Keith David Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2015), ISBN: 9780520279322

Keith David Watenpaugh's *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism*, which examines the humanitarian response to the various crises which occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean during and after the First World War, is particularly timely given the ongoing emergency in the same region today. Employing an impressive range of archival sources from aid agencies such as the American Red Cross and Near East Relief, government records, and personal testimony from aid workers and refugees, *Bread from Stones* seeks to answer two prominent historiographic questions on humanitarianism. The first is chronological, concerning how and why conceptions of humanitarianism have changed at particular moments in history: while the Second World War is often cited as a 'modernising' moment in the practice of humanitarianism, Watenpaugh argues that the First World War and the arrival of what he terms 'modern humanitarianism' constitutes 'a historical benchmark in the way humanitarianism was structured, financed, organised, and implemented' (p.4).[1] The second addresses the interrelationship (or lack thereof) between humanitarianism and rights.[2] In contrast to Bruno Cabanes' recent monograph *The Great War and the Origins of Modern Humanitarianism, 1918-1924* (2014) which argued that interwar humanitarians sought not only to treat bodily suffering, but also to protect the 'humanitarian rights' of their recipients, Watenpaugh argues that 'modern humanitarianism' was largely bereft of meaningful engagement with the legal and political rights of the people it was trying to help.

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1 Other notable works on this debate include Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Johannes Paulmann, 'Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism and Development* 4:2 (2013), 215-238

2 A note on terms: the 'rights' referred to here are distinct from the concept of 'human rights' which arrived after 1948. See Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010)

Generally speaking, these arguments are well supported by the body of evidence Watenpaugh employs in his text. Each chapter charts particular themes which highlight key features of 'modern humanitarianism'; for instance, western news reporting of Ottoman atrocities against Armenian civilians (pp.57-90); the rescue of 'kidnapped' women from Ottoman households (pp.124-156); and the post-war struggle to integrate thousands of Armenian refugees into a suitable homeland (pp.157-182). In terms of the 'modernisation' of humanitarian aid, Watenpaugh argues that 'modern humanitarianism' mirrored the changes in domestic philanthropy by adopting a more scientific, less religiously-inspired, approach which sought to address 'the bodily and…the root causes' of suffering (p.18). After briefly outlining the missionary-driven character of pre-1914 humanitarianism in this region (pp.16-19), Watenpaugh demonstrates these changes through the discourse and content of the aforementioned atrocity reports (e.g p.60 and p.81) and the personal testimony of American relief workers (e.g. pp.94-96). Although Watenpaugh's thesis may have been strengthened by providing more depth on pre-1914 humanitarianism, which tends to be flattened to the level of missionary work, his argument is relatively clear-cut.

Bread from Stones is at its most persuasive and powerful when discussing the failure of 'modern humanitarianism' to protect the legal and political rights of its recipients. Watenpaugh's argument is nuanced, demonstrating on the one hand how 'modern humanitarianism' emphasised solidarity, but at the same time questioning the idea that this solidarity between humanitarian 'subject' (charities) and 'object' (war victims) was based on the former's desire to protect the rights of the latter. Rather, American and European audiences were encouraged to empathise with distant strangers such as Armenian refugees through narrative and visual images which emphasised their shared culture, religion, or class, a process Watenpaugh labels 'unstrangering' (p.34). Furthermore, a key point Watenpaugh advances is that whatever the intentions of 'modern humanitarianism', it was ultimately subservient to wider geopolitical

forces, thus undermining its power to protect rights. Whilst 'modern humanitarianism' supported Armenians' right to self-determination and advocated an independent homeland for these minority citizens in a re-ordered post-war Middle East, the rise of Turkey as a dominant power in the region scuppered this vision (p.160). Having failed to uphold the rights-demands of its recipients, humanitarianism's solution to 'protecting' minority subjects was to transfer populations like Armenians and Iraqi Assyrians (not always with their consent) into colonial territories like French Mandate Syria, in doing so reinforcing the power of these colonial states (p.176) and supporting the 'soft ethnic cleansing' of the states who abused these minorities in the first place (p.199). While it may be the case that other war victims' legal rights were better protected than the Armenian refugees, it is difficult to contest Watenpaugh's assertion that humanitarianism (rather than holding states accountable and protecting the rights of victims) was a substitution for politics, and a 'truly ersatz substitution' at that (p.161).

A particularly interesting question provoked by Watenpaugh's book is one of chronology: if 'modern humanitarianism' was characterised by the failure to protect the rights of its recipients, does the fact that contemporary charities like Oxfam and Save the Children have started to incorporate human rights agendas into their work mean we now live in a time of 'post-modern humanitarianism'? Additionally, while this book will definitely be of interest to scholars of imperialism, the League of Nations, and the Middle East in general, some of Watenpaugh's language ('unstrangering'; 'objects vs. subjects of humanitarianism'; 'humanitarian imagination') may dissuade readers less familiar with theoretical concepts of humanitarianism. Nevertheless, *Bread from Stones* is a well-argued and powerful work which balances scholarly analysis of the phenomenon of 'modern humanitarianism' with heartfelt stories from its practitioners and beneficiaries. Watenpaugh's warning about 'how swiftly a humanitarian emergency can fade from view or become an inconvenient and forgettable problem for humanity' (p.160) seems as pertinent to the refugee crisis in the same region today as it does to the one a century before.

Ben Holmes

University of Exeter