

SWITZERLAND'S HUMANITARIAN CONTRIBUTION

Posted on February 2, 2019 by Keghart



Category: [Opinions](#)



Book Review



Abel Manoukian

Bearing Witness to Humanity:

**Switzerland's Humanitarian
Contribution During the
Armenian Genocide in the
Ottoman Empire 1894 – 1923**

Munster, 2018, 605 Pages

Prof. Anahit Khosroeva, *Banber Hayagitutyun* (pp 214-221), Inst. of History, Yerevan, January 2019

Dr. Abel H. Manoukian studied Theology at the University of Vienna, receiving his Masters of Theology in 1987 and the Doctorate Degree in 1993. He has served communities of the Armenian Church in Austria, Armenia, Canada and Switzerland for more than 32 years. He is an author of numerous books and articles in Western and Eastern Armenian, German, English and French. Currently he is engaged as a Scientific Assistant at the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and as a General Secretary of the Swiss Council of Religion.

Book Review



Abel Manoukian

Bearing Witness to Humanity:

**Switzerland's Humanitarian
Contribution During the
Armenian Genocide in the
Ottoman Empire 1894 – 1923**

Munster, 2018, 605 Pages

Prof. Anahit Khosroeva, *Banber Hayagitutyun* (pp 214-221), Inst. of History, Yerevan, January 2019

Dr. Abel H. Manoukian studied Theology at the University of Vienna, receiving his Masters of Theology in 1987 and the Doctorate Degree in 1993. He has served communities of the Armenian Church in Austria, Armenia, Canada and Switzerland for more than 32 years. He is an author of numerous books and articles in Western and Eastern Armenian, German, English and French. Currently he is engaged as a Scientific Assistant at the Federation of Swiss Protestant Churches and as a General Secretary of the Swiss Council of Religion.

The current English version of the book of Dr. Abel H. Manoukian titled "Bearing Witness to Humanity: Switzerland's Humanitarian Contribution during the Armenian Genocide in the Ottoman

"Empire 1894–1923" may be one of many hundreds on this subject, but certainly counts as one of the more significant and important researches dedicated to the history of the 100th commemoration of the Armenian Genocide.

The book contains a Preface to the English Edition, Foreword, Preface, 17 chapters, 69 subchapters, Postscript, Appendix, Bibliography, List of Illustrations, and Index (605 pages).

Although this book seeks to pay tribute to the Swiss people's unprecedented solidarity with the Armenians in their most trying times, and without doubt certainly achieves its' aim, there is another addition of great significance: at the beginning of his book Dr. Manoukian provides a comprehensive overview of the Armenian history and the events leading to the massacres and genocide perpetrated against the Armenians. He starts his book with the history of the Armenians from scratch: the Armenian Highlands – historical Armenia as a homeland of Armenians, verifying that the Armenians are the indigenous people of that land, going on with discussions on Urartu, then the Armenian Kingdoms including all dynasties – the Yervanduni, the Artaxiads, the Arsacids, after which the author gives a short review of how at the beginning of the 4th century in 301 Armenia became the first country in the world to adopt Christianity. Continuing through the book we see what happened to Armenia under the Arab crescent in the 7th century, where Dr. Manoukian gives a brief review on the Bagratids dynasty and kingdom, which played a significant role in the Armenian history; also he describes two noteworthy religious social movements such as the Paulicians and the Thondracians. One further highlight of this part of the book is when the author describes the history of the Armenian Kingdom of Cilicia. Continuing chronologically, readers get to the history of Armenia under the Ottoman yoke, Western Armenia within the Era of Reform in the Ottoman Empire and Eastern Armenia – under the wings of the Russian double-headed eagle (as the chapter is titled).

In summary, from the introduction of the book up to page 169 Dr. Manoukian describes the history of Armenia in great detail, supplemented with the illustrated descriptions and various maps. The author has all the skills of an historian, including his knowledge of investigation, inquiry, research, account, description, written account of past events, writing of history, historical narrative, recorded knowledge of past events and historical narrative, has prepared a truly methodological textbook of the history of Armenia in English for everyone who desires to learn and study this history and cannot find the appropriate literature. As such, this part of the book alone is significant and could be published and used as a textbook.

Visually, the second part of the book starts with the detailed history of Hamidian massacres of Armenians organized by Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid II (1894–1896) and continues to the history of the Armenian genocide during the First World War (1914–1918) organized by the Young Turks' government. Dr. A. Manoukian in his book describes and explains how the Swiss people took a stand alongside their Armenian brothers and sisters in the Christian faith during that trying time. A stark contrast emerges between the merciless policy of annihilation implemented by the Ottoman Empire and the shining examples of selflessness provided by aid workers from Switzerland, who – as

doctors, nurses and educators – gave the Armenian people formidable assistance in the most adverse circumstances.

Let's see how the Swiss Humanitarian Aid movement started. In the chapter called "Reaction to the Armenian Massacres in Switzerland" Dr. A. Manoukian writes that on December 28, 1895 under the title "Les massacres en Armenie", the first of a whole series of articles about Armenia was published, written by the Neuenburg professor of theology Georges Godet (1845–1907). Later on, in April of 1896 he published a brochure entitled «Les Souffrances de l'Armenie». Meanwhile the central committee of the Evangelical Alliance in Lausanne launched an urgent appeal to help the Armenians who had suffered at the hands of fate. The events in distant Armenia became a major issue in the Swiss society at that time, intensely preoccupying not only the media but also the churches. After the massacres of Van in June, 1896, massive rallies took place in Lausanne which received exceptionally wide coverage in the Swiss press - which strongly supported the call for a countrywide campaign to collect signatures for a petition. The numbers of signatures were growing and by March 26, 1897 a total number of 453, 015 Swiss citizens had signed a petition in support of the Armenian cause.

It was the first time in the history of the Helvetian people that there had been concerted engagement across the broad circles of Evangelical, Catholic and Jewish Switzerland for a general humanitarian cause and in pursuit of an aim that was solely altruistic. As such, this was a big step from Solidarity Rallies to the Petition.

In the text of the Petition, the Swiss people chiefly emphasized these two points:

- Swiss politics has always been oriented towards the conscientious observation of neutrality.
- The Swiss people view it as a moral obligation to lodge a protest against these crimes which cast shame upon our times.

The charitable work of the Swiss for the Armenians started in January, 1896 when Pastor Antistes Salis from Basel sent a written enquiry to the Swiss Federal Political Department in order to enquire how, money donated to the Armenian cause could be reliably received by those for whom it was intended. William W. Peet who was the general manager of the headquarters of the American mission recommended the city of Sivas (Sebastia) as a good place to locate the branch of the Swiss Armenian Aid, because no other aid society was active in that region. Finally after a lot of efforts on the part of the Swiss, some 230 sponsored Armenian children were accepted into the American missionary stations of Sivas and Gurun. The Development of Swiss charity work in the Ottoman Empire continued many years until 1922 when after the notorious Smyrna catastrophe it was decided to close down the orphanage being run in Constantinople and flee with its orphans to Switzerland. During these years locations where the Swiss provided humanitarian aid to the suffering Armenians included Sivas, Gurun, Kharbert, Marash, Aintab, Hadjin, Marzvan, Brussa, Bardezag,

Constantinople, Urfa, Zinjidere near Caesarea, Khoy, Urmia, Salmast, Jerusalem, Beirut, and Begnins (Switzerland).

Although the German Aid Work for Armenia didn't have a dedicated committee in Switzerland, many Swiss humanitarian *aid workers* were engaged at German missionary stations from 1897 alongside many others who worked directly in the Swiss Armenian Aid Organizations in collaboration with the American missionary societies.

I would like to highlight just one brief example of how the author in his book describes and truly honours Swiss missionaries and their work helping Armenians during these difficult times. In the chapter "Children without a Childhood" (page 306 of the book) Dr. Manoukian writes about Hans Fichter, the orphan preacher from Basel who was serving in Sivas in April, 1897. Here the Swiss Armenian Aid had provided sponsorship for children in the three orphanages called "Swiss Home", "Annexe", (for boys) and "Nest" (solely for girls). They were located in the newly established Armenian quarter on the northern side of the city, near to the consulates of France, England and the US. They comprised newly constructed private houses, which after the massacres had been left empty and the reconstructed as ideal homes for the orphans. These 3 homes housed 160 children, 90 of them boys, and 70 of them girls. However, most of the children didn't originate from Sivas, but came from the surrounding areas, where in November, 1895 a terrible slaughter had occurred. The daily routine in the orphanage had the following fixed points: teaching the subjects of Armenian, Turkish, and English, reading, writing, math, geography, drawing, singing and physiology. On Saturdays after lessons they were cleaning house, and then they were going to take bath. On Sundays they were going to church, morning prayers in American chapel, after that to Armenian Apostolic church. The running of the three orphanages was in the hands of the two American missionaries Rev. Albert and his wife Emma Hubard.

As I mentioned above, the *Swiss Humanitarian Aid* continued to provide *help* during the Armenian Genocide (1915/16) and after for many years, by providing emergency relief in numerous situations of crisis – to save lives, to alleviate suffering and to maintain human dignity for the benefit of the Armenians in need.

As the editor of *Mitteilungen über Armenien*, Dr. Emanuel Riggerbach was the first to launch an appeal to the friends of Armenia in Switzerland, calling for the rapid provision of aid and starting an aid campaign as early as August, 1915. The Cantonal Aid Committee for Armenia followed his example and in September issued an 'Appeal to the Swiss People', which was signed by 100 renowned personalities from German, French and Italian Switzerland.

The necessity for the Swiss Aid Committee to provide, parallel to its humanitarian involvement, supplementary political support to the Armenians increased from day to day. Although Swiss Armenian Aid had, from the beginning, decided to perform exclusively humanitarian work and to keep its distance from politics, the Aid Committee found itself compelled, even against its will, to be

involved in politics. Thus it emerged from the customary framework of missionary or philanthropic activity, in order to compose memoranda and send telegrams, provoke changes of opinion, visit influential personalities and speak with them, and engage in related activities. In Switzerland, as in other countries, the committees, as well as private individuals, had tirelessly addressed appeals and petitions to the leaders of international politics for many years.

When, at the end of the First World War, many peoples were entertaining hope for their freedom and own statehood, in particular those who had been oppressed in the Ottoman Empire, the Swiss Federal Council began to move away from its previously cautious stance. Although the Federal President, Gustave Ador emphasised the foreign policy position of Switzerland, which had until then been based on neutrality, he did request the governments of the United States, France, Great Britain, Italy and Japan to examine which guarantees could be incorporated into those treaties, which were in preparation, in order to ensure freedom and well-being of the Armenian people.

At the 14th General Assembly of the League of Nations, held on 22 September 1922, the Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta appealed to the member states a second time in support of the Armenians, in particular adding weight to the demand that a national homeland should be secured for the Armenian people in Turkey. In his speech he said:

"... We believe that for Turkey itself it is a matter of importance to finally find a solution to the painful Armenian question. The misery has to be brought to an end, and great progress will be achieved in the regulation of the oriental question if the poor, unfortunate Armenians have a refuge, shelter, and an independent national homeland.

When we take into account that this people in total number about 2.5 million, of which no more than 300,000 still remain in Turkey and 500,000 have managed to find a way into exile, where they are being supported by various aid organisations, particularly by those of the United States, we cannot refuse to bestow our pity on these poor, tortured individuals, just as little as we can deny our wish to support them to the very best of our abilities."

At the end of his speech, Mr. Motta made the following optimistic statement:

"You have, without doubt, seen on one of the squares in Geneva, the statue of the national hero Philibert Berthelier, who – when he was on the way to his execution for defending the freedom of his city – said: "Non moriam sed vivam" – 'I shall not die but live'. In the same way you too would want to say to the Armenian people: 'You will not die, but live, and you will sing the praises of the Lord.'"

A corresponding statement is to be found in a note dated 29 August 1924, sent by the Confederation of Political Departments of Switzerland (*Département Politique Fédéral Suisse*) to the General Secretariat of the League of Nations, which expresses the sympathy felt by the Swiss people towards the destitute Armenian people, and concisely describes the aid given by the Swiss over the previous 27 years. At the same time, the end of the note pleads for a definitive solution to the Armenian question through the creation of a fatherland and as such a national homeland for the

On 8 September 1924, the former Federal President of the Swiss Confederation, Gustave Ador, made an additional appeal to the member states of the League of Nations at its 5th General Assembly.

When the Federal Councillor Giuseppe Motta took the stage to speak at the 5th General Assembly of the League of Nations as its president on 2 October 1924, he used the opportunity to talk about the Armenian orphans who had been brought to Begnins from the Ottoman Empire, and turned to the plenum with an appeal for the future creation of a national homeland for the Armenians:

"Allow me, for a moment, to address a special issue, namely the Armenian question. On Tuesday evening, I had the honour of visiting the Armenian orphanage, which was founded by certain philanthropists in Begnins, in the Canton of Waadt. There I saw a large number of children, boys and girls. Each of those children resembled a living tragedy. They have no civil status before the law; and many of them witnessed the murder of their fathers and mothers, or their grandparents. They are trained and taught in their mother tongue. They simultaneously exemplify both the absolute beauty of their race and its martyrdom. When I entered, they were singing the national anthem of my country: 'O freie Berge ...' ('O free mountains...'). Their situation touched me profoundly and I left the home in Begnins with the firm intention, as president of the 5th Assembly of the League of Nations, to speak before the eyes of the whole world about the needs of our fellows and about our duty to help them. What a fortunate day it would be for all of us if the League of Nations, thanks to the energy and magnanimity of its great emissary, Dr. Nansen would finally succeed in finding a homeland for this people!"

In his book "Bearing Witness to Humanity" the author Dr. Abel H. Manoukian presents the original Swiss archive documents and papers, such as signature forms of the petition to the Swiss Federal Council, the appeal to the High Federal Council of the Swiss Confederation presented by the Swiss Aid Committee of Armenia in March 1897, receipts issued the donations sent from Switzerland to support Armenians in need, the original pictures of Swiss missionaries, nurses, orphans, locations and orphanages. These all are valuable primary sources that contain important historical information on current issues. As a scholar I am amazed by Dr. Manoukian's encyclopedic and expanded knowledge and also, the vast literature and bibliography he used, preparing the book.

Dr. Abel H. Manoukian endows his Swiss "witnesses for humanity" with a lively voice, without any loss of scholarliness, as is demonstrated by copious footnotes and references. His extremely wide-ranging research integrates previously unseen material from Swiss archives for the first time and forms the basis of this comprehensive work, which constitutes a significant enrichment of the subject.

Words cannot express my gratitude to Dr. Manoukian for his unique and exceptional research.

