



The workshop “Aid to Armenia. Armenia and Armenians in International History” took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June at Birkbeck College, University of London. The workshop was timely: the day before, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June, the German Parliament had employed the word genocide to describe the violence, massacres, death marches, rapes, forced conversions, abductions, and collective expropriations that the Ottoman Armenian population experienced during WWI and the crumbling of the Ottoman Empire. To this day, despite recognition of the Armenian genocide by multiple actors over the last few months and years, the Turkish government embraces a position of persistent denial.

The aim of “Aid to Armenia” was threefold. First, it enlarged the narrow perspective of Armenian history/studies that, over time, have privileged questions of violence, survival and denial over other overlapping historical processes. Second, the workshop framed the history of Armenia and Armenians within current discussions and preoccupations in international and global history. The themes of total war, peace, humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and sovereignty shaped presentations and discussions. Lastly, particular attention was devoted to engaging with the landmark historiographical contributions, which appeared mostly in 2015, in coincidence with the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armenian genocide. To this end, a group of scholars – at different stages of their career, from PhD students to more established scholars – gathered at Birkbeck College. The majority of the participants were historians, but the participation of political scientists, anthropologists, and legal scholars enriched the discussions and demonstrated the potential for ongoing interdisciplinary collaboration.

The first panel focused on crises, “questions”, and interventions during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire. **Stéphanie Prévost** (Paris Diderot) adopted a comparative framework to study the British and American responses to the Hamidian massacres of 1894-1896. She did so by looking at non-state actors working on the margins of inter-state diplomacy. **James Perkins** (British Library) discussed the British liberal interests in the Macedonian question, focusing in particular on the British diplomatic and moral responsibility towards the implementation of reforms. Triggered by the comments of **Rebecca Gill** (University of Huddersfield), both presentations elaborated on the role of geographies that the

territories populated by Armenians and Macedonia occupied in the imagination of Western policy-makers, philanthropists, and missionaries. This heterogeneous group of activists belonged to and participated in networks where all sort of interests – from private to public, from political and economic to social – intersected. The papers also prompted discussion of the ways that racial and orientalist languages of imperialism deployed by these groups in their engagement with the Armenians in the 19<sup>th</sup> century shifted to rooms, corridors, and buildings of liberal internationalism in Geneva after the formation of the League of Nations in 1920.

The second panel explored questions of refugees and resettlement from comparative perspectives. **Inger Marie Okkenhaug** (Volda University College) looked at the actors providing relief to post-genocide Armenian refugees and at their connections with the local communities. She addressed the history of Scandinavian missionary organizations and the work of their missionaries and relief workers in Armenia and Syria. **Maria Rizou** (King's College) introduced the role played by the National Bank of Greece and the Greek state in granting loans to Greek refugees between 1918 and 1924. She stressed that national money was lent to Greek refugees from Bulgaria and Romania, whereas external financial resources were granted to a great number of refugees coming from Asia Minor, before and during the exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey. The discussions that followed developed around the different connections and obligations that the state had towards refugees in the interwar period – as **Peter Gatrell** (Manchester University) pointed out. The interactions between the state and refugees developed (and still do) along specific lines, such as public health, nutrition, mental health, and general plans for the relief and reconstruction of societies. More broadly, this panel pointed for the need for greater attention to the economic dimensions of the history of humanitarian aid.

The third panel analyzed issues of gender, relief, and reconstruction in the interwar period. **Becky Jinks** (Royal Holloway UCL) presented the case study of an American humanitarian organization, the Smith College Relief Unit, in providing relief to Armenians from 1919 to 1921. She focused, on one hand, on the reasons why and the ways in which relief was provided, and, on the other hand, on the processes of self-reflection that relief workers underwent while busy at the ground level or writing *ex-post* about their experiences. Again, this raised important questions regarding the relationship between individual and organizational motivations, practices and narratives. **Anna Aleksanyan** (Clark University) presented the work carried out by the Neutral House, based in Istanbul, to rescue surviving Armenian women and children and the tensions arising from the so-called Armenization of the children. She particularly stressed the historical role played by the genocide in creating new social identities in the interwar period. **Philippa Hetherington** (UCL SSEES) provided food for thought during the discussion, which centered and articulated the category of gender. Gender might be used as a framing function and a way of identification; as a lens through which men can be studied as historical actors alongside women; and as a prism to analyze the connection between women and children in the Armenian case. More generally, this panel suggested that Armenians were not only recipients of humanitarian aid but also played an active role in shaping and re-appropriating it.

The workshop was closed by a round table connecting the past, present, and future of both Armenia and Armenians. The contributions highlighted the ways in which histories of crisis and relief continue to resonate. On the one hand history plays an important role in shaping perceptions of current crises. On the other, popular understandings of crisis and relief has be reshaped and re-appropriated in current contexts of conflict and displacement arising from the Nagorno Karabagh and Syrian conflicts. **Armine Ishkanian** (LSE) stressed the importance of understanding the politics of NGO interventions and civil society activism in Armenia during the post-Soviet transition. **Dawn Chatty** (University of Oxford) reflected on the recent arrivals of Syrian Armenian refugees in the Republic of Armenia. She

demonstrated the importance of regional histories of displacement for understanding not only the causes of the crisis but also the ways in which refugees perceive their experiences and seek to shape their futures and the responses of states to their claims.

Although the focus was on the post-Soviet period, discussions pointed to the importance of paying attention to the Soviet period and the responses of Soviet actors to various incidences of crisis in the region. **Katja Doose** (Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen), for example, explained how Soviet Armenian citizens' perception of the USSR as a donor of international aid was disrupted by the acceptance of international aid in the aftermath of the Armenian earthquake of 1988. From her end, **Anahit Shirinyan** (Chatham House) historicized the 4 days war in April 2016 between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno Karabagh by looking back to the first years of Armenian independence in the 1990s. More broadly, the roundtable demonstrated the fruitfulness of comparative and interdisciplinary perspectives and the importance of historicizing taken-for-granted assumptions about the nature of "complex emergencies" and the principles and practices of humanitarian interventions.

You can also find the report of "Aid to Armenia" on the blog of [The Reluctant Internationalists](#), Birkbeck College, UCL.

**Jo Laycock and Francesca Piana**