

Humanitarianism (Denmark)

By [Nils Arne Sørensen](#)

Summary

During the war and immediate post-war years, Danish individuals and institutions were active in humanitarian aid areas such as military hospitals, prisoners of war, and relief work among civilians, both in Europe and the Middle East.

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Introduction

In 1921, the Danish Red Cross (DRC) published a report entitled “Danish Aid Supplied to the Countries Ravaged by War during and after the World War”. The report is generally characterized by a somewhat self-congratulatory tone, stressing the role of the DRC as a key facilitator in this process. It also had a clear national agenda, highlighting the DRC’s motto “In war – in peace – charity” and emphasizing both how deeply rooted this motto was in the Danish nation and how it was one of [Denmark](#)’s best characteristics.¹

The report offered several disclaimers concerning the comprehensive character of the data offered. Still, it gives a picture of numerous and widespread initiatives ranging from collections raising a couple thousand Danish kroner (DKK) for poor women in post-war Vienna to the Danish camps for [prisoners of war from Russia](#) and the Central Powers, the net costs of which were more than DKK 10 million.² The manifold [humanitarian](#) initiatives documented by the DRC fall into four distinct categories. First, aid for the sick and wounded in the various armies; second, aid for [prisoners of war](#) (POWs); third, aid earmarked for the [Danish minority](#) in [Germany](#), and fourth, aid to suffering civilians in the former Central Powers in the aftermath of the war.

For all its shortcomings, the DRC report still offers the best comprehensive overview of Danish [international humanitarian efforts](#) during the war and its aftermath, as the topic has generated relatively little academic research. Interest has primarily been concentrated on Danish contributions in helping prisoners of war but with a strong focus on the part of these activities that took place in Denmark. Denmark is, however, placed in a broader international framework in Monika Janfelt's comparative study of Danish and Swedish programmes for children from [Austria](#) and Germany, while Matthias Bjørnlund has situated Danish humanitarian efforts among the Armenians in a thoroughly international and transnational setting.³ Interestingly, the aid to the Armenians is totally missing from the 1921 DRC report. This article therefore includes a section on the Danish engagement with the Armenians in addition to the fields highlighted by the DRC. However, the substantial efforts to support the Danish minority in Germany during the war years and especially in 1919-1920 will not be included as these fall into the grey zone where humanitarianism to a very high degree served as a vehicle for political interests.⁴ Likewise, the works of various philanthropic organizations to help alleviate social problems created by the war in Denmark will not be discussed.

Danish Auxiliary Ambulances

Even though Denmark declared its [neutrality](#) at the outbreak of war, many Danes naturally feared that Denmark could suffer a fate similar to that of [Belgium](#). The DRC suddenly encountered a widespread interest in volunteering in case the war spilled over into Denmark.⁵ The German attack on Belgium, however, also caused Danes to engage in the tragedies unfolding outside the Danish borders. On the initiative of prominent (and Francophile) doctor [Edvard Ehlers \(1863-1937\)](#), a committee for medical assistance to the Allied Powers (*Dansk Hjælpeambulancekomité*, The Danish Auxiliary Ambulance Committee) was founded on 10 August 1914. Sponsored by private contributions, this committee organized Danish ambulances, i.e. medical teams, that were sent to Belgium, [France](#), [Russia](#) and [Serbia](#). During the successive wars a team with a field [hospital](#) was sent to [Estonia](#) in 1919, and in 1920, the committee organized a team that went to [Poland](#) to fight epidemics. The Danish teams worked for the local [Red Cross](#) branches. Typically, the Danish committee supplied equipment, and covered travel expenses and salaries while the local Red Cross office organized food and housing (in Serbia's case, however, the Serbian government covered all costs). According to a report published by the committee in 1923, 136 doctors and [nurses](#) worked under its auspices.⁶ A parallel initiative was launched under DRC leadership in 1918 when an ambulance consisting of a fully equipped field hospital with 100 beds and a medical staff of sixteen doctors and nurses served on the White side in the [civil war in Finland](#).⁷

With the exception of a few Danish nurses that worked for the Austrian Red Cross,⁸ Danish medical aid during the war was clearly pro-Allied (while the efforts in Estonia, Finland and Poland were clearly anti-Bolshevik). There is no evidence that this was perceived as a problem by the Danish government. On the contrary, in 1923 Dr. Ehlers stressed the support offered by the Foreign Ministry in Copenhagen and its representatives in France and Russia, and the Danish field hospital in Estonia came from Danish army supplies.⁹

Prisoners of War

At the outbreak of war, the DRC (founded in 1876) had close links to the elites of Danish society, including the monarchy. However, it was also a tiny organization based exclusively on volunteers that considered itself almost an auxiliary of the Danish military. This changed dramatically during the war as a result of the DRC's efforts to help POWs.

In October 1914, the [International Committee of the Red Cross \(ICRC\)](#) asked the DRC to take responsibility for communications to and from POWs from the [Eastern Front](#). The DRC accepted the invitation, which led to a dramatic expansion of its activities. Over the war years, the DRC's Office for Eastern Front POWs (*Krigsfangekontoret for Østfronten*) developed into an organization with more than 600 employees. It developed an archive that registered 3.5 million POWs, distributed some 1.3 million letters, and forwarded more than 6 million packages and 1 million books to the POW camps. The DRC also established POW offices in Austria, Germany and Russia to help organize the distribution of letters and packages as well as medical supplies for POWs in Russia. From 1915, the DRC started organizing inspections of POW camps, documenting the conditions of the inmates. Although the published reports were characterized by a diplomatic tone, the conclusion of the delegation that visited camps for Russian POWs in Germany in the autumn of 1915 is telling: "*Partout ou se trouvent des prisonniers de guerre on entend certainement les tristes paroles que nous avons si souvent entendues: il vaut mieux être mort que prisonnier.*"¹⁰

The costs of this work went far beyond the very limited resources of the DRC, and from 1916 the Danish government stepped in and supplied the necessary funding. Politically, this support was based on an understanding that the work of the DRC for POWs was in the Danish national interest, as Danish diplomats posted in Austria, Germany and Russia all reported to the Foreign Office.¹¹

When a private initiative was launched in 1916 to create [internment camps](#) for ill and wounded POWs from both sides in the war, the government quickly took over and launched a plan to establish camps in Denmark similar to the ones that had already been set up in

[Switzerland](#). Austria-Hungary, Germany and Russia accepted the Danish offer, and in the spring of 1917 Russian POWs started arriving at the Horserød Camp north of Copenhagen, while POWs from Austria-Hungary and Germany were sent to a camp close to Viborg in central Jutland. Compared to the Swiss case, the Danish initiative involved far less prisoners. The camp at Hald near Viborg received 1,507 prisoners (or patients, as they were called), while the Horserød camp received 3,847. The Hald camp caused some local resentment, in part due to the perception of Germany as the national archenemy, but also due to fear of too close contact between the imprisoned officers and local women. Relations between locals and the Russian prisoners in the Horserød camp were better, but from the summer of 1917 the [revolutionary](#) tension in Russia also arose in the camp, and the Danish military worried that soldiers guarding the camp were being influenced by Bolshevik prisoners. With the end of the war on the Eastern Front, the inmates were repatriated and the two camps closed down in the early summer of 1918.¹²

Two further Danish engagements with POWs merit mentioning. When the [USA](#) entered the war in April 1917, Denmark took over the American role as caretaker of Austro-Hungarian interests in Russia. A crucial part of this were the POWs, and the Danish legation in Petrograd took over inspections of POW camps but also helped supply food and medical aid in the chaotic situation in revolutionary Russia in 1917-1918. After the signing of the [Brest-Litovsk Treaty](#), the DRC also played a role in helping return Russian POWs. It is estimated that the DRC helped repatriate some 1.5 million POWs, primarily on the Eastern Front.¹³ When Denmark severed relations with the Bolshevik government in December 1918, the DRC took over the legation's aid work until it was ousted from Russia in the summer of 1919.¹⁴ While Danish humanitarian efforts in revolutionary Russia are seriously under-researched, Denmark's role as a transit centre for the repatriation of ca. 100,000 Allied POWs from camps in Germany is well documented. The POWs typically spent a month or less in Denmark. The Allied soldiers were generally popular in Denmark – at least if they were white. When a group of Chinese soldiers arrived in Copenhagen by ship, they were stopped by the police when they wanted to go ashore and some local newspapers reported on the perils of “The Yellow Race”.¹⁵

Post-war Civilian Aid

From early 1919 the widespread suffering among civilians in Central and Eastern Europe ignited a surge of humanitarian initiatives in Denmark. Well-established humanitarian actors such as the DRC and the missionary movement were active, but so were a broad range of professional organisations, both with specific campaigns and collections (e.g. the Association of Danish Potato-farmers organized shipments of potatoes to Vienna) or as part of a broader

professional network of international colleague aid (*Kollegahjælpen*). To these should be added a number of campaigns launched by individuals, often women, from the middle and upper classes (and often with a history of philanthropic work).¹⁶ Most of these efforts focused on Central Europe, and especially Austria. This must primarily be explained by the massive humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Austrian cities, however, strong anti-German feelings in Denmark are probably also an important explanation as to why most Danish aid went further south.¹⁷

Of the manifold initiatives, the campaign to restore the health of Viennese children through stays with Danish families gained the most attention, both at the time and later. The driving force in this was a committee for Viennese children's stay in Denmark (*Komitéen for Wienerbørns Ophold i Danmark*) founded by lawyer [Sigurd Jacobsen \(1882-1948\)](#) in 1919. Under the auspices of this committee and supported by a very sympathetic Danish press, 13,720 Austrian children went to Denmark for stays typically lasting three months in 1919-1920. By 1924 the number had risen to 21,285. The initiative could build on domestic roots as there was a well-established tradition for organizing summer vacations for working-class children in private homes in rural Denmark, but it was naturally also inspired by similar initiatives unfolding in countries such as [Switzerland](#) and the [Netherlands](#), both of which received far more children from Austria than Denmark.

The aid for Austrian children was typical of the humanitarian work in general as the driving forces came from the educated and upper classes of Danish society. However, the Danish Trade Union Movement ran a parallel project for German working-class children. In 1917-1918, this initiative, spearheaded by social democratic trade unionist and politician [I.P. Nielsen \(1873-1952\)](#), brought some 1,300 German children to Denmark. The number rose in the post-war years, peaking in 1923-1924. Altogether almost 33,000 German children came to Denmark for temporary stays between 1917 and 1925. Danish aid for German children wound down in late 1924, whereas the committee for Viennese children had already begun closing down in 1922.¹⁸

Armenia

At the outbreak of the war in 1914, a handful of Danish female aid workers were well established in the [Ottoman Empire](#), working both for German and American aid projects among the Armenians but also at a fully Danish orphanage for Armenian children, founded in 1902. Danish interest in the plight of the Armenians dated back to reports on the Ottoman massacres of 1894-1896. From the late 1890s, the Armenians became a small, but clear focus for the Danish Missionary Movement, and especially the *Kvindelige Missions Arbejdere*

(KMA, Female Mission Workers), established in 1900 and inspired by a Swedish association of the same name that had been established in 1894. For KMA, Armenians were the core field of interest, and from 1901 KMA sent out missionaries (whose main activities were practical aid work) to Mezreh in the Mamouret-ul-Azis province of the Ottoman Empire.¹⁹

Another actor in this field was the lay humanitarian organization *De danske Armeniervenner* (Danish Friends of the Armenians) that was founded in 1902, inspired by American and British role models such as *Pro Armenia* and *Friends of Armenia*. It organized collections in Denmark and sent funds to support American and German organizations already working in the region. They also sponsored the teacher [Karen Jeppe \(1876-1935\)](#) who went to the Ottoman Empire in 1903, where she became the leader of a children's home run by the *Deutsche Orient Mission* in Urfa, close to the Syrian desert.

When the Ottomans carried out the [Armenian genocide](#) in 1915, Danish aid workers were reduced to powerless spectators as children under their care were taken away to be murdered. However, at great personal risk the aid workers hid Armenians from their persecutors and helped [refugees](#) materially. KMA missionary Maria Jacobsen (1882-1960) recorded what she witnessed (and what refugees told her) in her dairy, which today is considered one of the most important sources of our knowledge about the genocide.²⁰ Deeply marked by their experiences, most of the Danish aid workers left between 1916 and 1918, but Karen Marie Petersen (director of the Danish orphanage in Mezreh since 1909) and Jacobsen struggled on with ever dwindling resources until 1919 before returning to Denmark.

This did not mean the end of the Danish engagement with the Armenian people. Beginning in 1921 Danish aid workers returned to the region to help "the remains of the almost totally destroyed Martyr-people", to quote from the mission statement in the first issue of the journal of the Danish Friends of the Armenians from 1921.²¹ This organization sponsored Karen Jeppe, who went to Syria and founded an institution to help Armenian women and children who had lived in Muslim families, often as prisoners or slaves. She continued her work among the Armenians, based in Aleppo, until her death in 1935. The KMA also relaunched its work among the Armenians. From 1922, Karen Marie Petersen and Maria Jacobsen were back in the region, where they founded a children's home in Jbeil, Lebanon, that Jacobsen directed until her death in 1960.

Conclusion

Danish humanitarian contributions during and after the war were far from negligible. In 1921, the DRC estimated the monetary value of Danish contributions to approximately DKK 57

million (or ca. 0.9 percent of Denmark's 1921 GNP).²² The close links to [foreign policy](#) and national interests have also been pointed out. Unsurprisingly, this Danish experience parallels and was, to a large degree, inspired by wider international trends.

These parallels beg the question whether the experience of the war marked a "humanitarian awakening" in Denmark that had strong lasting impact, as Julia Irwin has argued was the case in the United States in her analysis of the American Red Cross.²³ The 1921 DRC publication that is a key source for this article should be seen, at least partly, as an attempt to uphold the momentum for humanitarianism that the war and post-war crises had created. However, this failed. During the early 1920s, Danish international humanitarian aid was rolled back. For the DRC, the war years were a decisive experience that strengthened the organization enormously – by 1919, the DRC had some 25,000 supporting members²⁴ – but in the post-war years the DRC focused on domestic projects. This reflects a general pattern in Denmark where only the missionary movement kept a systematic, albeit limited, international perspective to its humanitarian work.

At the outbreak of World War II the DRC started looking outward again. In 1939 it established an office for war victims abroad and organized an ambulance for Finland in the Winter War. From 1943 the DRC organized aid packages for Scandinavian inmates in German concentration camps. When the end of the war came into sight, the DRC, together with other humanitarian organizations, contacted high-ranking civil servants to secure government help (and resources) in planning post-war aid for civilian war victims in Europe. The result was a coordinated effort combining private and government resources in the post-war period. Most consisted in material aid but the post-1945 period also witnessed the organization of temporary family care in Denmark for at least 20,000 European children. In the immediate post-war years (1945–1947), the monetary value of Danish aid efforts was estimated to be DKK 213 million (or 1.3 percent of Danish GDP in 1947).²⁵ These efforts were underpinned by strong popular support but also pressure for a more idealistic Danish foreign policy.²⁶

If we are to pinpoint a Danish "humanitarian awakening", World War II and its aftermath is, therefore, a much stronger candidate than World War I. That said, the links between the experiences of the two world war eras are evident. Danish humanitarian aid in this way offers supplementary support for the well-established interpretation of the two world wars as a modern "Thirty Year War".

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Notes

1. Dansk Røde Kors (DAK): Hjælp ydet fra Danmark til de krigshærgede Lande under og efter Verdenskrigen 1914-1918 [Danish aid supplied to the countries ravaged by war during and after the world war 1914-1918], Copenhagen 1921. ↑
2. All monetary amounts in this article are given in current prices using Danish Kroner (DKK). To give some perspective to the figures, the following information might be helpful. In 1914, GNP per capita in Denmark was DKK 866 and rose to DKK 1,983 in 1921 (\$224 and \$353, respectively, in current USD). This growth was, however, the result of inflationary pressure. Measured in fixed prices, Danish GDP only rose by 1.1 percent from 1914 to 1921. Figures are based on Tables 1.1, 10.1 and 10.2 in Johansen, Hans. Chr.: Dansk Økonomisk Statistik 1814-1980, Copenhagen 1985. The conversion to USD is based on the website <http://www.historicalstatistics.org/Currencyconverter.html>. ↑
3. See Janfelt, Monika: Stormakter I människokärlek. Svensk og dansk krigsbarnshjälp 1917-1924 [Humanitarian great powers. Swedish and Danish child relief 1917-1924], Åbo 1998, and Bjørnlund, Matthias: På Herrens Mark. Nødhjælp, mission og kvindekamp under det armenske folkedrab [In the service of the lord. Humanitarian aid, missionary work and feminist struggle during the Armenian Genocide], Copenhagen 2015. ↑
4. The efforts are outlined in some detail in Kretzschmer, Knud: Den sønderjydske Fond 1918-1960 [The Foundation for Southern Jutland 1918-1960], Tønder 1960. ↑
5. Cf. Zalewski, Barbara: "Den nærsynede Barmhjertighed". Dansk Røde Kors' rolle i dansk udenrigspolitik set i forhold til Røde Kors' principper om neutralitet, upartiskhed og uafhængighed ['Short-sighted mercy'. The role of the Danish Red Cross in Danish foreign policy 1876-1945 in relation to the Red Cross principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence], unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Copenhagen 1997, pp. 86-87. ↑
6. Dansk Hjælpeambulancekomité (ed.): De danske Hjælpeambulancer 1914-1921 [The Danish Auxiliary Ambulances 1914-1921], Copenhagen 1923. ↑
7. The Danish background is analysed in Zalewski, Den nærsynede 1997, pp. 135-145, while ambulance activities in Finland are detailed in Chievitz, Ole: Oplevelser med dansk røde Kors Finlandsambulance [Experiences with the Danish Red Cross' Finland Ambulances], Copenhagen 1918. Ole Chievitz (1883-1946) was the surgeon heading the Danish team. ↑
8. Cf. DAK, Hjælp ydet 1921, p. 20. ↑
9. Cf. Dansk Hjælpeambulancekomité, De danske 1923, pp. 12-13, 112. ↑
10. "Wherever there are prisoners of war, the sad words that we have already heard so often certainly fall: better to be dead than imprisoned." [translated by the editorial

office]. Dansk Røde Kors: Rapports sur les Visites des Camps de Prisonniers en Russie et en Allemagne par des Délégations de la Crois Rouge Danoise, Copenhagen 1916, p. 13. The figures are from Dansk Røde Kors: I medmenneskelighedens tjeneste. Dansk Røde Kors i 125 år [In the Service of Humanity. 125 years of the Danish Red Cross], Copenhagen 2001, p. 13. For details, see DAK, Hjælp ydet 1921, pp. 32-45 and Blüdnikow, Bent: Krigsfanger – et billedrama om krigsfanger i Danmark under 1. verdenskrig [Prisoners of war. A visual drama about prisoners of war in Denmark during the First World War], Odense 1988, pp. 11-25. ↑

11. Cf. Blüdnikow, Krigsfanger 1988, pp. 18-19. ↑
12. The best general treatment of the camps is Blüdnikow, Krigsfanger 1988, pp. 26–95. For the Horserød camp, see also Fransen, Peter: Livet i de røde barakker. Horserødlejren 1917-2017 [Life in the red barracks. The Horserød camp 1917-2017], Odense 2017, pp. 13-52. Figures are from Beretning om Behandling af de syge Krigsfanger i Lazaretlejren ved Hald 1917-1918 [Reports about the Treatment of sick Prisoners of War in the Military Hospital near Hald 1917-1918], Copenhagen 1918, p. 7. ↑
13. Cf. Zalewski, Den nærsynede 1997, p. 185. ↑
14. See Preben-Hansen, Bernadette: Dansk krigsfangehjælp i Rusland og Sibirien 1917-1920 [Danish Support for Prisoners of War in Russia], in: Magasin fra Det kongelige Bibliotek 27 (2014), pp. 51–60. Bent Jensen has analysed the DRC mission in Russia in 1918–1919 in detail. His analysis, however, has a political rather than humanitarian focus. See Jensen, Bent: Dansk Røde Kors' Ruslandsmission 1918-19 [The Danish Red Cross' Russia Mission 1918-19], in: Historisk Tidsskrift 101 (2001), pp. 45-101. ↑
15. Cf. Blüdnikow, Krigsfanger 1988, pp.124-134. ↑
16. Based on the listing of initiatives in DAK, Hjælp ydet 1921, passim. Even a cursory reading of newspapers from the period demonstrates that this is not an exhaustive list, but the mushrooming aid initiatives in 1919-1921 have not been subject to serious research. ↑
17. For the link between anti-German feelings and humanitarianism, see Janfelt, Stormakter 1998, pp. 124-125. ↑
18. This section is primarily based on Janfelt, Stormakter 1998, but see also Jacobsen, Sigurd: Wienerbørn i Landflygtighed [Vienna's children in Exile], Copenhagen 1943, in Knudsen, Susanne H.: Wienerbørn. Barndom i krigens skygge [Vienna's Children. Childhood in the Shadow of the War], Copenhagen 2012, the experience is told from the children's perspective using oral sources. Knudsen's book, however, primarily focuses on the parallel aid projects in the aftermath of World War II. ↑
19. Danish humanitarian efforts to aid the Armenians have been thoroughly researched in Bjørnlund, Pål Herrens 2015. For an overview of the Danish missionary movement in this

- period, see Henschen, Daniel; Kaldets Verden. En historie om missionsbevægelsen i Danmark fra 1890 til 1950 [The World of the Divine Call: A History of the Missionary Movement in Denmark from 1890 to 1950], unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Southern Denmark 2016, pp. 48-64. [↑](#)
20. Jacobsen, Maria: Diaries of a Danish Missionary. Harpoot 1907-1919, London 2001. [↑](#)
21. Sick, Ingeborg Marie: De danske Armeniervenner [The Danish Friends of the Armenians], in: Armeniervennen (January 1921), pp. 3-4. [↑](#)
22. DAK, Hjælp ydet 1921, pp. 45-47. For Danish GNP in 1921, see Johansen, Dansk historisk 1985, table 10.1. [↑](#)
23. Irwin, Julia F.: Making the World Safe. The American Red Cross and a Nation's Humanitarian Awakening, Oxford 2013. [↑](#)
24. Cf. Zalewski, Den nærsynede 1997, p. 157. [↑](#)
25. The information on aid efforts from 1939 to 1951 stems from DAK, I medmenneskelighedens 2001, pp. 12-13; Krogh, Tyge: Humanitet og politik i dansk efterkrigshjælpearbejde 1945-1951 [Humanity and Politics in Danish post-war aid work 1945-1951], in: Historie, Ny Række 18 (1990), pp. 248-263; Sane, Henrik Zip: Børnenes århundrede. Interessen for de fremmede børn i det 20. århundredes Danmark [The Children's Century. The interest for the estranged childred in 20th century Denmark], Farum 1997, pp. 106-114. [↑](#)
26. Krogh, Humanitet 1990, pp. 260-262. [↑](#)

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- [Janfelt, Monika: **Stormakter i människokärlek. Svensk och dansk krigsbarnshjälp**](#)

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External Links

- [Chievitz, Ole \(in Danish\): Oplevelser med dansk røde Kors Finlandsambulance, Copenhagen 1918 \(The Royal Library\) \(Book\)](#)
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- [Den danske regerings komité til forplejning af syge krigsfanger \(in Danish\): Plan for hospitaliseringen af syge krigsfanger i Danmark, 1916 \(The Royal Library\) \(Primary Source\)](#)
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