

UC historian argues Armenian genocide gave rise to modern humanitarian movement

February 18 2011

One of the 20th century's most infamous atrocities, the Armenian genocide, also should be remembered for fostering the modern humanitarian movement, a UC Davis historian argues in a paper recently published in the *American Historical Review*.

Establishing a defining characteristic of modern humanitarianism, people at the time “began to reject the idea that suffering was natural or normal and concluded that you could stop human suffering, that we had the intellectual tools, the social reforms, the science and medicine to do it,” said Keith David Watenpaugh, an associate professor who teaches in the religious studies program. “It was just generating the international will to do so.

“This was the first time a major international body, in this case the League of Nations, intervened on behalf of a large population of refugees and [genocide](#) survivors, to try to help them. Many Americans were involved in this effort. And it was also a major failure.”

Watenpaugh's paper, “The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920-1927,” was published in the December edition of the *American Historical Review*, the official publication of the American Historical Association.

Between 1 million and 1.5 million Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, much of which later became Turkey, died as a consequence of the

genocide. Many were killed during forced marches into the desert or starved to death without food or water.

A specialist in modern Islam and human rights, Watenpaugh researched League of Nations intake surveys that recorded the histories of some 2,000 Armenian girls, boys and young women who, he wrote, “were rescued — or, more often, rescued themselves — from Arab, Kurdish and Turkish households into which they had been taken.”

At the outset of the genocide, men and older boys were rounded up and executed. Many of the survivors were women and children, who often were sold or given away by their captors to become “agricultural workers or domestic servants, servile concubines, unconsenting wives, and involuntary mothers,” Watenpaugh writes.

The League of Nations’ belated rescue efforts recovered few of an estimated 90,000 survivors, Watenpaugh said. The mission was handicapped by efforts to portray the refugees as symbols of a much larger conflict.

“The Armenian women and children were non-Muslims being held by Muslims,” he explained. “So it was portrayed as an example of a basic conflict between Islam and the West. This kind of politicization of refugee problems often does more harm than good.”

Turks interpreted this portrayal as an attack on their national honor and religion and refused to help the League of Nations rescue survivors.

“The Armenians weren’t victims of a religion, rather, their enslavement had less to do with religion than traditional social practices,” Watenpaugh said.

Moreover, it is important to remember, he added, “that it was a modern

phenomenon — genocide — that created the conditions under which these women and children could be victimized.”

Watenpaugh said that he hopes his research will foster reconciliation by creating a better understanding of a shared past of trauma and violence in the region including Turkey, where the government still insists the genocide never happened.

Work like this can help “modern Turks come to terms with the fact that the genocide of the Armenians is part of their past as well,” he said.

“No longer are the Armenians merely the hated ‘other,’ as they had been taught in school. Perhaps Grandma was an Armenian who had been taken. They may have absolutely loved and adored their grandmother and she’s Armenian.”

Provided by UC Davis

Citation: UC historian argues Armenian genocide gave rise to modern humanitarian movement (2011, February 18) retrieved 20 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-02-uc-historian-armenian-genocide-gave.html>

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