwegians and orphanage children. The clothes warmed little bodies and at the same time reminded the children of their breadwinners.

Women in Norway “adopted” Armenian children in the orphanage. Each one who donated money to support a child received the title of “foster mother.” Norwegian foster mothers not only donated money, but also knitted socks, jumpers, and sewed clothes for “their” child.

Many of the photographs of the children living at “Source of Light” also fulfilled the donors’ “need for affection”, and these photographs became another important factor in creating personal bonds between the “mothers” in Norway and the children in Armenia. Many of the children were photographed when they were welcomed into the home: emaciated, dirty, dressed in rags<sup>20</sup>. A few months later, Biorn photographed the children again, and these “after” photographs proved that the donors had made a difference in the lives of these children. The Norwegian Women's Missionary

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<sup>19</sup> **Hovannisian** 1971, 142-143.

<sup>20</sup> On Armenian refugees and humanitarian photography, see **Balakian** 2015, 89-114.

Organisation printed these photographs in its magazine. In addition to the printed reports in the organisation's magazine, Biørn also wrote letters to each donor. This process was not one-way. Biørn asked each foster parent to send pictures of "their" child. She told the children about the foster mothers and showed them on a map where the donors lived in Norway.

Knitting clothes for a particular child, adopting from a distance, exchanging photographs, letters and parcels of clothing were all part of what Watenpaugh calls "the dismemberment of the object of humanitarianism."<sup>21</sup> He argues that at the centre of the modern humanitarian mind is a process whereby the object of humanitarianism seeks to help less those who are alien and different and to help more those who happen to be familiar, similar and deserving of help. The aim of humanitarian reason is to make "the victims of war, famine and disaster seem familiar" and to turn the problems of these victims into problems of humanity<sup>22</sup>. By presenting children as individuals and creating personal connections between them and their givers, Biørn made orphans familiar to a specifically female Norwegian audience.

The short biographies published for potential Norwegian donors were also part of this process of "unbundling". While the biographies depict the helplessness and suffering of refugee women, a characteristic feature of representations of Armenian sacrifice during that time, they also present a more complex picture. Such was the case with the story of a widow who twice travelled long and arduous distances to ask Biørn to take care of her five-year-old son. To support herself, the woman resorted to begging, but it was not enough to support her son. She married

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<sup>21</sup> Watenpaugh 2015, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

twice, and both her husbands were killed: the first one in the Mush massacre in 1915, the second one in Tabriz in Persia in 1918. The boy was born when she fled from Mush. The woman was a Protestant and asked to work in an orphanage. Biorn was unable to provide her with a job, but the boy remained<sup>23</sup>.

Despite her evident grief and suffering, this woman is not depicted as helpless and passive. On the contrary, her account emphasizes that she was determined to get help from Biorn and was willing to travel a long way to do so. In addition, she was looking for a job. This refugee woman is not portrayed as an archetypal victim but as an individual with a religious and geographical identity. These facts (she is Protestant and from Mush) create a familiar connection for the Norwegian donors who supported Biorn's medical and educational work in Mush before the war.

In her seminal study of the history of the modern refugee, Gatrell argues that “images of refugees are unidentified and decontextualised. Only rarely are individuals identified”<sup>24</sup>. Biorn's work is an exception. By identifying orphans and their relatives, the refugees in Biorn's published texts and photographs are given historical context. Moreover, by identifying children, parents, and other caregivers by name and age, and by telling their unique, individual stories of survival, Biorn did not portray Armenian refugee children and women as anonymous, passive recipients of aid. On the contrary these stories show very young children actively trying to escape destructive situations in search of a better life. Armenian refugee women and children were portrayed as destitute, hungry and sick victims, but at the same time as embodiments of “will and courage”<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, the

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<sup>23</sup> National Archives, KMA, PA 699, nr. 0028. **Kvartalshilsen** 1923, 2.

<sup>24</sup> **Gatrell** 2013, 10.

<sup>25</sup> **Maksudyan** 2014, 152.

eyewitness reports from the Biorn's shelter contributed to the individualization of the "Armenian refugee" through context – the provision of names, surnames, family and geographical affiliations of individual survivors. This contrasts with the prevailing tradition of depicting refugees as nameless people grouped into a "collective category of concern"<sup>26</sup>.

### ***Conclusions***

In 1924, Biorn became seriously ill and had to return to Norway. She hired a Protestant Armenian woman from Bitlis, who had been educated at the American Council Mission, and was confident that she would make a good manager of the orphanage. However, the Soviet government was no longer willing to tolerate this Christian institution. The Soviet authorities asked ACRNE to take the children from the Norwegian orphanage. If the Americans had refused, the children would have remained in the care of the state.

We do not know what happened to the children at "Source of Light." In 1927, the Norwegian Women's Missionary Organisation curtailed its work in Soviet Armenia and Bodil Biorn founded a new orphanage for Armenian orphans in Aleppo. She and her Armenian colleague also assisted and trained refugee women. In 1934, at the age of 63, Biorn retired and moved to live in Oslo with her adopted Armenian son and his family. Biorn died in 1960. Until her death, she continued to write and publish works on the lives of Armenian refugees.

Biorn's deep knowledge of the Armenian language and culture, as well as her experience in humanitarian work during the Genocide, were crucial to her success in Soviet Armenia during the interwar period. Building on her pre-Genocide ties with Armenians, especially in

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<sup>26</sup> Gatrell 2013, 10.

the Mush district where she lived for seven years, Bodil Biorn was able to operate as an independent humanitarian worker. The surviving residents of Mush prompted her on where to organise a relief operation and helped her with practical matters when she visited Armenia. The Mush network created a familiar sphere in an unfamiliar political and geographical context. In addition, Biorn was able to use her connections with former American missionaries now working for ACRNE in the Soviet Republic, while remaining separate from their wider activities and thus maintaining the distinctive nature of her work.

The network of Norwegian sponsors from further afield also played a crucial role in organising and carrying out her relief work. Through photographs and biographies of orphanage residents and surviving Armenian parents, Biorn established personal connections between the Armenian children and women benefactors in Norway. By donating money and time, writing letters, binding and stitching for the “needy,” the latter created imaginary connections between their own world and that of the Armenians. These ties were strengthened through the exchange of texts and photographs about the refugees.

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## **Ամփոփում**

Բուժքույր և միսիոներ Բողիլ Բյորնն «Արևելքում քրիստոնեական բարեգործության խթանման գերմանական միության» կազմում 1905 թ. ժամանեց Մուշ և մոտ 10 տարի ղեկավարեց տեղի գերմանական որբանոցի կլինիկան, ապա Առաջին աշխարհամարտի տարիներին իր սկանդինավցի գործընկերի հետ աշխատեց Կարմիր խաչի հիվանդանոցում: Երբ պատերազմի ավարտից հետո թուրքական իշխանություններն արգելեցին օտարերկրյան առաքելությունների գործունեությունը երկրում՝ հայ ժողովրդի հետ ցեղասպանություն վերապրած նորվեգուհին տուն չվերադարձավ, այլ տեղափոխվեց Խորհրդային Հայաստան և 1922 թ. Ալեքսանդրապոլում հիմնեց որբանոց: Այս կերպ նա փորձեց համատեղել միսիոներական կոչումը և մարդասիրական աշխատանքը ցեղասպանությունը վերապրածների շրջանում, քանզի համոզված էր, որ Աստված ծրագիր ունի փրկված հայ երեխաների համար: Նորվեգուհիների մասնավոր նվիրատվությունների հաշվին պահվող որբանոցը կոչվեց «Լույսի աղբյուր»: Իր կարճատև գոյության ընթացքում այն սովի ճիրաններից փրկեց և ընտանեկան դաստիարակություն տվեց տասնյակ որբերի:

Ցավոք, Խորհրդային իշխանությունները չհանդուրժելով նորվեգական քրիստոնեական առաքելության գոյությունը՝ 1920-ական թվականների կեսերին պահանջեցին լուծարել որբանոցը: «Կանանց նորվեգական միսիոներական կազմակերպությունը» 1927 թ. պաշտոնապես դադարեցրեց իր գործունեությունը Խորհրդային Հայաստանում, իսկ Բողիլ Բյորնը հայ որբերի համար նոր որբանոց հիմնեց Հալեպում:

**Բանալի բառեր՝** Նորվեգական առաքելություն, Ալեքսանդրապոլ, ցեղասպանություն, ամերիկյան որբանոց, «Լույսի աղբյուր», ձեռագործ գուլպաներ, խորթ մայր, Ֆրիտյոֆ Նանսեն:



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### **Резюме**

Медсестра и миссионерка Бодил Бьёрн в составе «Немецкого общества содействия христианской благотворительности на Востоке» прибыла в Муш в 1905 г. и в течение примерно 10 лет возглавляла клинику местного немецкого приюта. В годы Первой мировой войны она вместе со своими скандинавскими коллегами работала в госпитале Красного Креста. После окончания войны, когда турецкие власти запретили иностранные представительства в стране, норвежская миссионерка, пережившая с армянским народом геноцид, не вернулась домой. Вместо этого она переехала в Советскую Армению и в 1922 г. основала приют в Александрополе.

Таким образом, Бьёрн пыталась совместить миссионерское призвание и гуманитарную работу среди переживших геноцид, убежденная в том, что у Бога есть план для спасенных армянских детей. Детский дом, содержащийся за счет частных пожертвований норвежских женщин, получил название «Источник света». За время своего недолгого существования он спас десятки сирот от голодной смерти и обеспечил им семейное воспитание.

К сожалению, советские власти недолго терпели существование Норвежской христианской миссии и в середине 1920-х годов потребовали расформировать приют. В 1927 году Норвежская женская миссионерская организация официально прекратила свою деятельность в Советской Армении, а Бодил Бьёрн основала в Алеппо новый приют для армянских сирот.

**Ключевые слова:** Норвежская миссия, Александрополь, геноцид, американский детский дом, «Источник света», носки ручной вязки, приемная мать, Фритьоф Нансен.