

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2026.15.17>

The Role of American and English Humanitarian Organisations in Stabilising the Socio-Economic Situation of Soviet Armenia in the Early 1920s

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Abstract: *This research examines the role of humanitarian organisations in newly Sovietized Armenia during the early 1920s, focusing on the American Near East Relief (NER) and the English Relief Committee (Anglcom). It assesses their contributions to stabilizing socio-economic conditions, with contemporary relevance given Armenia's recurring challenges, such as the plight of internally displaced persons from Nagorno-Karabakh. Amid historical crises like famine, epidemics, and mass homelessness during the transition to a new political system, these organisations played a critical role. Using methods including scientific abstraction, induction, and archival analysis, key findings reveal: (1) Soviet Armenia's leadership relied on foreign aid to prevent catastrophic outcomes for orphans and refugees, and (2) NER and Anglcom's initiatives significantly influenced the success of the New Economic Policy, relieving the government of social burdens and enabling economic recovery. This analysis offers valuable insights into managing severe socio-economic crises.*

Keywords: Soviet Armenia, Sovietisation, Humanitarian Organisations, Near East Relief, English Relief Committee, New Economic Policy, Orphan Care Activity

Introduction

The early 1920s were a period of profound socio-economic crisis in Armenia.¹ Amid new political realities, the social conditions were dire, and the economy was nearly entirely devastated. In this context, the government's efforts to stabilize the socio-economic situation would have been largely ineffective without the support

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¹ About the political situation in this period on the Caucasus, see e.g. Hovhannisyan, 2024; Virabyan & Virabyan, 2024; Martoyan & Hakhoyan, 2025.

of foreign humanitarian organisations. These organisations assumed a substantial share of the country's social welfare burden, enabling the government to focus on economic recovery. Among them, the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (hereafter NER)² and the English Relief Committee (hereafter Anglcom)³ played pivotal roles. Through their financial, material, and human resources, thousands of homeless orphans and refugees⁴ were rescued from hunger and disease, while the activities of these organizations also alleviated the social burden on the state and contributed to the socio-economic stabilization of Soviet Armenia.

The economic and social dimensions of the New Economic Policy in Soviet Armenia have been extensively examined by Armenian historians, including V. Ghazakhetsyan, H. Virabyan, and others, whose studies provide detailed analyses of the economic policies, social transformations, and administrative changes that characterized the early years of Soviet rule. At the same time, a number of studies have focused on the activities of foreign humanitarian organizations. Among these, the most comprehensive is S. Avetisyan's monograph on the American Committee for Relief in the Near East, complemented by studies addressing the activities of British relief organizations. Nevertheless, existing scholarship has not comprehensively examined the role of humanitarian organizations within the broader context of the implementation of the New Economic Policy and the socio-economic stabilization of Soviet Armenia. In particular, a comparative assessment of the activities of NER and Anglcom remains absent, especially with regard to their contribution not only as providers of humanitarian assistance but also as institutions that complemented the state's limited social welfare capacity and facilitated the country's socio-economic recovery. In this context, the present study seeks to address this historiographical gap by examining the activities of humanitarian organizations within the framework of state social policy and the implementation of the New Economic Policy. Particular attention is devoted to orphan relief, as the presence of tens of thousands of orphaned children, coupled with the severely limited financial resources of the state, made orphan care and education one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges facing Soviet Armenia in the early 1920s. Consequently, a comprehensive assessment of

² In 1918, the U.S. Congress established the American Committee for Relief in the Middle East, building on the earlier efforts of the American Committee for Relief in Armenia and Syria, which had provided aid to countries affected by World War I. This organisation, later abbreviated as Near East Relief, became instrumental in humanitarian activities. Avetisyan, 2009: 6-7, 2024; Rodogno, 2025.

³ The pro-Armenian movement in Britain found institutional expression in the English Relief Committee, which brought together various pro-Armenian, public, and charitable organisations in England. These included the Armenian Society, founded by Emily Robinson, the Lord Mayor's Fund, the Manchester Women's Society, and others. Avetisyan, 2014: 4; Laycock, 2017.

⁴ The majority of these refugees and orphans were survivors of the Armenian Genocide of 1915-1916 and the subsequent military conflicts, forced deportations, and population displacements in the South Caucasus during 1918-1920. Their numbers increased significantly following the collapse of the First Republic of Armenia and the influx of displaced persons from the former Ottoman Empire and neighboring regions.

the socio-economic significance of humanitarian organizations would be incomplete without a thorough analysis of their contribution to orphan relief and education.

The Socio-Economic Conditions in Armenia during the Early Years of Sovietisation

The Sovietisation of Armenia in 1920 occurred amid a profound socio-economic crisis that threatened the very survival of the population. The country's economy was in ruins⁵ – industry, agriculture, and infrastructure were devastated, leading to severe food shortages. Thousands of homeless orphans and migrants flooded the country,⁶ while daily deaths from starvation and epidemics reached alarming numbers.

Between 1913 and 1919, Armenia's gross industrial output (in monetary terms) declined twelvefold, electricity generation decreased threefold, gross agricultural output fell sixfold, and the cultivated area was reduced by a factor of three. Cotton cultivation disappeared entirely, while the irrigation system ceased to function. In 1919-1920, the birth rate in Armenia was only 8.7 per 1,000 inhabitants, whereas the mortality rate reached 204.2 per 1,000.⁷ At the same time, the country's population had fallen to approximately 720,000, compared with nearly one million in 1913.⁸

In the initial weeks of Sovietisation, the new government implemented policies modeled after Soviet Russia's "war communism," including food requisitioning. However, these measures, combined with widespread violence and confiscations, only deepened the poverty and despair. Stabilizing the economy and addressing the critical social conditions proved an enormous challenge, further complicated by the extensive misappropriation and outflow of financial and material resources. According to Simon Vratsyan, a significant portion of the state treasury, stored in boxes and trunks during the February Uprising,⁹ was embezzled by the Revolutionary Committee. Only a small portion of it "ended up in the hands of the Committee for the Salvation of the Motherland," and was spent "on current government debts and feeding thousands of emigrants" as noted in the July 1921 report of the commission led by Vratsyan.¹⁰

⁵ Ghazakhetsyan, 2006: 260-265.

⁶ According to 1920 data, the number of Western Armenian refugees living in the country exceeded 200 thousand, and the number of orphans and children left homeless reached tens of thousands. Meliksetyan, 1975: 77-78.

⁷ *Hayots patmutyun*, 2020: 374-375.

⁸ Ghazakhetsyan, 2006: 264.

⁹ The February 1921 Uprising was an anti-Bolshevik armed revolt in Soviet Armenia. During the uprising, the Committee for the Salvation of the Homeland, headed by Simon Vratsian, functioned as the provisional governing authority in Yerevan from 18 February until the return of Soviet forces in early April 1921. Hovannisian, 1996: 423-428.

¹⁰ Vratsyan, 1993: 667-677. According to the report, only that part of the funds taken out of the country which ended up at the disposal of the Committee for the Salvation of the Motherland (without the funds appropriated by the RevCom) amounted to 9.4 billion rubles (in Armenian checks/vouchers), 650 million rubles in Soviet drams, 147 thousand rubles, 23.3 thousand American dollars, 8.5 thousand English

Consequently, the Soviet authorities faced the challenge of reviving the country's economy amidst an almost complete lack of public funds. This situation not only ruled out the possibility of public investment in various sectors but also made it unavoidable to implement tax reforms aimed at increasing state revenues. It should be noted that Armenia's public debt to the United States and Great Britain alone amounted to approximately 13 million dollars and 4.4 million dollars,¹¹ respectively, reflecting the republic's extremely limited fiscal capacity.

These developments should, however, be understood within the broader economic context of the early Soviet period, as the socio-economic processes taking place in Soviet Armenia were not isolated developments but reflected the broader logic of the economic policies pursued in Soviet Russia and, subsequently, throughout the Soviet Union. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, by the end of the Civil War, the Bolshevik government was confronted with widespread economic devastation, administrative disorganization, severe food shortages, and growing peasant resistance to grain requisitioning, making a fundamental change in economic policy unavoidable.¹² As noted by Robert William Davies, the New Economic Policy marked the transition from the emergency measures of War Communism to a mixed economic system that combined state control over the commanding sectors of the economy with the partial restoration of market mechanisms.¹³ Developing this interpretation further, Moshe Lewin argues that the New Economic Policy was more than an economic reform; it represented a broader attempt to redefine the relationship between the Soviet state and society in response to the crisis of War Communism.¹⁴

Against this background, the situation in Armenia was distinguished by an exceptionally heavy social burden in addition to the general economic crisis. The presence of tens of thousands of destitute refugees and, in particular, orphaned children created social welfare challenges that exceeded the material and administrative capacities of the newly established Soviet government.

In response to these challenges, the New Economic Policy was introduced in Armenia, replacing the emergency policies of War Communism with a more flexible economic model that combined state control with limited market mechanisms. While the New Economic Policy allowed for certain capitalist practices, such as private enterprise and individual responsibility, it initially brought noticeable improvements to the country's socio-economic conditions. However, its positive impact was short-lived due to its reliance on the mechanism of food taxes – extracting taxes from peasants in

pounds sterling, as well as various gold and silver ornaments and objects and other accessories of material value.

¹¹ Blinov & Derevenko, 1923.

¹² Fitzpatrick, 2001: 93-95.

¹³ Davies, 1993: 1-4.

¹⁴ Lewin, 1985: 3-15.

the form of agricultural produce. This approach further suppressed the already limited monetary circulation, leading to currency depreciation. To address these issues, the authorities shifted to levying taxes in monetary form. However, given the minimal living standards, the economic burden largely fell on agricultural workers, exacerbating their hardships and fueling widespread discontent.

Clearly, relying solely on economic measures was insufficient to address the growing, multifaceted social issues, as each new transformation brought additional challenges. Resolving these socio-economic problems would have been impossible without external assistance, particularly from Russia.¹⁵ However, during this period, Russia itself was grappling with severe social difficulties, most notably a significant food shortage. As a result, starting in April 1921, the monthly grain allocation to Armenia was reduced by 5.5 times.¹⁶

The most indicative situation is represented by the data of the Social Committee of the Armenian SSR, according to which already in December 1921 there were more than 200 thousand needy people in Armenia. Western Armenian refugees, 50 thousand urban beggars, 50 thousand orphans (except those in American orphanages), more than 5 thousand war disabled, etc.¹⁷ Orphans and refugees together accounted for nearly 35% of the country's total population, while orphans alone accounted for approximately 7%. Against the backdrop of high child mortality and the unprecedented number of orphaned children, orphan care emerged as one of the foremost priorities for the social stabilization of Soviet Armenia, while assistance to refugees constituted an important complementary component of this effort.

In such dire circumstances, it became increasingly evident that the authorities alone could not stabilize the catastrophic situation in the country without external support. The majority of this assistance came from foreign humanitarian and charitable organisations, with the contributions of NER and Anglcom being particularly invaluable.

Impact of NER and Anglcom Activities on Socio-Economic Issues

Foreign humanitarian organisations had a significant influence on various aspects of social and economic life, often serving complementary functions that resulted in a more targeted and effective integrated impact.

NER officially began its operations in Armenia in May 1919, extending its activities across the entire Republic and saving thousands of orphans and refugees from famine and epidemics.¹⁸ Following the establishment of Soviet power in Armenia,

¹⁵ Virabyan, 2007: 58-60.

¹⁶ Ghazakhetsyan, 2006: 227.

¹⁷ Meliksetyan, 1975: 93-94.

¹⁸ Avetisyan, 2009: 152.

NER continued its work in collaboration with the Soviet authorities,¹⁹ receiving their official support and full guarantees. These assurances exempted the organisation from any form of confiscation, enabling it to carry out its mission effectively.

This concession and the privileges granted by the Soviet authorities were entirely logical, given the immense scale of NER's activities and their profound impact on the social situation. For comparison it should be noted that as of 1921, over 15,000 children²⁰ were under the care of more than 50 state-run orphanages. In comparison, NER was responsible for approximately 25,000 orphans²¹ that same year – accounting for more than 30% of the total orphan population in the country and 40% more than the number of children cared for by the Soviet Social Committee.

Even when considering the orphans housed in foster homes run by other organisations, an estimated 16,000 children remained homeless in the country. These figures underscore that, without NER's humanitarian aid, the Soviet authorities would have been unable to finance even the most basic needs for such a vast number of orphans. Consequently, a significant portion of the country's future generation – the national gene pool – would likely have faced devastating losses.

Combining the data reported in various sources, Diagram 1 shows the trend in the total number of NER orphans from 1920 to 1927.

From 1924 onward, improved living conditions in the agricultural sector contributed to this trend. Many refugees started searching for lost children and relatives, and individuals from NER orphanages began taking home not only their own children but also those of relatives or even fellow villagers, which was also one of the reasons for the sharp decline in the number of orphans.²²

In 1924, NER announced that it would begin to gradually empty the orphanages and invited the government to consider the future fate of the orphans.²³ As of 1 January 1926, NER had 8234 orphans²⁴ in its orphanages, and as of 1 January 1927, the number of orphans had decreased by another 2733.²⁵

As of 1923, NER operated 43 orphanages in Armenia, of which only 35 were in the neighbourhood of Alexandropol, which was therefore known in society as “the city of orphans.”²⁶

¹⁹ Azatean, 1995: 68-71.

²⁰ Meliksetyan, 1975: 94.

²¹ Peterson, 2004: 112.

²² Avetisyan, 2009: 169.

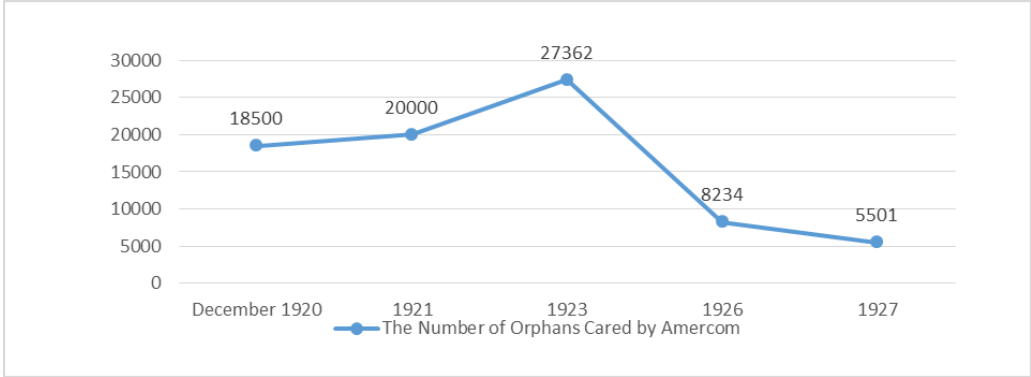
²³ HAA, f. 113, in. 38, f. 42, pp. 125, 148, 252, 261; f. 122, in. 1, f. 508, p. 10.

²⁴ HAA, f. 39, in. 1, f. 2, p. 17.

²⁵ HAA, f. 122, in. 1, f. 399, p. 26.

²⁶ Azatean, 1995: 72.

Diagram 1. Changes in the Total Number of Orphans in NER’s Care 1920-1927.



Source: Avetisyan, 2024: 189.

The diagram illustrates that NER’s orphan care activities were most active during the initial years of Sovietisation. After this peak, the number of orphans under NER’s care began to gradually decline. This decrease was primarily attributed to many orphans reaching adulthood and leaving the orphanages.

As of January 1923, a total of 20,367 students were enrolled in educational institutions operated by NER’s orphanages. These included 3,559 in Yerevan, 2,397 in Alexandropol, 4,814 in the district areas, 4,544 at the Cossack Post, 2,431 in Seversk, 2,434 in Jalalogly, and 188 in Darachichak.²⁷

It is important to note that NER’s efforts extended beyond the care and education of orphans. In the institutions under its supervision, both boys and girls were taught various trades, which later provided them with valuable skills and became a source of income and livelihood as they grew into adulthood.

NER’s contribution to the stabilisation of the health situation in the country has also been enormous. The number of hospitals in the organisation reached 39 (10 migrant hospitals, 11 orphan hospitals, 5 reception hospitals, 5 infectious diseases hospitals, 7 infectious skin diseases hospitals, 1 eye hospital), with a total of 5609 beds.²⁸ Almost the entire population depended on the facilities of the NER hospitals, which were staffed by both American and local doctors and nurses.

The population’s dependence on NER was so great that the organisation’s staff frequently complained of being overwhelmed, as they were often called upon to assist anyone in need, whether for help or medical treatment, despite not being tasked with taking care of the entire country.²⁹

²⁷ *Hayastani Sotsialistakan Khorhrdayin Hanrapetutyun*, 1925: 347.

²⁸ Barton, 1930: 126.

²⁹ Avetisyan, 2009: 168.

NER's financial and material support, including food, clothing, and other essentials, was substantial. Throughout its entire period of operation in Armenia and other countries, NER spent a total of approximately 91 million 146 thousand dollars.³⁰

In 1924 alone, NER shipped approximately 9.33 million pounds of relief supplies to Armenia, along with 148,800 dollars in cash assistance. The shipment included approximately 4 million pounds of clothing distributed to refugees in Armenia and Greece, 3.3 million pounds of flour, 500,000 pounds of corn, 100,000 pounds of condensed milk, and 300,000 pounds of canned food. More than half a million people benefited from this assistance.³¹ The recipients of this aid numbered over half a million people.³²

It should be noted, however, that the quantitative data on humanitarian assistance available in published sources and archival records are fragmentary and unsystematic, making it impossible to fully reconstruct the actual scale of relief efforts or to conduct a consistent chronological analysis of their dynamics. Despite these limitations, the available evidence indicates that financial and material assistance of such magnitude could not but have had a substantial positive impact on the economy of a country suffering from extreme poverty and severe shortages of public financial resources.

At the same time, contemporary assessments of NER's activities and their economic impact were not unequivocal. Some complaints arose, claiming that under the guise of providing aid, the Americans were involved in illegal trade practices. Since the goods they imported were exempt from duties, they flooded the market with cheap products, which, in turn, hurt local production.³³ However, it is important to recognize that the mentality associated with a market economy and the logic of market competition were not yet ingrained in the perceptions of the 1920s. In this context, the effect of NER's activities can be seen as ambiguous. The availability of cheap and accessible goods significantly alleviated the burden on the extremely low-income population and offered an alternative to more expensive local products.

As for the activities of Anglcom, a review of archival documents reveals that although the scale of Anglcom's assistance was smaller compared to NER, it still had a notable impact. The most active period of Anglcom's operations was from 1922 to 1923, after which its activities gradually declined, and by 1926, the organisation ceased its operations.

³⁰ Azatean, 1995: 166.

³¹ Avetisyan, 2009. 191.

³² *Kochnak*, 1925: 1161.

³³ HAA, f. 113, in. 38, f. 30, pp. 147-148.

In 1922, Anglcom imported 65 wagons of various goods into Armenia.³⁴ The total amount raised by the fund in the same year was 30,000 pounds, a significant portion of which was sent to Yerevan.³⁵

The significant influence of Anglcom's activities on stabilizing the dire social situation is highlighted in a report submitted by the People's Commissar for Education (hereafter Narkompros) to the People's Committee of the Armenian SSR. The report states:

Fully aware that, by the end of autumn, hundreds of homeless children wandering the streets each night would face severe hardship, and recognizing that within the framework of our budget, we could not even minimally address the needs of these unfortunate children, we appealed to the American and English committees for support. The American committee flatly refused, stating that its funds did not allow for the opening of any new orphanages. However, the English committee pledged its support. Northcourt, a commissioner of the English committee, promised to open a new orphanage for street children in October, to provide food and clothing for 250 children, and to supply 2,000 yards of material for winter clothing.³⁶

Starting in December 1922, Anglcom expanded its activities by opening feeding centers for a total of 2,700 children and assisting 6,900 refugees from Mesopotamia and Persia,³⁷ thereby rescuing them from hunger and suffering.

By 1923, Anglcom was operating four orphanages, one hospital, several vocational schools, and a general school with 513 pupils,³⁸ where the children of the committee's employees were educated alongside orphans. In addition, food stations for refugees were established in seven settlements: Yerevan, Echmiadzin, Oshakan, Ashtarak, Bash-Garni, Kamarlu, and Nakhchivan.

As early as July 1925, negotiations between Anglcom and the Narkompros of the Armenian SSR began regarding the transfer of the orphanages. According to the agreement, Anglcom gradually handed over all the property of the orphanages by January 1926, after which the organisation's activities effectively ceased.

While the narrower scope of Anglcom's activities compared to NER resulted in a lower level of influence, it is important to note that, given the circumstances of the time, any form of external assistance played a crucial role in helping the government stabilize the critical social situation and restore the shattered economy.

³⁴ Poghosyan, 2005: 147.

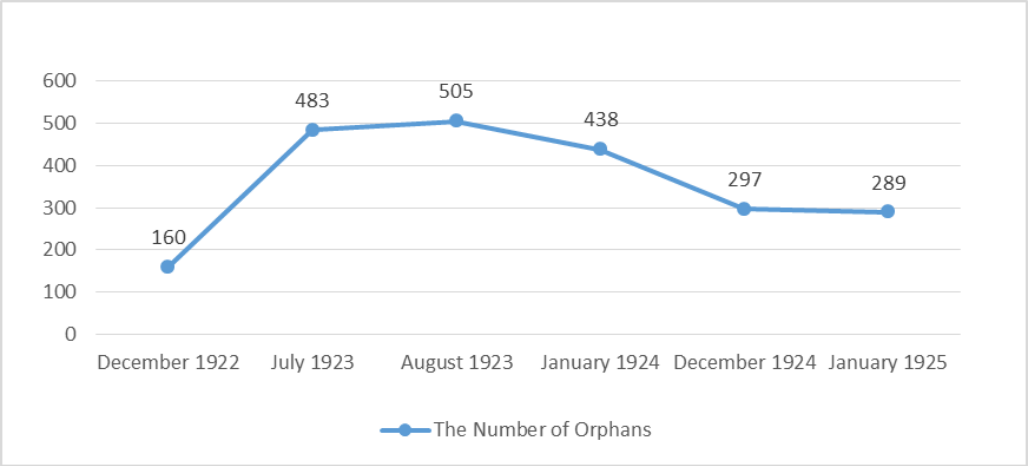
³⁵ Poghosyan, 2005: 151.

³⁶ HAA, f. 122, in. 1, f. 102, pp. 4-5.

³⁷ HAA, f. 113, in. 38, f. 30, pp. 98-105.

³⁸ HAA, f. 113, in. 38, f. 32, pp. 14-16.

Diagram 2. Changes in the Total Number of Orphans in Anglcom’s Care 1920-1925.



Source: Data in documents of HAA, f. 30, pp. 98-105, f. 32, pp. 14-16, f. 33, pp. 88-89, f. 42, pp. 9-17, f. 62, pp. 18-19, 76-83, f. 113, in. 38.

Conclusion

Beyond documenting the historical activities of the American Near East Relief Committee and the English Relief Committee, the findings of this study demonstrate that humanitarian organisations may play a far broader role than merely providing emergency relief. In conditions where state institutions possess limited fiscal and administrative capacity, humanitarian assistance can effectively complement public social policy by alleviating immediate social pressures, preserving human capital, and enabling governments to redirect scarce resources toward economic recovery and institutional development. This perspective contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between humanitarian assistance and state resilience during periods of profound socio-economic crisis. At the same time, the historical experience of Soviet Armenia remains relevant today, as many contemporary societies affected by armed conflicts, forced displacement, and humanitarian emergencies continue to face similar challenges of balancing urgent social needs with long-term recovery and sustainable development.

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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

No funding information.

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Data availability statement

<https://zenodo.org/records/21154692>

To cite this article: Gyozyalyan, V., Avetisyan, S. (2026). The Role of American and English Humanitarian Organisations in Stabilising the Socio-Economic Situation of Soviet Armenia in the Early 1920s. *Historia i Świat*, 15, 385–396. <https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2026.15.17>



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