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Humanitarianism (Sweden)

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This article offers an overview of Swedish transnational humanitarianism from 1914-1924. First, it sets Swedish wartime humanitarianism within the framework of benevolent Nordic neutrality. It sketches some of the major relief operations, from the exchange of disabled POWs through Sweden in 1915-1918, missions for war prisoners and starving civilians in revolutionary Russia, to interwar child-relief for Central Europe. It briefly introduces key actors such as the Swedish Red Cross and the Swedish Save the Children. Finally, this article discusses some key observations regarding the character and development of Sweden's humanitarianism during the period, including the Central Powers bias, the idea of Nordic exceptionalism, and the emergence of new forms of more mediated, human rights oriented and female dominated humanitarian NGOs.

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Introduction

The First World War has been called “a great humanitarian awakening”.^[1] For [Sweden](#), with the highest profile among the [neutral](#) countries,^[2] the conflict implied an intensified humanitarian engagement. In tandem with a more interventionist state, humanitarian organizations, voluntary associations, and civic society grew in importance in Sweden during the war, as did national relief, philanthropy, and charity.^[3] This article will leave national efforts aside to concentrate on Swedish transnational aid to war-ravaged Europe. Further, in adherence with historian [Branden Little's](#) remark that “[t]he humanitarian war” outlasted the paradigmatic dates of the conflict, this article will cover humanitarian activities carried out during “the decade-long disaster” of 1914-1924.^[4] There is an apparent lack of research regarding the Swedish humanitarian history of the First World War. This is not an exhaustive overview, rather the objective is to offer some insights into a still highly unexplored field and to make this element of the war’s history known to an international public that cannot access Swedish language historical sources.

Most scholars in the field have framed Swedish wartime humanitarianism within Nordic neutrality. Sweden, [Denmark](#), and [Norway](#) issued a joint declaration of neutrality in August 1914, but their neutralities differed widely due to diverse geopolitical situations and historical experiences. Internationally, Sweden was perceived as ardently anti-Russian and therefore pro-German, a fact that was reflected in the country’s [neutrality politics](#). However, the commitment to neutrality was a fixture of Scandinavian political culture; it was regarded as a morally superior position to that of military alliances and as furthering peace in international relations.^[5] [Humanitarianism](#) was increasingly vital to this policy. The war gave the Nordic countries new roles in the international arena as civilized role models and “humanitarian great powers”, propagating the idea of benevolent Nordic neutrality.^[6]

“An Army of Misery”: The POW Exchange, 1915-1918

The largest Swedish humanitarian operation began in the second summer of the war. Between August 1915 and February 1918, 63,463 wounded and sick [POWs](#) were exchanged between Russia and the Central Powers through neutral Sweden. The Swedish Red Cross, (*Svenska Röda Korset*, SRK), was in charge of this transfer operation, though the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Swedish State Railways, and the National Board of Health were also heavily involved. The invalids arrived on steamers from [Germany](#) and were transported through Sweden by train from Trelleborg in the south to northern Haparanda at the Finnish border (then part of the [Russian Empire](#)). Around 400 Swedish doctors, [nurses](#), assistant nurses, medical orderlies, and interpreters served on the transports. The captives suffered from gunshot wounds and frostbite injuries, amputations, paralysis, blindness, tuberculosis, and mental illness. Approximately 200 invalids died during the transit and were buried in Sweden.^[7]

The transports gained a lot of attention. People flocked to the railway stations to offer the invalids gifts. For many, seeing this “army of misery”^[8] was their first direct and literal experience of war. The

media coverage was intense, dominated by spectacular visual testimonies and photographic illustrations. Film footage from the transports appeared regularly in weekly newsreels and, in September 1915, a [film](#) entitled *Krigsfångeutväxlingen genom Sverige* (*The POW Exchange through Sweden*) was screened. Most reports depicted the mission as a great piece of humanitarian work, a proof of Swedish generosity, compassion, and impartiality towards war victims.^[9]

In total, 26,168 POWs were returned from Russia to Germany: 22,000 from the Habsburg army, 3,617 from Germany, and 428 from the [Ottoman Empire](#). From Germany, 37,295 Russian prisoners were returned, including five children and 188 civilians of both sexes. The last transport departed a month before the [Treaties of Brest-Litovsk](#) were signed. Monuments commemorating the operation were later erected in Haparanda and Trelleborg.^[10]

Angels of Siberia: Other Red Cross Relief Actions

The SRK also assisted POWs abroad. In 1915, a special commission was set up in Stockholm to monitor the general treatment of war prisoners in [internment](#) camps, at transports, and in [forced labour](#). The same year, the Swedish Red Cross Aid Committee for War Prisoners (*Svenska Röda Korsets hjälpkommitté för krigsfångar*) began distributing so-called small gift parcels (*Liebesgaben*), letters, food, clothes, books, and medicine to Siberian prison camps. Over 40 trains with 1,016 wagons were sent to Russia during the war. The most famous of the 77 SRK delegates supervising the transports was the nurse [Elsa Brändström \(1888-1948\)](#), known as “the Angel of Siberia”. In Sweden this international celebrity was presented as a personification of the nation’s new aspirations as a “humanitarian great power”.^[11]

After the war had formally ended, the SRK continued its humanitarian work in the east. In 1921, a Swedish relief expedition, partially financed by the state, was sent to starving Russians as part of international Nansen relief, providing food and portable kitchens. In the Samara and Saratov region, the mission raised over three million Swedish crowns and distributed 2,950 tonnes of food, medicine, and clothes. The Swedes administered Dutch and Czechoslovakian supplies and fed 150,000 persons a day. The SRK also intended to enhance long-term development by purchasing local cattle, tractors, and farming tools. During the 1920s, the SRK – often in close cooperation with Save the Children and the other Nordic Red Cross Societies – ran orphanages, soup kitchens, and sanatoriums for children in [Austria](#), Germany, Hungary, [Greece](#), and the [Baltic States](#).^[12]

On the Other Side: Missions for Belgium, Poland, and Armenia

If the SRK’s work largely focused on the [Eastern Front](#), all was not completely quiet on the Western. Swedish public opinion distinguished itself among the European neutrals, even in relation to [occupied Belgium](#), with frequent displays of strongly pro-German sentiments.^[13] Nevertheless, the fate of [Belgium](#) engaged many Swedes, especially on the left. Belgium was featured as a neutral martyr in

order to engender compassion and ameliorative action for suffering civilians, especially women and children.^[14] In the autumn of 1914, the women's magazine *Idun*, under the pro-Entente author Marika Stiernstedt (1875-1954), started the campaign "The ravaged homes" ("De sköflade hemmen") to assist [Belgian refugees](#). Critics accused *Idun's* editorial office of taking sides in the conflict and highlighted civilian suffering in East Prussia and Galicia. The magazine's collections were modest when compared to the money raised for relief in the east; in November, 4,000 Swedish crowns were given to the Belgian Minister in Stockholm.^[15] The year after the Belgian appeal, Stiernstedt helmed another call for alms for [Poland](#).^[16]

In 1917, the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter (The Daily News)* started a collection for the victims of the [Armenian genocide](#). The Armenian cause was later taken up by Stiernstedt, the Social Democrat Prime Minister and Nobel laureate Hjalmar Branting (1860-1925), and the missionary Alma Johansson (1881-1974) – herself an eyewitness to the genocide in 1915.^[17]

Friends of Finland: Swedish Ambulances in the Finnish Civil War in 1918

After the [Russian revolution](#), Finland declared itself independent in late 1917. A few months later, a fierce [civil war](#) broke out between the bourgeois Whites and the socialist Reds. Finland had been part of the kingdom of Sweden until 1809 (when ceded to imperial Russia) and had a large Swedish-speaking minority. The dire situation in the neighbouring country engaged the Swedish public in several ways. Private relief and support committees such as *Föreningen Finlands vänner* (The Friends of Finland Society) were organized all over the country. Many Swedes were upset over their government's refusal to send troops to help the Whites. Sweden was officially neutral, but around 1,000 Swedish volunteers fought on the White side. In addition, four Red Cross ambulances (mobile field hospitals) were sent to Finnish cities to care for wounded Whites in a joint Scandinavian Red Cross action. These were supplemented by a field hospital for military horses run mainly by women veterinary orderlies from the animal relief organization The Red Star (*Röda Stjärnan*). When the Reds were defeated in early May 1918, all ambulances were returned to Sweden.^[18]

The staff involved in the operation considered themselves – and were considered – part of the White army and under their command. The SRK doctors also took active part in military work for the Whites, including holding court-martials for captives and punishing malingerers. Like most of their Finnish counterparts, the doctors were reluctant to help Red victims. Although some of the summary executions were met with revulsion, solidarity with the Whites superseded neutrality. Back home, the expedition was largely considered an expression of the Nordic duty to save Finland, a humanitarian action that honoured both the SRK and Sweden. The relief workers were depicted as national heroes.^[19]

Child Relief: The War Children and Save the Children

After the Armistice, humanitarian attention was diverted from military care to civilian victims, especially children. The SRK now engaged in huge post-war child relocation schemes. Approximately 22,000 children were sent to foster families in Sweden in 1919-24. The operation mostly targeted German and Austrian middle class, Protestant children. The mission was perceived as physical, moral, and pedagogical: the war children should be sent back home both in good physical condition and with new insights into a well-ordered society, applicable to their own country for rebuilding Europe.^[20]

A sign of the times was the founding of the Swedish Save the Children (*Rädda Barnen* or RB) in November 1919. Quite rapidly the RB established itself as an important and influential Swedish humanitarian organization for children's welfare and rights. By 1920 the organization had over 50 local and regional committees and 150 local deputies all over the country. With the slogans "To save children is to save the future!" and "All children are our children!" the RB devoted most of its activities to Central Europe. Again, Austria was the most prominent recipient of help. In the winter of 1920, 25,000 famished Viennese children and 12,000 war widows were supported daily. The RB also worked in Russia, Poland, the Baltic States, Belgium, [France](#), Germany, and [Armenia](#). The organisation focused mainly on helping locally, running soup kitchens, kindergartens, orphanages, summer camps, and sanatoriums. Through 1924, an estimated 8 million Swedish crowns were raised for different humanitarian activities.^[21]

The RB was a pioneer when it came to development aid and fundraising methods. The organization introduced the idea of sponsored children in Sweden, took full advantage of the media and used spectacular, highly emotional PR-campaigns to gain public attention. The NGO was also an influential partner in the International Save the Children Union and lobbied within the [League of Nations](#) to advocate for universal children's rights. The SRK was closely tied to the state, while the RB was a more independent, civil NGO dominated by feminist women. This reflects what Irene Hermann and Daniel Palmieri call a kind of "feminization" of interwar relief work. Even if wartime humanitarian actions partly served to reinforce traditional [gender roles](#) in Sweden, it also offered new emancipatory arenas for women, and challenged gendered images of war and the state. All in all, the RB represented a new kind of post-war humanitarianism: transnational, secular, professionalized, and human rights based.^[22]

Conclusion

Some tentative conclusions can be drawn from this introduction to Swedish wartime humanitarianism. The first regards the significance of neutrality, both in relation to the humanitarian ethos and the Swedish position. As Johan den Hertog and [Samuël Kruizinga](#) have critically remarked, in historical writing the neutrals are all too often treated as "a faceless and powerless collective [...], which the belligerents pressured into the role of passive observers."^[23] This artificial juxtaposition of "passive" neutrals and "active" belligerents has obscured the total character of the war and the fact that neutrality was sometimes *empowering* – for individuals, organizations and

states. In the Swedish case, the neutral position opened up space for public and private humanitarian endeavours of previously unknown dimensions and range. It offered a certain independence of action and enhanced, and perhaps even changed, the national self-image.

Obviously, this humanitarianism was neither neutral nor impartial, but politically, socially, and sometimes religiously biased (as in Armenia or the favouring of Protestant war children). In some cases, such as the ambulance missions to Finland, relief actions could be considered a protest against the government's official policies. In Sweden, as in other wartime countries, the boundaries between military and humanitarian work, national and international, public and private, and altruism and politics, were inexorably fluid and blurred. Relief workers often had a double role as both private humanitarians and foreign policy actors.^[24] A related observation is that the key part of the Swedish humanitarian activities was clearly in favour of the Central Powers – especially Germany and Austria. It seems to have been much harder to engage the Swedish public, let alone relief workers and activists, for the suffering of the Entente. Revolutionary Russia is the significant exception, but here urgent political motives such as hampering Bolshevism were at stake. The strong pro-German tendencies in Sweden thus permeated humanitarian endeavours as well.

Notably, to uphold neutrality was particularly difficult in relation to neighbouring Finland, a country to which Sweden had strong historical and cultural ties. In the interventions on behalf of the Whites, both political and medical humanitarianism were compromised.^[25] This can be compared with the sometimes harsh criticism of private relief measures for Belgium, who were accused of jeopardizing Swedish neutrality. This shows that the many different, co-existing politicized neutralities and cultural notions of neutrality must be acknowledged in order to recognize the complexity of the Swedish wartime situation and its humanitarian actors.

Another wartime humanitarian development was the Nordic turn, visible in various inter-Nordic relief actions in Finland and Russia. Internationally, Nordic neutrality was profiled as a model of humanity, peace, order, progression, modernization, and civilization. At the same time, it is notable that in comparison with other small neutral states such as [the Netherlands](#) or [Switzerland](#), Scandinavian humanitarian measures were not as big and important as perceived in the Nordic self-image.^[26] Finally, what is the legacy of Swedish First World War humanitarianism? Most of the wartime emergency actions are by now largely forgotten, and they require more research. This notwithstanding, the missionary spirit of Swedish exceptionalism and the urge to relieve victims of war are still alive with regard to today's conflicts.

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