1 Introduction

I had never earlier seen as many poorly and pitiably ill people as I did in Mus [sic] and the surrounding villages. There were only two doctors for the population of the whole area, a military doctor and the district physician, both Turks.¹

These are the words of missionary and nurse, Bodil Biørn (1871–1960), describing her first encounter with the Musch region in eastern Anatolia in October 1907. In an attempt to make Norwegian supporters and sponsors identify with the plight of Armenian mountain people in eastern Anatolia, Biørn described their food. The bread reminded her of the barkebrød (bark bread) Norwegians survived on during a period of hunger during the Napoleonic wars.² During the hundred years that had passed since the Norwegians suffered the consequences of European wars in the early 1800s until 1907, Norway had become an independent state, which demonstrated early signs of a modern health system. The first professional nursing training school, for example, the deaconess institution Lovisenberg in Christiania (Oslo), was established in 1868. Before leaving for the Ottoman Empire as a missionary, Biørn was a student at Lovisenberg and she later worked as a nurse in Norway for several years. Upon hearing about the plight of Armenian orphans, Biørn experienced a personal calling to work among the Armenians as a missionary and nurse. In 1905 she arrived in Turkey in order to work for a small organization, the Women Mission Workers (“Kvinnelige misjonsarbeidere”: KMA). Here Biørn became part of a transnational network that engaged in humanitarian work among the Armenian population, and later with Armenian refugees in the years during and after World War I.

¹ National Archives, KMA, PA 699, nr. 0028, KMA Kvartalshilsen nr. 2 (1908), 16.
² Henrik Ibsen wrote a poem about this hunger called “Terje Vigen”.

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The KMA was the first independent women’s mission organization in Scandinavia. Inspired by the international holiness movement and the English Keswick Conventions, the KMA’s first branch was established in Sweden in 1894, then in Denmark and Finland in 1900, and in Norway in 1902. Missionaries and members belonged to the upper and upper middle classes, and they were educated women—many worked as teachers and nurses. The idea behind the KMA was not to create a support association for already established mission organizations, but to establish a prayer-movement by and for women. It was thus a mobilizing force for women’s right to take spiritual responsibility for their own lives, as noted by theologian Kristin Norseth. As such, the KMA was a realization of women’s strong desire for direct and practical participation in mission work on their own terms. For many KMA-missionaries practical mission work involved humanitarian engagements, as well as evangelization. Humanitarian work was an integral part of the missionary enterprise of other groups, such as the American Protestant missionaries who worked in Armenian communities in the Ottoman Empire. This fusion of evangelization, emergency relief, and “longer-term efforts to prevent suffering from famine, ill-health, or poverty” that characterized other missionary efforts in the area, also described the approach and activities of the Scandinavian KMA missionaries in the Middle East.

Based on sources from the Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian branches of the KMA, this article focuses on how the mission—evangelization, healing, and

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3 The Holiness movement, originating in the 19th century among Protestant churches in the United States, was inspired by J. Wesley’s and the Methodist teaching of human existence without sin. Inspired by the Holiness movement in Keswick, England, from 1875 on, several thousand evangelicals gathered for annual conventions focusing on Christians spiritual empowerment to overcome a sinful life. “Hellighetsbevegelsen,” Store Norske Leksikon, accessed September 23, 2018, https://snl.no/hellighetsbevegelsen.

4 Kristin Norseth, “La os bryte over tvert med vor stumhet: kvinners vei til myndighet i de kristelige organisasjonene 1842–1912” (PhD diss., University of Oslo, 2007), 402. Influenced by women’s mission organizations in North America, Great Britain, and Germany at the time, these women wanted to realize their God-given calling to serve God in mission work at home or abroad.

5 Norseth, “La os bryte over tvert med vor stumhet,” 402.

6 Flora A. Keshgegian, “‘Starving Armenians’: The Politics and Ideology of Humanitarian Aid in the First Decades of the Twentieth Century,” in Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy, eds. Richard Ashby Wilson and Richard D. Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 144. See also Nazan Maksudyan’s article in this volume.

7 Johannes Paulmann, “Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century,” Humanity 4, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 215, http://humanityjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/4.2-Conjunctures-in-the-History-of-International-Humanitarian-Aid-during-the-Twentieth-Century.pdf.
welfare—was practiced by a Scandinavian female missionary working for the pietistic, German “Deutscher Hülfsbund für Christliche Liebeswerk im Orient”, in the Ottoman Empire from 1905 to 1914. A central issue for the Scandinavian Women’s Mission Workers was the plight of girls and women. In Protestant mission ideology and rhetoric in general, Non-Christian women were to be included in what was perceived as the collective of Christian, liberated women. This was a result of the Evangelical belief in all women's right to salvation and the corresponding spiritual equality of men and women. How did Biørn include local women's plight in her vocation? What resonance did the Protestant emphasis on women’s work for women have in Armenian society?

Protestant missionaries created and operated in transnational spaces, on both social and ideational levels. These transnational arenas were characterized by a variety of local and foreign actors. As argued by historian Julia Hauser, the actors competed, cooperated, and appropriated each other's approaches, or were connected by virtue of the mobility of students and teachers between establishments. In her study of the German Kaiserswerth Deaconesses in Beirut, Hauser shows how the missionary agenda—being fundamentally impacted by local factors—underwent considerable transformation in practice. How was the KMA agenda of evangelization, healing, and welfare impacted by local factors in Turkish Armenian societies? How was this humanitarian and spiritual work received by local parties?

2 Sources

When Biørn left Norway in 1905, the KMA gave her a camera. She was to take pictures that, together with her written reports from the field, would document the work in which Scandinavian supporters invested prayers and money. The photos taken from Armenian communities in eastern Anatolia (the Musch region) provide invaluable visual documentation of a society extinguished by genocide in 1915. Biørn’s photographs are now held in the Norwegian National Archives in Oslo and accessible on Wikimedia.9

In addition to the photographs, the letters and reports written by Biørn and her Swedish colleague, the nurse and midwife Alma Johansson (1880–1974), are important sources that describe life in the Musch region, where the pre-World

8 Julia Hauser, “From Transformation to Negation: A Female Mission in a ‘City of Schools’,” Journal of World History 27, no. 3 (September 2016): 476–477.
9 “Skolepiker fra Musch, lærerinnen og Bodil Biørn,” Wikimedia, made available by the National Archives of Norway, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Bodil_Bi%C3%B8rn.
War I population consisted of Kurds, Armenians, and Turks. Furthermore, there are published reports and unpublished letters from the Danish KMA’s work among Armenians in the Anatolian twin cities, Kharpert and Mezereh.

3 Bodil Biørn: Background

Bodil Biørn, who came from a wealthy shipping family, grew up in Kragerø—a coastal town in the south of Norway. Growing up with a loving and deeply religious, German Lutheran, mother, Biørn held a profound Protestant conviction, with a strong inclination to serve both spiritually and physically. Despite her upper-class background Biørn chose a life of work, inspired by her religious calling which led her to the nursing profession. At the time nursing was one of the few professions open to women in Norway.

In the late 19th century Norwegian society underwent a dramatic process of modernization, in which industry, migration, and urbanization were key factors. Even so, the society was still to a large extent rural, traditional, and patriarchal: expectations regarding gender did not change much from the norms of preindustrial, agrarian Norway. The ideal was to stay at home and take care of husband and children. According to historian Elisabeth Lønnå, “working women (mostly unmarried) were systematically paid less than men and kept out of leading positions within their field of work ... The great majority were kept in totally subordinate positions as [house] servants, a type of work most men were able to avoid”.

Being a deacon was an alternative profession to working as a house servant. Those who chose this rigorous and demanding training, which demanded the candidates’ total submission, were mostly women from the lower classes. Biørn’s upper-class background made her an exception. Even though she was born into privilege she chose to follow her personal calling to enter the deaconess training at Lovisenberg in Christiania. Biørn’s religious calling was closely tied to the notion of healing and caring for people in need. Spiritual vocation

10 There are also German missionary sources from Musch, but so far these sources from the Deutscher Hülfsbund have not been examined systematically in scholarly works.
11 Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “En norsk filantrop”: Bodil Biørn og armenerne, 1905–1934 (Kristiansand: Portal forlag, 2016).
12 Elisabeth Lønnå, “Gender in Norway in the Period of Mass Emigration,” in Norwegian American Women: Migration, Communities and Identities, eds. Betty A. Bergland and Lori Ann Lahlum (St Paul: Minnesota Historical press, 2011), 40.
13 Kari Martinsen, Freidige og uforsakte diakonisser: et omsorgsykke vokser fram, 1860–1905 (Oslo: Aschehoug/Tanum-Norli, 1984).
and humanitarian relief were also interconnected in Bjørn’s decision to leave Norway in order to work among persecuted Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.

4 The Abdülhamid II Massacres, Missions, and Relief

The Armenians—two million in number—were one of the largest Christian minorities in the Ottoman Empire. The majority belonged to the Armenian Apostolic Church, though there were also Catholic and Protestant minorities. Before World War I, there were particular Armenian concentrations—though never demographic majorities except at local levels—in the historic Armenian settlements. The most significant ones were in the eastern provinces of Anatolia, where they date back 3,000 years. These were the regions in which Protestant, including Scandinavian, missionaries settled.

From 1894 to 1896, the Armenians in Anatolia suffered widespread persecutions initiated by the Ottoman government. During the Abdülhamid II massacres, Armenian villages were plundered and in many places in Anatolia, there were absolutely no resources left to start cultivating the land. It is estimated that out of the 2 million Armenians, more than 88,000 were murdered; 500,000 were robbed of all their belongings; around 2,500 villages and towns were plundered; 568 churches were pillaged and destroyed; and 282 churches were turned into mosques. Finally, 100,000 orphans and widows were without support. The massacres had left Armenian communities without their traditional networks of family, kin, and church. Since men had been the main targets of the massacres, women had to become breadwinners and heads of families.

The massacres received great attention in the USA and Europe, including the Scandinavian countries. The massacres, according to historian Matthias Bjørnlund, were the main impetus that transformed the Danish KMA from a Bible Study group to an effective missionary NGO. The Danes’ eagerness to

14 Razmik Panossian, *The Armenians: From Kings and Priests to Merchants and Commissars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 42, 84–85.
15 National Archive (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen, KMA.363, pk. nr. 16. Letter from Christa Hammer, January 19, 1902.
16 Julius Richter, *History of Protestant Missions in the Near East* (London: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1910), 143.
17 Ernst Lohmann, *Skildringer af Armeniske Forhold og Tilstande* (Copenhagen, 1902), 11. Translated from German to Danish.
18 Matthias Bjørnlund, “Harput-Missionaries, Danish Missionaries in the Kharpert Province: A Brief Introduction,” *Houshamadyan*, accessed May 23, 2018, http://www.houshamadyan.org/mapottomanempire/vilayetofmamuratulazizharput/harputkaza/religion/missionaries.html.
contribute to relief among persecuted Armenians had repercussions in Norway. In February 1904, a representative from the Danish KMA was invited by the KMA in Christiania, to speak about the Armenian massacres and the great need for humanitarian assistance that still existed. The Danish and Swedish KMA had several nurses working with relief in Anatolia, and now the Norwegian KMA wanted to send out a nurse as well. Bodil Biørn attended the meeting. She was deeply moved by the plight of Armenian children. To her it seemed like God had given her a mission to help relieve suffering among Armenian orphans. Biørn became the KMA’s envoy to the Armenians. They would pay her wages, although she formally worked for the Deutscher Hülfsbund. After a year of training at the KMA School for female missionaries in Copenhagen, and a three-week training course with the Deutscher Hülfsbund in Freienwalde, Germany, Biørn was initiated as missionary and left for Turkey in the fall of 1905.

5 Transnational Mission Work in the Ottoman Empire

The various independent women’s mission organizations in Norway, and the rest of Scandinavia, were small in numbers and they relied on financial, practical, and ideological cooperation with each other. In the Ottoman Empire they also relied on cooperation with the Deutscher Hülfsbund, the Deutsche Orient Mission, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Mission (ABCFM). This was practical: the KMA was too small to establish their own mission stations. Being an all-women organization, it was also seen as unsafe to establish mission stations in the Middle East without Western male missionaries.

Safety considerations and the need for infrastructure, in addition to the well-established connections with German and American missions, led the Danish

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19 Matthias Bjørnlund, “A Fate Worse than Dying: Sexual Violence during the Armenian Genocide,” in Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 148.

20 Not until 1919 was a women given formal status as missionary by the dominating Norwegian mission society (Det Norske Misjonsselskap NMS). Almost twenty years earlier, prominent religious women had established KMA, an organization that would enable them to be directly involved in, and have control over mission work both at home and abroad. See Line Nyhagen Predelli, “Emma Dahl: Contesting the Patriarchal Gender Regime of the Norwegian Missionary Society in Madagascar,” Scandinavian Journal of History 2 (2003): 105–136, 120; Inger Marie Okkenhaug, “Herren har givet mig et rigt virkefelt: Kall, religion og arbeid blant armenere i Det osmanske riket,” (“Vocation, Religion and Work Among Armenians in the Ottoman Empire”) Historisk Tidsskrift (Journal of History) 1 (2009): 39–60.
KMA to start an orphanage, Emaus [Emmaus], in Mezreh (present-day Elazig) in 1902. This institution was Scandinavian in the sense that it received support from the Nordic countries, and its initial staff consisted of the first Scandinavian missionaries in Turkey: the Danish Christa Hammer (d. 1903) and the earlier mentioned Swedish Alma Johansson. In the beginning, the Ottoman authorities were hostile towards the Scandinavian establishment, but a few months after the opening, Hammer observed that the local authorities, the Vali, had a positive view of the mission’s health work.

Christa Hammer and Alma Johansson were both linked to the Deutscher Hülfsbund, while another of the early Danish KMA missionaries, the nurse Maria Jacobsen (1882–1960), worked as head nurse for the American Board—the largest Protestant mission in the Middle East before World War I, present in Mezreh and Kharpert since 1907. These links between the Scandinavian KMA missions and the American Board and the Deutscher Hülfsbund, illustrate how these organizations developed entangled histories, creating transnational networks and transnational spaces in the Middle East.

When Biørn arrived in Turkey in 1905, the headquarters of Deutscher Hülfsbund stationed her in Mezreh. Here she worked as a nurse in the German orphanage Elim, headed by the Dane Jenny Jensen, from the KMA. Biørn, at the same time, also worked in the American Board hospital in Mezreh. This was a typical first year experience for the KMA-missionaries. They had to have a “working-knowledge” of English and German, and they had to get a grip of the local language. In addition, they were trained in modern, American and German standards of medicine and nursing. These young women worked in transnational spaces that introduced them to a multi-cultural humanitarian work place, and to the pragmatism needed for mission work in a Middle Eastern context. Biørn, for example, worked with American, German, and Scandinavian staff, and, in addition, she also worked closely with two Armenian doctors and two Armenian women who helped with caring for the sick children.

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21 Bjørnlund, “Harpur-Missionaries.”
22 National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen, KMA.360, pk. nr. 16. Letter from Christa Hammer. February 10, 1902.
23 The American Board had been working in Turkey since 1831. By 1900, it was the largest, oldest, and most important mission organization involved in the Ottoman Empire. See for example S.E. Moranian, “The Armenian Genocide and American Missionary Relief Efforts,” in America and the Armenian Genocide of 1915, ed. J.M. Winter (West Nyack, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 186–213.
24 Bodil Biørn, Diary, December 1905 (Private archives). I would like to thank Jussi F. Biørn for allowing me access to this material.
25 Kvinnerlige misjonsarbeidere, Se til hvorledes i bygger videre, K.M.A. gjennom 50 år (Oslo, 1952), 27.
Armenians were probably trained in the American mission hospital in Mezreh, and they may have grown up in one of the Protestant orphanages in Anatolia. In the early 1900s, the American Board alone had around sixty orphanages established at various mission stations in Anatolia, which cared for 10,000 orphans.

6 Spiritual Reformation

The mission’s humanitarian aspect was the catalyst for Biørn and her colleagues, which led them to choose a life in Ottoman Anatolia. The desire to teach the Protestant faith to the local population was, however, equally important to the Scandinavian women and their German colleagues. This did not mean that they wanted the Armenians to leave the Gregorian (Orthodox) Armenian religion: what they hoped for was a religious reformation of the Gregorian Church. It was a commonly held belief that the Armenians were living in spiritual decay, since they were occupied by Muslims, whose influence had led to heathendom. Scandinavian and German missionaries wanted to create “believing Armenians” who would be able to read the Bible in their own language. This would facilitate the Protestant ideal of a personal, direct relationship with God. For the missionaries, this meant an emphasis on learning the local language as soon as possible. Missionaries were at a great disadvantage as long as they did not speak Armenian fluently. When Biørn got a grasp of the Armenian language—a tormenting process according to herself—she participated in health visits to urban slum areas, together with Swedish and German nurses and preachers. These visits were often combined with evangelical meetings for women. The female missionaries also went on horseback out to Armenian villages in order to preach to, as well as to attend to the medical needs of local women.

The following example from the Hülfsbund’s work in Musch sheds light on how Lutheran missionaries attempted to create “new spiritual life” among the Armenians, by combining humanitarian work and evangelization.

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26 Bjørnlund, “Harput-Missionaries.”
27 Nazan Maksudyan, Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2014), 120.
28 Christa Hammer, for example, prayed for a religious reformation and blamed Muslim occupation for what she saw as spiritual decay among the Armenians. National Archives (Rigsarkivet), Copenhagen, KMA.360, pk. nr. 16. Letter from Christa Hammer. February 10., 1902.
One Sunday morning, Biørn rode out to a village to visit the sick and to “gather the women” for a meeting. After seeing to a patient, she inquired, through the patient's relatives, if the Gregorian minister would allow her to gather Armenian women in the church or in the local school. The Orthodox minister reacted vehemently and accused her of being a “thief, bandit and a Satan”, who tried to seduce the people. Biørn did not manage to calm the priest, and she concluded that: “It was one of these fanatic priests, who thinks that we have come to make Germans out of the Armenian people, and make them leave their church, something we in no way want to do”.29

The animosity towards the “Germans” was not only motivated by the fear of losing Armenians to the Protestant faith. As part of a modernization process, the Turkish state had invited a large number of German engineers and military officers to reform the military and build railways in the Empire. The positive relations between Germans and Ottoman rulers resulted in anti-German sentiments among the Armenian population.30

Even so, the main reason for the hostility that the missionaries met from Armenian priests, church leaders, and nationalists, was rooted in a fear that missionaries would have a destabilizing effect on traditional Armenian society. At times the opposition against Western missions, including Scandinavian women, was formidable. At the same time, the mission schools, health clinics, and hospitals were in great demand. While mission journals kept focusing on the need for a Protestant reformation among the Armenians, mission labour in the field was redefined as a practical social vocation. When Bodil Biørn was ordered to Musch in eastern Anatolia in 1907, by the German mission board, her training as a nurse and her years of professional experience in nursing would inform what was to become the main focus of her work.31

7 Mission and Humanitarianism

The Deutscher Hülfsbund had established a number of mission stations in various areas in the Ottoman Empire, including a small station in Musch where Biørn was stationed from 1907 to 1915. When she arrived in Musch, Biørn was

29 National Archives (Riksarkivet), Oslo, Kvinnelige misjonsarbeidere (KMA) PA 699, nr. 0028. K.M.A. Kvartalshilsen nr. 3 (1910), 24.
30 Communication with Matthias Biørnlund.
31 Inger Marie Okkenhaug, "Women on a Mission! Scandinavian Welfare and the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, 1905–1917," in Interpreting Welfare and Relief in the Middle East, eds. Nefissa Naguib and Inger Marie Okkenhaug (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 64.
a seasoned nurse who had worked in various places and under different conditions for more than ten years. Her extensive experience was crucial to the success of her new endeavour, since she now often had to work on her own under demanding, challenging, and, at times, depressing conditions.32

Biørn established a polyclinic (outpatients’ department, locally named the Doctor’s Ward) where 4,000 patients were treated every year.33 She also visited yearly around 300 patients in the city and 200 in the villages, together with Alma Johansson (in Musch from 1910). The patients were Armenians, Turks, and Kurds, and they all expected this “doctor” to cure all ailments, the most common being trachoma, malaria, lung diseases, and rheumatism. To assist her, Biørn apprenticed a young Armenian man, who received further education later at the mission hospital. She also had two young Armenian women helping her.

This is an example of the transnational health training that became an important “side benefit”—maybe one of the most important side benefits—of the missionary project in general. In Kharpert, Maria Jacobsen was head nurse in the American Board hospital, where she worked with Armenian nurses, most of whom were orphans who had grown up in one of the American institutions. Here they had received schooling and were trained as nurses.34 Or, alternatively, the young women working with Biørn may have gone on to receive a professional training at the German Deaconess School, which was supported by the Hülfsbund.

The German Deaconess School opened in 1904, and it was located at the Hülfsbund’s large hospital in Marash.35 Here Armenian girls from various German orphanages trained as nurses. Occasionally, Arab and Armenian women, who had been educated in various schools run by German Deaconesses, became members of the Deaconess sisterhood.36 Biørn had not been initiated as a Deaconess, but her professional training was based on the same Kaiserwerth model as her younger Armenian colleagues. Even so, European training was not enough. In order for a foreign health worker to practice in the Ottoman Empire, central authorities in Constantinople had to approve the foreign medical training.37

32 Kvinnelige misjonsarbeidere, Se til hvorledes i bygger videre, K.M.A. gjennom 50 år, 29.
33 Kvinnelige misjonsarbeidere, Se til hvorledes i bygger videre, K.M.A. gjennom 50 år, 29.
34 Bjørlund, “Harput-Missionaries.”
35 Uwe Kaminsky, “German ‘Home Mission’ Abroad: The Orientarbeit of the Deaconess Institution Kaiserwerth in the Ottoman Empire,” in New Faith in Ancient Lands: Western Missions in the Middle East in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries, ed. H. Murre-van den Berg, SCM 32 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 191–210.
36 Kaminsky, “German ‘Home Mission’ Abroad,” 207–208.
37 Biørn, Diary, December 1907.
The Scandinavian nurses became part of the many-faceted Ottoman health system, which was constituted by a conglomerate of local, state, and foreign actors and institutions. Alma Johansson, who was trained as a nurse in Sweden, had to pass a nursing exam (conducted in French) that was supervised by health authorities in Constantinople, while the Turkish consulate in Berlin approved Børn's certificate as a nurse and midwife. Børn was certified to work with female patients, but not “to give medicine to other ill people”, i.e. male patients. In addition, she was forbidden to use sharp instruments, because only certified doctors were authorized to perform operations. Even so, the restrictions of central health authorities had to be ignored when faced with everyday humanitarian challenges. Børn and Johansson felt they had a moral and professional obligation to meet their patients’ needs as best they could. This meant that when necessary they tended to male patients and they performed operations. Working in remote, rural Turkey, led the Scandinavian women to deal with many aspects of health work that they were not allowed to perform at home. The local population expected these two women to perform as “doctors”, and as head of the polyclinic, Børn was known locally as “the doctor”. When Alma Johansson took over the clinic, she was named the “new doctor”. Both women felt that this title was a burden, yet, to rid themselves of it was impossible. Compared to the Turkish (male) doctors that worked in the area, however, the Scandinavian women felt they were much better qualified to treat sick people. A modern, professional health training and almost total independence in their daily medical practice gave these two female nurses a deep-seated sense of professionalism and capability as health practitioners.38

When an Armenian, Roman Catholic doctor tried to forbid Børn’s work, she wrote that she had the confidence of the local people, something this young, inexperienced man did not have. For him the Norwegian woman was a competitor. Despite the problems Børn encountered as a female, Western health worker operating within a patriarchal context, she continued to see patients in the polyclinic and with home visits.39

In rural Ottoman society there were few midwives and the high percentage of women dying in childbirth made Børn certify as a midwife in Berlin during her first vacation.40 Alma Johansson was a trained midwife and in 1911, there were three certified midwives working in the Musch region: one was employed by the government and the other two were Scandinavians. In addition to the

38 The Swedish National Archives (Det svenske riksarkivet), Arninge, KMA-arkivet, SE/RA/73 Ø47/F1/3/F3a/2. Letter from Alma Johansson, Musch (November 2, 1910).
39 National Archives (Riksarkivet), Oslo. KMA Kvartalshilsen, nr. 3 (1912), 27.
40 Kvinnelige misjonsarbeidere, Se til hvorledes i bygger videre, K.M.A. gjennom 50 år, 30.
large number of patients, the working conditions in these mountain villages were extremely difficult. There were no roads and the midwives had to walk or ride long distances. The general level of health was low. In addition, there was resistance among the local population to seek the help of the midwife. Women's second rate position in Ottoman society meant that some men did not want to pay for professional help when their wives were about to give birth.

Biørn and Johansson did not cooperate with the local certified midwife, but saw her as a competitor. They suspected that she was not qualified and the local midwife and Johansson had several clashes. In addition to this midwife, there were unskilled, local women who were paid helpers during births. These women were also against seeking the help of the Scandinavians, since it would mean the end of their livelihood. As a result, Biørn and Johansson were called as a last resort and only when the traditional helpers had to give up. The great distances—often a five-six hour hike—meant that when they finally arrived, it was often too late to save the lives of the mother and child. Over the years, however, there were several improvements: for example, women who were about to give birth learned to send for the midwife in time.

In addition to improved health conditions, Protestant missions saw education as a way of transforming women's lives both spiritually and materially. As shown by historian Barbara J. Merguerian, in Kharpet (Harput) in eastern Turkey, the American Board established elementary schools for girls (from 1855 onwards), teaching Armenian women to read, as an early version of “women's work for women”. Girls and young women, as future mothers of children, educated in Protestant values, would be "instruments of socialization and the potential founders of homes established on Christian (Protestant) virtues and principles". The belief in giving attention, time, and resources to the education for women was shared by Scandinavian and German Protestant missionaries in the Ottoman Empire.

The Deutscher Hülfsbund established a number of schools for both Armenian boys and girls. This was part of their work among Armenian orphans.
and included primary education. In the first three grades, the children were taught the Armenian language, as well as Turkish in Armenian script and Ottoman Turkish. As mentioned previously, German and Scandinavian Protestants believed it was crucial to learn to read and write in order to understand the Bible in one’s own mother tongue.\footnote{Later on, the pupils also learned English, history, and geography. After the Young Turk revolution in 1908, physical education and German were introduced. Hayk Martirosyan, “German Missionary Activity in the Ottoman Empire: Marash Station (1896–1919),” The International Raoul Wallenberg Foundation, http://www.raoulwallenberg.net/filmsbooks/book-german-missionary-activity-in-the-ottoman-empire-marash-station-1896-1919/.} In the Deutscher Hülfsbund’s ideology, however, education was not only necessary for Armenian girls and boys in order to reach a spiritual religious reformation, it was also a means to modernize Middle Eastern society. This “enlightenment program” included both sexes, and one central concern was the attempt to eliminate the high level of illiteracy among young girls in the general populace, whom were not in the care of mission orphanages.\footnote{Lohmann, Skildringer af Armeniske Forhold og Tilstande, 30.}

In 1908, the Deutscher Hülfsbund established a day school for girls in Musch, initiated by Bodil Biørn, and financed by German and Norwegian supporters. The school was run by two Armenian female teachers. After initial skepticism among the local population, girls—some of them young wives and mothers—came to school, and after some time there were 120 pupils in attendance. The school may have been the first one for girls in Musch. The two teachers, Maritza and Margarit, had grown up in Emaus, in the Scandinavian orphanage in Mezreh, and they were trained in a teacher’s seminary run by the American Board.

In Musch, Maritza and Margarit taught young girls to read and write, and the girls also received instruction in mathematics, the Bible, and sewing. The curriculum was a means of transfer of religious beliefs, but just as important was the emphasis on teaching the girls a practical skill, which would be a means to “help-to-self-help” for young women who later might have to support parents and siblings.

To run a school was expensive. Some of the pupils were poor and in ill-health and they needed clothes and medicine, in addition to books. Biørn argued, however, that the school was an excellent way of reaching the children, and that the school would open the way to parents and to the wider society.\footnote{National Archives (Riksarkivet), Oslo. KMA Kvartalshilsen nr. 3 (1914), 28.} In practical terms, the school had the unintended effect (from the missionaries’ point of view) of bringing about the establishment of more schools for
the local population. The Ottoman government established schools partly as a reaction towards the many foreign mission schools, many of which were especially aimed at Christian minorities. "In response to this interference with its subjects", historian Elizabeth Thompson writes, “the Ottoman state built its national schools as a bulwark against foreign subversion, as a direct bond between state and citizen”.48

The government schools aimed to promote loyalty to the Ottoman state. Even so, yet another group had ambitions regarding education of the Armenian children and youth. Armenian politicians saw both mission schools and the Ottoman government’s educational institutions as counterproductive to their nationalist aims. The main threat was the numerous mission schools, which catered for Armenian children at all ages. Political activists feared that exposure to foreign missionary education would mean that children lost their culture, religion, and Armenian identity. To counter this development, Armenian nationalists often established their own schools in areas where there existed missionary schools. This happened in Musch, where the prominent national leader Simon Zavarian initiated and ran an Armenian school around 1910.49 Missionary schools thus generated competition, which meant increased possibilities for education for the local population. The fused history of these three competing benefactors, the Ottoman state, the Armenian nationalists, and the foreign missionaries, of education for the Armenian population, exemplify how “the missionary encounter” could be a product of complex interactions between local, foreign, and state actors. Among the local population, Armenian girls and women may have gained the most from this encounter, since Protestant missions gave equal weight to male and female literacy, while local schools were less inclined to offer girls education.

8 Conclusion

A young Norwegian woman’s religious calling to relieve and prevent suffering from sickness and poverty, led to a working career in the Middle East. Ideologically and practically, this mission work was carried out in transnational spaces. Bodil Biørn’s mission was deeply inspired by the Scandinavian KMA’s “women’s work for women”, and it included relief work, education, and spiritual reformation. One way of improving the lives of Armenian girls was the establishment

48 Elizabeth Thompson, Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege, and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 75.
49 Panossian, The Armenians, 176.
of a school for girls. Some of the girls trained as teachers and nurses in Protestant institutions, thus joining the small, but growing numbers of professional women in the Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s.

Local hostility and opposition did not mean that Bjørn and fellow missionaries gave up evangelization, but their efforts were by far dominated by practical humanitarian work: nursing, medical attendance, and education. The lack of medical help among women also led Bjørn to specialize as a midwife. In fact, midwifery may have been one of the most important legacies of Scandinavian missionaries in eastern Anatolia before World War I and the Armenian genocide.
Appendix

Figure 4.1 Girls in the orphanage in Musch with dolls from Scandinavian donors.

Note: “Barn ved Musch barnehjem?” Wikimedia, made available by National Archives of Norway, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Barn_ved_Musch_barnehjem%3F%2F_03014712190050.jpg
FIGURE 4.2 Armenian women.

Note: "Armenske kvinner," Wikimedia, made available by National Archives of Norway, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Armenske_kvinner_-_f030141712190013_1469.jpg
Figure 4.3 Bodil Biørn and teacher Maritza with 1st grade in Mush, ca. 1912.

Note: “Bodil Biørn med skoleklasse,” Wikimedia, made available by National Archives of Norway, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bodil_Bi%C3%B8rn_med_skoleklasse_-_fo30141712180005.jpg

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