

# In the Trenches of War: The Ottoman Red Crescent during WWI

Mesut ÇAPA\*

\* Professor Mesut Çapa teaches history at the Ankara University. He is currently the Director of the Institute of Turkish Revolution History.

**For citation** Çapa, M. (2025). In the trenches of war: The Ottoman Red Crescent during WWI. In A. Kuyaş (Ed.), *Humanitarian Support during WWI: Activities of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies* (pp. 9-62). Turkish Red Crescent.

## Introduction

The foundational principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent were established on 22 August 1864, when sixteen nations from around the world convened in Switzerland to sign the First Geneva Convention. Aimed at protecting sick and wounded combatants through a set of decisions, this agreement outlined provisions for the creation of humanitarian organizations by belligerent nations; the status of hospitals, healthcare workers, and volunteer nurses; and the delivery of aid to civilian populations and wounded soldiers. Accordingly, it was decided that a red cross atop a white background should serve as the universal emblem representing humanitarian organizations, hospitals, and their personnel. Individual Red Cross societies were, per the Geneva Convention, placed under the oversight of the newly formed International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Efforts to establish the Ottoman Red Crescent, known in Turkish as the ‘Osmānlı Hilāl-i Aḥmer Cem’iyyeti, began during the *Tanzimat* period. Signing the Geneva Convention on 5 July 1865, the Ottoman Empire sought to form its own organization similar to the extant Red Cross societies. However, public sensitivity toward adopting a cross led state officials to hesitate to form such an organization. Although the *Mecrūhīn-i ‘Asākir-i ‘Osmāniyyeye Mu‘āvenet Cem’iyyeti* (Society for Aiding Wounded Ottoman Soldiers) was established through the efforts of Dr. ‘Abdullāh Bey, a professor at the Imperial School of Medicine who had attended the International Conference of the Red Cross held in Paris in 1867, its charter, prepared in 1869,

was never formally ratified.

It would not be until 14 April 1877 that the Ottoman Red Crescent Society would be officially established. From its inception, the organization has carried both a national and, through its affiliation with the ICRC, an international identity.



◀ The first emblem of the Red Crescent, 1878

While the administrative structure of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society closely mirrored that of the existing Red Cross societies, it selected the Red Crescent as its emblem in lieu of a cross from its inception. The formal recognition of the Red Crescent as a “neutral, official emblem” by all states was ultimately secured through the efforts of Dr. Besim Ömer (Akalin) Pasha at the Eighth International Conference of the Red Cross held in London in 1907.<sup>1</sup> In subsequent years, Islamic nations likewise integrated the red crescent into the nomenclature of the humanitarian societies that they either had established or would go on to establish.

The Red Crescent Society remained largely inactive from its inception until the Second Constitutional Period, when, following the 1908 constitutional reform, Minister of Foreign Affairs Rifat Pasha redrafted the organization’s charter. The Red Crescent was formally reestablished on 20 April 1911 during the presidency of the Grand Vizier İbrâhîm Hakkı Pasha. The society rapidly expanded its institutional capacity and provided important humanitarian services during the conflict in Ottoman Tripolitania and the Balkan Wars.

Rifat Pasha’s efforts after the beginning of the Second Constitutional Period resulted in the reorganization of the Red Crescent. A new charter drafted in 1911 by a committee largely composed of physicians remained in force until 1925. Notable members of the committee included Dr. Es’ad (Işık) Pasha, Dr. Besim Ömer (Akalin) Pasha, Dr. Bahâeddin Şâkir Bey, Chief of the Private Secretariat of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Şâlih Bey, Director of the Imperial Military Medical School Dr. ‘Alî Gâlib Bey, Inspector General of the Public Health Directorate Dr. Kâsım ‘İzzeddin, and retired Colonel and physician Mehmed ‘Alî Bey.

The first article of the charter states that a society named the Ottoman Red Crescent Society, headquartered in Istanbul, was established under the patronage of the sultan and the honorary presidency of the crown prince. In line with this provision, the society came under the patronage of Sultan Mehmed Reşad V, while Crown Prince ‘İzzeddin Efendi assumed honorary presidency. The Central Committee was elected on 20 April 1911 by the Red Crescent General Assembly convened under the chairmanship of Grand Vizier İbrâhîm Hakkı Pasha. The charter stipulated that members of the Red Crescent Central Headquarters and those serving as vice presidents were to carry out their duties without remuneration. In fact, senior members of the Red Crescent were expected, as a principle, to perform their duties without receiving financial compensation. Nevertheless, the charter allowed for a salaried secretary from outside the organization to be employed. The monumental workload during World War I and its aftermath necessitated the hiring of such a secretary. All correspondence was signed by the president and vice presidents, while purchases and expenditures were conducted in accordance with written directives issued by the president pursuant to the decisions of the Central Headquarters.

1 Besim Ömer. *Dokuzuncu Washington Salib-i Ahmer Konferansı’na Memuriyetim ve Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cemiyeti’ne Tekliflerim Hakkında*, İstanbul, 1328, pp.51-52.

Although established as a national institution, the Red Crescent Society functioned, pursuant to the Geneva Convention and the Conference of The Hague, as a bona fide international humanitarian organization. Mirroring the Red Cross, the Red Crescent adopted the principle of absolute neutrality and impartiality. Its operations were governed by the core principles adopted upon its accession to the Geneva-based ICRC as well as by the charter drafted in line with these principles. The Red Crescent's founding objectives were articulated as follows:

The Red Crescent Society was to use its wealth of resources to assist the medical units serving the Ottoman land and naval forces in the treatment of sick and wounded soldiers. On land, it was to establish field hospitals, dispatch medical teams, and operate hospital trains for wounded soldiers near battle zones; at sea, it was responsible for organizing and maintaining hospital ships. In times of war, the Red Crescent was authorized to make expenditures provided that they did not exceed the organization's annual income. The decisions ratified at the Geneva Convention and Convention of The Hague similarly required the Red Crescent to provide assistance to sick and wounded combat forces from foreign belligerent armies.<sup>2</sup>

## **The Ottoman Red Crescent Society during WWI**

The Ottoman Empire fought on a number of fronts during WWI, including the Dardanelles, the Caucasus, and Palestine (Suez Canal). During this tumultuous period, the Red Crescent coordinated closely with the army in matters concerning POWs, displaced populations, medical care, and relief efforts. Medics trained by the Red Crescent rendered a range of essential services behind the frontlines.

Unable to fully consolidate its organizational structure during the Tripolitanian and Balkan Wars, the Red Crescent expanded both its headquarters and provincial branches at the beginning of 1914. During the ensuing years of conflict, it carried out activities in key centers like Ankara, Çankırı, İzmir, Sivas, Edirne, Baghdad, Yemen, and Sofia. In addition to this, the society appointed representatives both domestically and abroad.

## **Administrative Structure**

Following the outbreak of WWI, the Red Crescent Central Committee, taking into account the extraordinary circumstances of the war, delegated a significant portion of its responsibilities to the Executive Board—itsself composed of the following members:

President Hüseyn Hilmî Pasha, Vice President Dr. Besîm 'Ömer (Akalin) Pasha, Vice President Dr. 'Âkîl Muhtâr (Özden), Secretary General Dr. 'Adnân (Adivar), Chief Inspector Dr. Celâl Muhtâr

---

<sup>2</sup> Mesut Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, Türkiye Kızılay Derneği Yay., Ankara 2009, pp. 17–21.

(Özden), Honorary Accountant Hâmid (Hasancan), and Honorary Treasurer Berç Keresteciyan (Türker) Efendi. Vested with the most authority, Dr. 'Adnân (Adivar) oversaw coordination between the Red Crescent and the army's medical department during WWI. Members of the Executive Board were all honorary, with only the chief inspector receiving a salary to cover his necessary expenses.<sup>3</sup>



▲ Members of the 2nd General Assembly of the Ottoman Red Crescent Society gathered at Darülfünun in 1912

**Seated, front row from left to right:**

1. Dr. Râsim Pasha
2. 'Azmi 'Ömer Bey
3. Mehmed Muhtâr Pasha
4. Hüseyin Hilmi Pasha
5. Minister of Foundations Hayrî Bey
6. Chief of Staff Nasib Pasha
7. Dr. Lâmbikî Pasha
8. Dr. Es'ad Pasha

**Standing, second row from left to right:**

1. Dr. Hâzım Pasha
2. Writer Dîrân Kelekyân Efendi
3. Dr. Celâl Muhtâr Bey
4. Dr. 'Âkil Muhtâr Bey
5. Dr. Hakkı Şinâsî Pasha
6. Surgeon Dr. Kerîm Şebâtî Bey
7. Veterinarian 'Âbidîn Bey
8. Dr. Gâlib Bey (Director of the Medical School)
9. Jerusalem Deputy Rûhî al-Khâlidî Bey
10. Dr. Kâsım 'Izzeddîn Bey
11. Berç Türker Bey
12. Dr. Mehmed 'Alî Bey

**Standing, third row from left to right:**

1. Dr. Kilisli Ri'fat Bey
  2. Ziyâ Nûrî Pasha
  3. Âgâh 'Ömer Bey
  4. Merchant Kamhî Effendi
- Last row, standing:
1. Haydar Kermen
  2. Dr. 'Adnân (Adivar)

3 Mesut Çapa, "Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer (Kızılay) Cemiyeti," *Osmanlı*, Vol.5, Yeni Türkiye Yay., Ankara 1999, p. 133. *Türkiye Kızılay Derneği, 73 Yıllık Hayatı (1877-1949)*, Ankara, 1950, pp. 59-61.

Several visionary doctors—most notably Besim ‘Ömer Pasha, Âkil Muhtâr (Özden), Celâl Muhtâr (Özden), and ‘Adnân (Adivar)—were instrumental in the Red Crescent’s wartime success. Indeed, it was largely through the dedicated efforts of these and other selfless individuals that the Red Crescent earned the trust and recognition of both the military and the wider civilian population.

Dr. Celâl Muhtâr’s discipline, foresight, and steadfast commitment were pivotal to the Red Crescent’s success during the First World War. He oversaw the administrative and financial affairs of the organization’s central warehouse in Kantarcılar disctrict of Istanbul, during this perilous period. Anticipating that the war would last for at least four years and precipitate severe inflation, Celâl Muhtâr launched a series of strategic initiatives to strengthen the Red Crescent’s operational capacity. He prioritized increasing the amount of food and clothing stocks in the warehouses and depots he established while simultaneously working to boost agricultural production, develop fisheries, and enhance the transportation network.<sup>4</sup> After consulting with Halil Edhem Bey, then director general of museums, on the best course of action, Celâl Muhtâr rented and converted the former’s mansion in Kantarcılar into a large warehouse. He had the foresight to procure ten thousand kerosene tins at the beginning of the war at a nominal cost—an act that would later prove critical to the transportation and preservation of essential goods such as olive oil, clarified butter, and petroleum as storage containers became increasingly scarce as the war dragged on. These tins were also used for storing foodstuffs delivered to hospitals and kitchens.



◀ Storage of Red Crescent supplies (1331 / 1915)

4 Yalman, Ahmet Emin, *Yakın Tarihte Gördüklerim, Geçirdiklerim*, Vol. I., Istanbul, 1970, pp. 283–284.



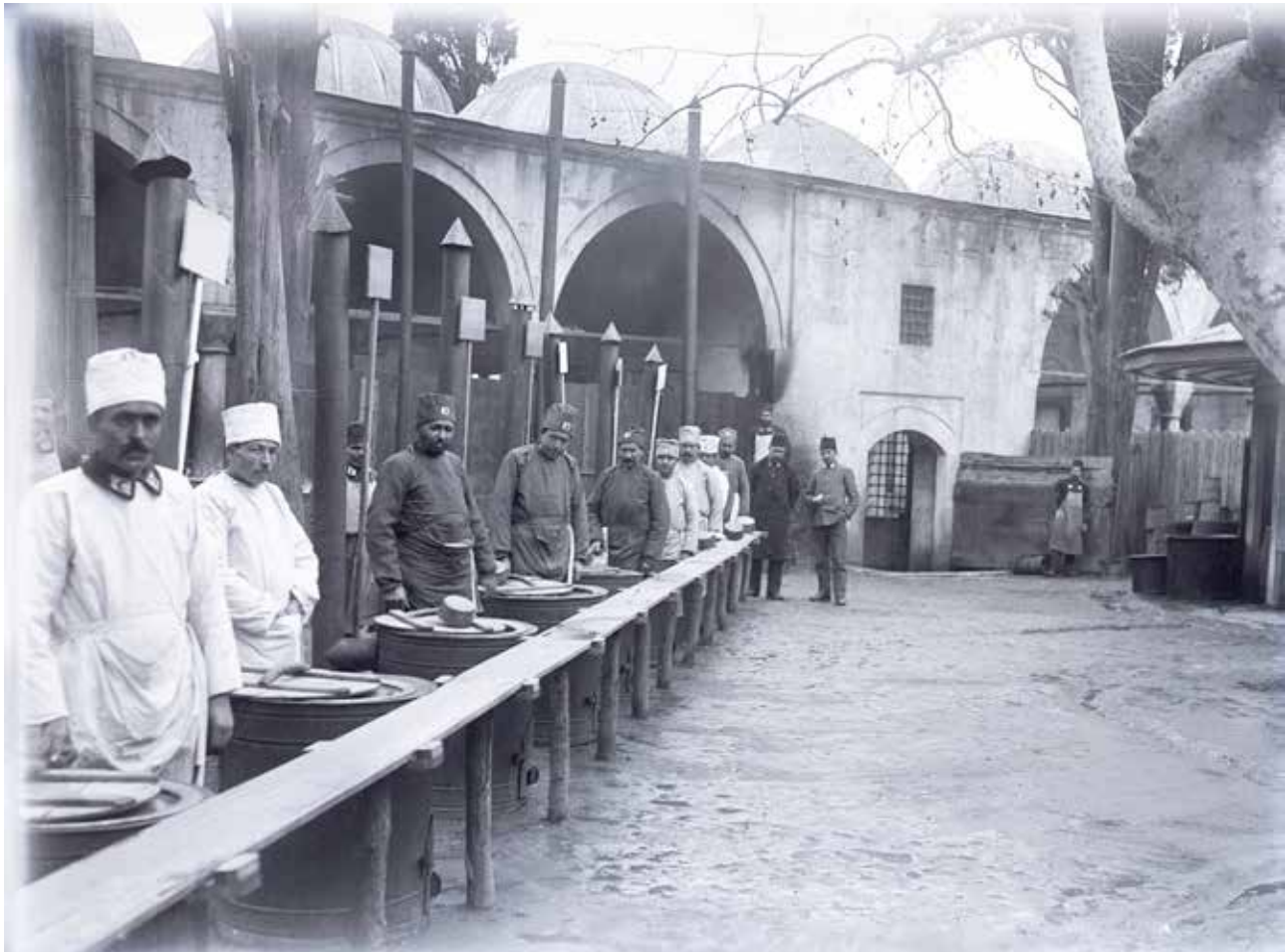
◀ *Stock of samovars and oil lamps in the Red Crescent warehouse*



◀ *The Red Crescent warehouse in Sirkeci (Istanbul)*



The Red Crescent's most urgent need during the war was unbleached cotton muslin and canvas. Without this material, it would have been impossible to meet the organization's myriad textile needs, which included clothing for patients and their caregivers, hospital bed sheets, and wound dressings. The Executive Board petitioned the government for permission to export raw cotton to Germany and Austria, where it would be processed in textile factors and returned as finished muslin. Through this arrangement, the Red Crescent was able to secure one million meters of muslin at below-market prices. A sewing workshop was promptly established in the organization's central warehouse to produce garments from this fabric. The Red Crescent also paid special attention to the production of stretchers to transport sick and wounded servicemen—items that likewise required canvas. To this end, Hüsni Efendi, a master oar-maker assigned to the Red Crescent by the armed forces, was commissioned to produce them.







▲ Red Crescent soup kitchens in Istanbul during World War I



▲ Dr. 'Âkîl Muhtâr (Özden)

Istanbul was blessed with an abundance of fish during WWI, which were preserved in brine for use in hospitals and kitchens. Over the course of the war, the Red Crescent distributed a total of thirty-six million meals through the kitchens it had set up in Topkapı, Üsküdar, Eyüp Sultan, Kumkapı, Fatih, Atikalipaşa, and Kartal. Per Dr. Celâl Muhtâr's recommendation, the preparation and distribution of food was performed with meticulous attention to cost and logistics. Recipients of food were issued color-coded cards designating the amount of food they were entitled to receive. With the exception of the Secretary General, who was employed full time, all members of the Executive Board served on a voluntary basis. Although a modest stipend was allocated to the Inspector General to cover essential expenses, Celâl Muhtâr reportedly "refrained from touching even a single coin of it," opting instead to donate his entire salary to charity. Toward the end of WWI, at the General Assembly meeting held on 5 February 1918, Celâl Muhtâr was once again elected Inspector General.



▲ Dr. Besîm 'Ömer (Akalin) Pasha

A founding member of the Red Crescent when it was reestablished in 1911, Dr. 'Âkîl Muhtâr (Özden) served as Vice President from 1913 until the latter stages of the Turkish War of Independence. He, alongside his elder brother Dr. Celâl Muhtâr, played a pivotal role in driving the Red Crescent's continued development. During WWI, Dr. 'Âkîl Muhtâr was assigned to maintain relations between the Red Crescent and the government, preside over both the Central and Executive Boards, and ensure coordination between these two bodies.

Dr. Besîm 'Ömer (Akalin) Pasha served as Vice President of the Ottoman Red Crescent from the organization's reestablishment in 1911 until 1918. The organization represented the Ottoman Empire in relations with the ICRC and at international assemblies. Besîm 'Ömer Pasha's involvement with the Red Crescent dated back even before the Second Constitutional Period. As stated above, his efforts at the Eighth International Red Cross Conference in London in June 1907—alongside the persistent advocacy of the Ottoman delegation's at The Hague—led to the universal recognition of the Red Crescent as a "neutral, official emblem." He likewise played a central



▲ *Himâye-i Etfâl Society (Society for the care of the orphans). In the middle is Member of Parliament Faik Beyfendi, with Naile Hamdi Hanımefendi on his right and Dr. Besim Ömer, the society's president, on his left.*

role both in mobilizing Turkish women to join the Red Crescent and in legitimizing nursing as a profession. As the Red Crescent's vice president and technical advisor (*müşâvir-i fennî*) to its Women's Center, Besim Ömer Pasha delivered lectures on nurse training to women. Many prospective nurses attended his classes in the lecture hall of Istanbul's Dârü'l-Fünûn (the precursor to Istanbul University) between October 1914 and April 1915, several of whom later served in Red Crescent and military hospitals in Istanbul during the Battles of Gallipoli. In one of his published lectures, he emphasized the importance of women's participation in social life, highlighting the vital services that Red Crescent-trained nurses could provide during both war and peacetime. Dr. Besim Ömer Pasha stepped down from his position as Vice President during the General Assembly meeting on 5 February 1918, after which date he continued to serve as the organization's honorary president.

Joining the Red Crescent during the Balkan Wars, Hâmid (Hasan) Bey served as the honorary accountant for the organization during WWI. Then, on 5 February 1918 during the aforementioned meeting, Hâmid Bey was elected to replace Besim Ömer Pasha as Vice President, after which he came to be known as "the Red Crescent man" throughout the Turkish War of Independence. From that point on, Berç Keresteciyan Efendi assumed Hâmid Bey's former role of honorary accountant.



▲ *Dr. 'Adnān (Adivar) Bey*

Dr. 'Adnān (Adivar) Bey, having previously served as an inspector for the Red Crescent during the Italo-Turkish War, was appointed Secretary General during WWI, overseeing the organization's medical and administrative affairs. He played a key role in establishing Red Crescent-affiliated healthcare, social-assistance, and philanthropic activities; in identifying their areas of operation; and in managing the various administrative branches of the General Headquarters. He was concurrently appointed Assistant to the Inspector General of the Field Medical Corps by the Ministry of War, afforded the rank of reserve medical major. In this dual role, he was also tasked with coordinating relations between the Military Medical Corps and the Red Crescent Society.

Dr. Hikmet (Gizer) Bey, an assistant at the Faculty of Medicine, served a secretary general of the Red Crescent and its delegate in Europe during WWI. Recognizing early in the war that it could not meet its expenses solely through domestic donations, the Red Crescent undertook efforts to secure funds from the citizens of its European allies. Together with a secretary, Dr. Hikmet Bey traveled to Germany, Austria, and Hungary as the Red Crescent's official representative.

There, he succeeded in collecting a substantial amount of donations from Berlin, Vienna, and Budapest. With donations raised through theater performances, concerts, and flower sales organized by the Red Crescent relief committee established in Bosnia and Herzegovina under the leadership of the Ottoman consul general, various supplies—many of which difficult to procure in Istanbul—were purchased and shipped back to the capital.

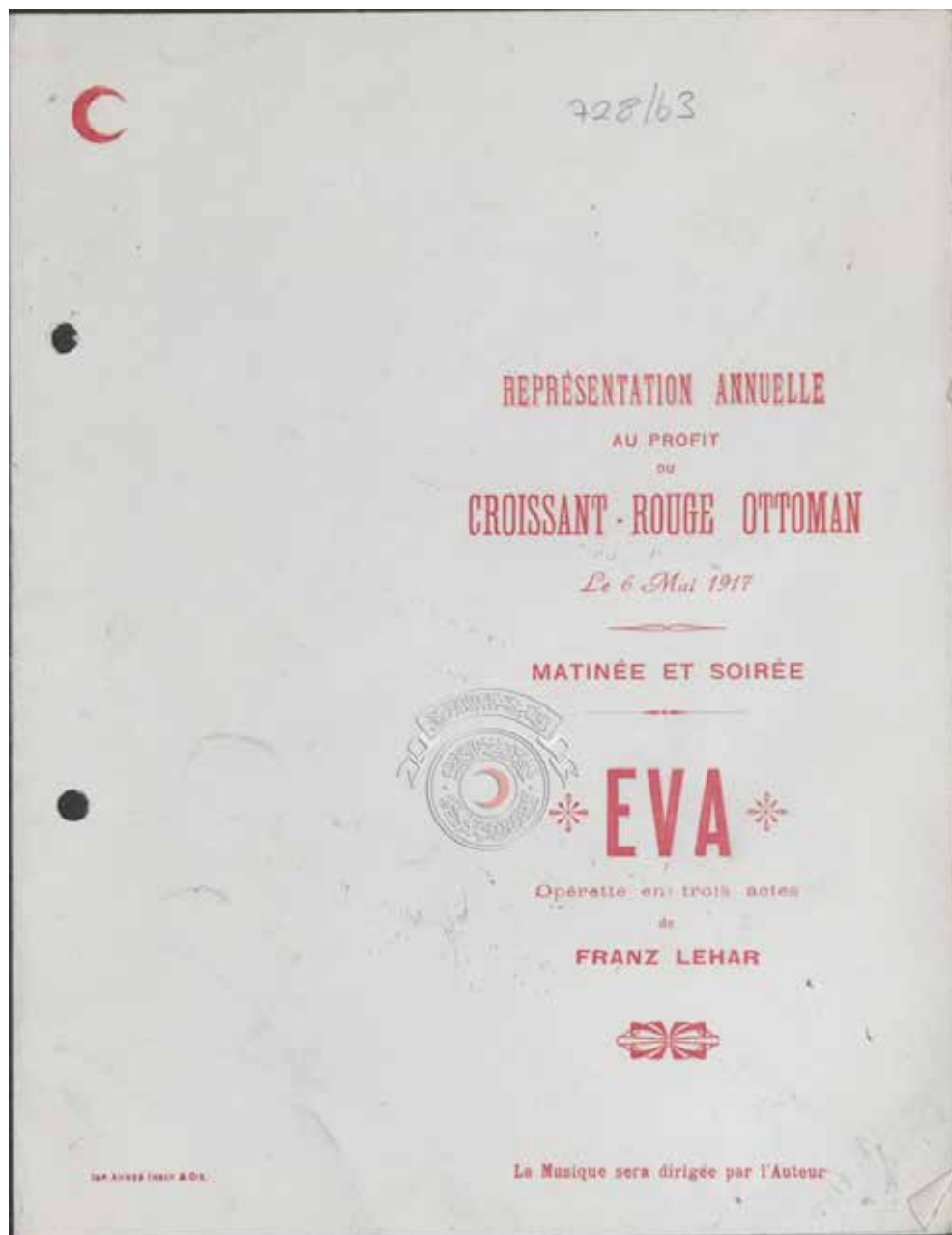


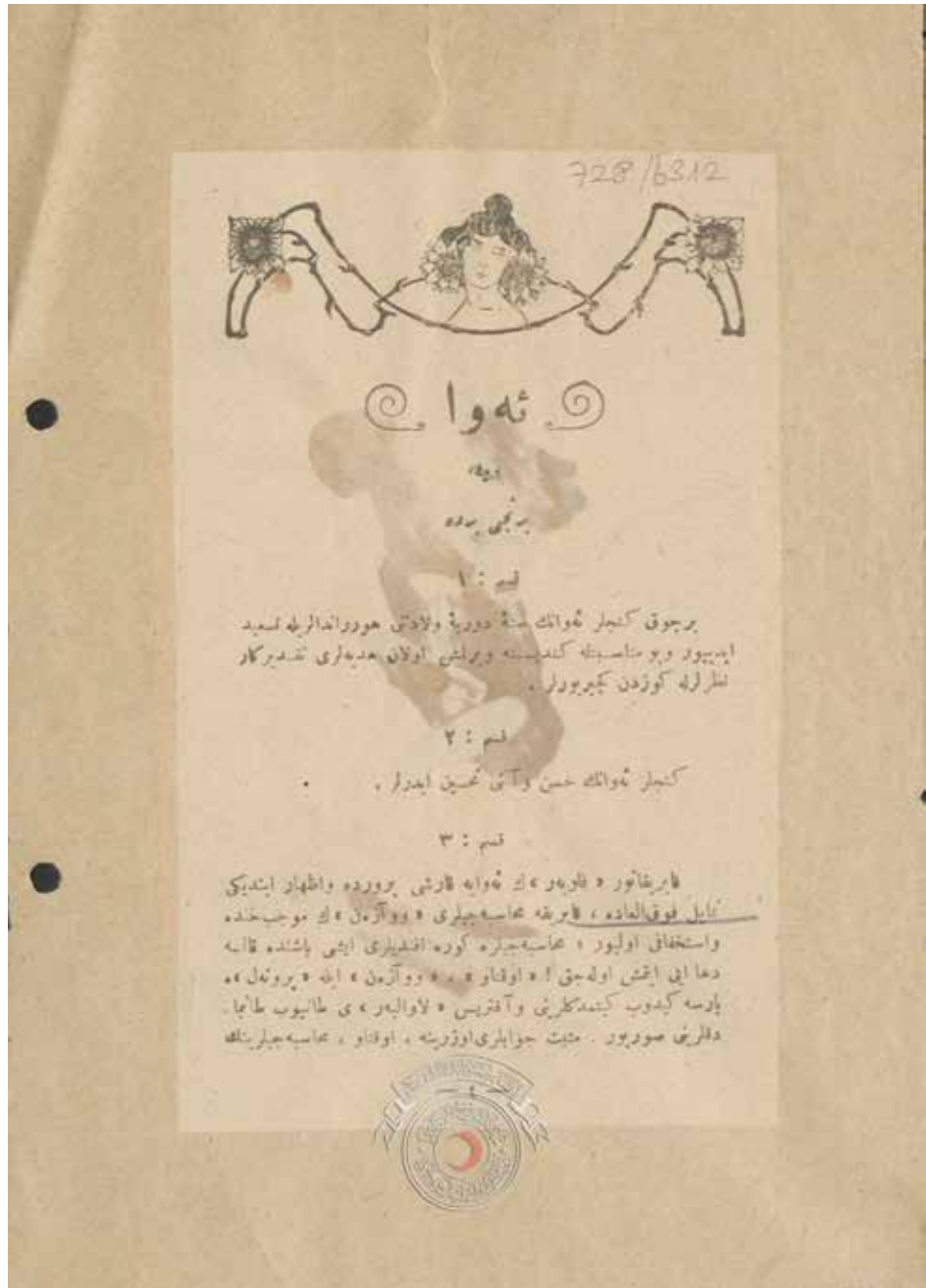
◀ *Sale of flower pins for the benefit of the Red Crescent, Karaköy (Istanbul)*





▲ Exhibition opened in Galata (Istanbul) for the benefit of the Red Crescent






▲ French and Ottoman Turkish program of Franz Lehár's operetta Eva performed for the benefit of the Red Crescent.





728/78

  
 بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ  
 عَمَّا بَلَّغْنِي هَذَا لِحَسْبِ حَسْبِي  
 وَلِيَّ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَالْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ  
 وَالْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَالْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ  
 وَالْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَالْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ  
 اَشْهُدُكَ نُونًا نَيْنَا ١٩ عَمَّا بَلَّغْنِي هَذَا لِحَسْبِ حَسْبِي  
 مَسَارَةُ نُونِ الْعَارِ

*Gesellschaft des Osmanischen Roten Kreuz*  
 unter dem Allerhöchsten Protektorat S. Kais. Maj. des Sultans  
*Abendunterhaltung*  
 gegeben unter dem  
 Höhen Patronate S. Kais. Hoheit Yussuf Izzeddin Effendi Thronfolger  
 und seiner Hoheit Prinz Said Halim Pascha  
 Grosswesir, Minister des Ausseren  
 am Montag den 12/25 Januar 1915 Abends 9 Uhr im  
 Winter Theater des Petits-Champs

*Société du Croissant Rouge Ottoman*  
 sous l'Auquale Protection de S. M. I. le Sultan  
*Soirée de Gala*  
 donnée sous le Haut Patronage de S. A. I. Youssef Izzeddine Effendi  
 Héritier du Trône  
 et sous la Présidence de S. A. le Prince Said Halim Pascha  
 Grand Vénir, Ministre des Affaires Étrangères  
 le Lundi 12/25 Janvier 1915 à 9 heures du soir  
 au Théâtre d'Hiver des Petits-Champs

L. S. G. 1915

▲ Visuals from advertisements for concerts held for the benefit of Red Crescent

Dr. Hikmet Bey likewise obtained medical supplies ordered by the military medical corps. He arranged for sick officers and enlistees sent to Germany, Austria, and Hungary for treatment to be placed in sanatoriums. He assisted with treatment and communication needs of soldiers fighting on the Galician Front, arranging for wounded to be repatriated to Ottoman territory. Following the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on 3 March 1918, Dr. Hikmet Bey provided assistance to POWs returning to Ottoman lands from Russia via Austria and Hungary.

After beginning to work with the Red Crescent at the onset of WWI as part of his military service, 'Alī Mācid (Arda) Bey eventually served as secretary of the Red Crescent Prisoner Commission (*Üserā Kōmisyōnu*). In 1915, he served as secretary to the Red Crescent delegation dispatched to inspect POW camps in Ankara and Çankırı.

During the General Assembly meeting held toward the conclusion of WWI on 5 February 1918, Dr. 'Aqıl Muhtār, Hāmid Bey, Kilisli Rifāt, Dr. Celāl Muhtār, Berç Keresteciyan, and Dr. 'Adnān Bey were appointed to the Red Crescent's board of directors. Hāmid Bey and Dr. 'Aqıl Muhtār Bey were elected as vice presidents of the organization.<sup>5</sup>

## **Establishing the Red Crescent Women's Center: Its Contributions to Nursing**

The great calamity and mass displacements experienced during the Balkan Wars convinced women of the need to support the Red Crescent's efforts behind the front lines. A fruit of Dr. Besīm 'Ömer Pasha's efforts, a women's center composed largely of the wives of senior statesmen and founding members of the Red Crescent was established on 20 Mart 1912. While Kāmures Kadın, queen consort of Sultan Reşād, served as honorary president of the Ottoman Red Crescent Women's Center, as it was known officially, Ni'met Maḥmūd Muhtār Hānım, wife of Maḥmūd Muhtār Pasha, was elected as acting president.<sup>6</sup>

Following the establishment of the Red Crescent Women's Center, Ottoman women increasingly embraced the vital role of nursing in the war effort. Caretakers—referred to as compassionate nurses—who successfully completed the courses taught by Dr. Besīm 'Ömer Pasha were authorized to serve behind the front lines.<sup>7</sup>

Having developed an interest in the subject while in London between 1887 and 1891, Dr. Besīm 'Ömer Pasha began offering courses in nursing and midwifery to young Turkish and Muslim girls from Russia and Istanbul at the Kadirğa Maternity Clinic to prepare them to

5 Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, pp. 24–29.

6 *Ibid.*, pp. 46–49.

7 Mesut Çapa, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Kızılay (Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti Hastabakıcıları," *Prof. Dr. İlker Alp'e Armağan Kitabı*, Çanakkale, 2021, pp. 157–169.

assist wounded soldiers during the Balkan Wars. The first course, opened in 1912, graduated ten women, all of whom were appointed chief nurses in various hospitals run by the Red Crescent.<sup>8</sup> Interest in the program grew rapidly. By the year preceding WWI, fifty women were enrolled in a five-month course at the Red Crescent's headquarters in Istanbul. Of these, twenty-seven passed the final exam held at the end of June 1914, thereby earning a nursing diploma. Honorary president Kāmures Kadın attended the graduation ceremony on 13 July 1914 alongside Nāciye Sultan, the wife of Minister of War Enver Pasha, and her mother. Presented with medals of honor on behalf of Sultan Reşād, the graduating women served in various hospitals run by the Red Crescent in Istanbul. The names of these women are:

Belkīs Cemāl, Belkīs Halil, Belkīs Rāgıb, Şervet Şākır, Hālet Şākır, Halīme Halīm, Hatice İbrāhīm, Hatice Agāh, Remīze Cemāl, Şādiye Halil, Seniha Ra'ūf, Sa'adet Şākır, Sa'adet Cemāl, Şabīha Haqqı, Tal'at Süreyyā, 'Āiše Süreyyā, 'Āliye 'Alī Rızā, Fāhire Sezā'i, Leylā Vāhid, Leylā Yūsuf Rāzī, Münire İsmā'il, Mācide Besīm, Mehri Başrī, Mebrūke Memdūh, Mebrūke Bekir, Nā'ile Hamdī, and Na'ime Haşib.

The Red Crescent also sought to train male nurses to meet the growing need for medics as the war progressed. Ten or so male candidates were selected through an examination administered by the Red Cross Central Headquarters to complete a year of hands-on training under practicing physicians at Ġurebā Hospital before being deployed to various fronts. A portion of these men were stationed at the Red Crescent hospital near the front line in Dobruja, where they served for more than a year.<sup>9</sup>

Red Crescent hospitals also accepted volunteer nurses who had been trained outside of its facilities. Two Muslim and four Jewish women were employed on a voluntary basis at the Red Crescent hospital in Tekirdağ in September 1915.<sup>10</sup>

The demand for nurses behind the front lines increased steadily throughout the war. On 8 September 1916, the Directorate of Medical Affairs—part of the Ministry of War—requested that the Red Crescent provide them nurses to care for wounded soldiers.<sup>11</sup> That same year, after completing their education at Kadirğa Maternity Hospital, seven women were deployed to Jerusalem and Damascus, assigned under the command of the Fourth Army. Bedīye Aḥmed, Zinet Aḥmed, Münevver Ġālib, Şeniye Ziyā, Nāfī'a Hüseyn, Fikriye Sinān, and Seher 'Ārif served in various hospitals from the time they arrived in Jerusalem until the fall of Damascus.<sup>12</sup>

8 'Osmānlı Hilāl-i Aḥmer Cem'iyyeti'niñ 1335 [1919] Senesinde Mün'aqid Hilāl-i Aḥmer Meclis-i 'Umūmisi Hey'et-i Muhteremesine Takdim Edilen 1330–1334 Senelerine 'Āid Merkez-i 'Umūmī Raporu, (OHAC 1335), Istanbul, Maṭba'a-i Orḡāniyye, 1335 AH, pp. 33–35.

9 OHAC 1335, pp. 34–35.

10 Türk Kızılay'ı Arşivi (TKA), file. 833.

11 Besīm 'Ömer, *Hānımefendilere Hilāl-i Aḥmer'e Dā'ir Konferans*, (n.d.), pp. 32–37.

12 TKA, file. 833, *Hānımlar Hey'et-i Merkeziyesi Tarafından Tertib Edilen Takvīm*, 1916, pp. 122–123 and OHAC 1335, p. 35.



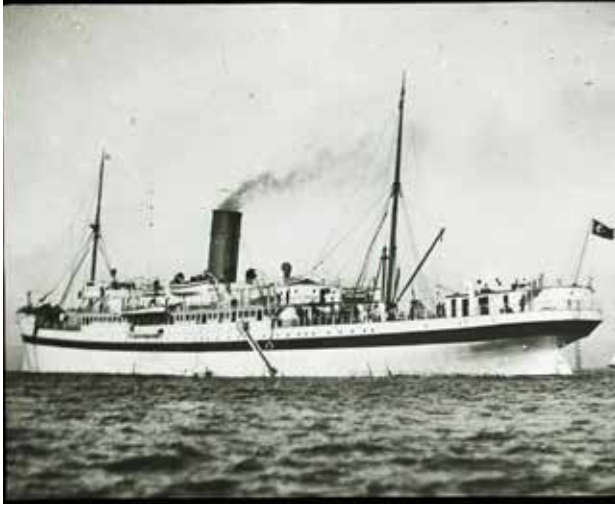
▲ Şâfiye Hüseyn (Elbi)



▲ At the Red Crescent Hospital of Cağaloğlu (Istanbul), 1331 / 1915

Despite their high interest among educated women in Istanbul, it remained a largely voluntary pursuit rather than a formal profession during the war. Among the women who chose to serve in this capacity were Şâfiye Hüseyn (Elbi) and Âişe Abdülcemil (Sılay), both of whom volunteered on multiple fronts throughout WWI. The Istanbul-born Şâfiye Hüseyn (Elbi) began working as a nurse during the Balkan Wars. Owing to her father's occupation, she completed her education abroad, acquiring fluency in English, French, and German.<sup>13</sup> Alongside her personal readings in anatomy, particularly in anatomy, she received practical training through the courses taught by Dr. Besim Ömer Pasha. Upon finishing her instruction, she was appointed head nurse of the Red Crescent's 950-bed hospital in Ğalața by the facility's head physician, Dr. Mehmed Âli Bey. After assisting in numerous surgeries and providing inpatient care, she was reassigned to the Red Crescent's Bezm-i Âlem Sultânisi Hospital in Cağaloğlu.

13 Başbakanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA), 490.1-305-1236-1.



▲ The Reşid Paşa hospital ship

Şâfiye Hânım served as head nurse aboard the *Reşid Paşa*, a hospital ship chartered by the German Red Cross from Seyr-i Sefâ'in, during the Battles of Gallipoli. While some of the wounded received treatment on board the ship, those who had sustained severe wounds were evacuated from Gallipoli to Istanbul—often under fire from the British. The crew and medical staff of *Reşid Paşa* performed their duties with unwavering dedication despite the constant threat

of death looming above them, sometimes enduring weeks without proper meals, suffering lice infestations, and spending many a freezing night after their coal supplies had been exhausted. Throughout the battles, Şâfiye Hânım tended to the needs of anyone who came to her wounded whatever his religion or ethnicity might have been, offering both medical treatment and emotional consolation. She inspired hope in gravely injured and despondent patients on the brink of despair, reassuring them that they would survive and go on to live long, fulfilling lives. In fact, her words were so comforting that several came to believe her. In one instance, she recounted the death of a British soldier aboard the ship:

We took great care to ensure that no critically wounded man died of thirst. We even gently trickled water into the mouth of this wounded British soldier. He'd repeat that he was going to die and would murmur the name of his fiancée under his breath over and over. I thought about what I'd need to do if he were indeed to pass. I began to console him in English—his mother tongue—without it once entering my mind that he was an enemy soldier.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to receiving medals from the Ottoman Red Crescent, British Red Cross, and German Red Cross, Şâfiye Hânım was honored with the Gallipoli Star and Florence Nightingale Medal in recognition for her selfless service in WWI.

Another courageous woman serving as a Red Crescent nurse behind front lines was 'Âişe' Abdülcemil (Sılay). Born in Istanbul in 1889, she completed her nursing education in the Gülhâne Military Hospital in 1914 and received her nursing certificate from the Red Crescent on 1 September of the following year. After initially working in the Red Crescent's Faculty

14 Mesut Çapa, *Birinci Dünya Savaşı ve Millî Mücadele'de Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti ve Kızılaycılar*, Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, Ankara, 2023, pp. 51–55.

Hospital, she would eventually be stationed in various hospitals near the front lines, including in Palestine, Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, Pozantı, Ereğli, Karaman, and Edirne. She was awarded certificates of commendation by the head physicians of the Jerusalem Military Surgical Hospital, the First Military Surgical Hospital in Damascus, and the Homs Surgical Medical Hospital.<sup>15</sup>

At the onset of WWI, 353 nurses with formal training applied to the Red Crescent headquarters in Istanbul. Of these, 284 served in the organization's military and civilian hospitals as nurses, twenty held diplomas from the Red Crescent, thirty-six were enrolled in university classes, thirty-seven were students at Kadirğa, and thirty-five possessed certificates attesting to their prior service in hospitals during the Balkan Wars. The remaining 156, though lacking formal qualifications or documentation, worked as volunteers alongside hospital and medical staff.<sup>16</sup>

As the war drew to a close, the Red Crescent, despite all its efforts, had not succeeded in establishing a systematic nursing program. While nursing education was not institutionalized at the school level during the war, the blend of theoretical and practical instruction received in hospitals was instrumental in laying the groundwork for the development of nursing in the country. Until then, however, the Red Crescent would remain the sole provider of nursing education during the twilight of the Ottoman Empire and the dawn of the soon-to-emerge Republic of Türkiye.

## **Coordination between the Red Crescent and the Ottoman Armed Forces**

Throughout the war, the Red Crescent's medical teams and humanitarian aid played a vital role in supporting the efforts of the Ottoman military medical corps. Supplies received by the medical corps included bedding sets, laboratory equipment, surgical instruments, serum, vaccinations, bandages, field hospital supplies, kitchen utensils, various foodstuffs, sterilizers, tents, mobile hospital wagons, transport carts, discharge papers, and washing machines. The Red Crescent likewise dispatched medical teams to the Caucasus Front to assist the military's medical operations there. A thirty-member Red Crescent delegation headed by Dr. Mehmed Emîn Bey traveled from Trabzon to Erzurum, where they treated sick and wounded soldiers arriving from the front lines and worked to prevent the spread of typhus and other infectious diseases. After establishing a 200-bed hospital in Erzurum in early 1915, the team relocated to nearby Erzincan. The second team subsequently deployed by the Red Crescent to Erzurum was, however, forced to retreat to Kayseri through Erzincan and Kemah following the Russian occupation of Erzurum in 1916. Once in Kayseri, they established a 1,000-bed convalescent facility in Zencidere.

<sup>15</sup> BCA, 490.1-297-1200-1.

<sup>16</sup> Seçil Karal Akgün and Murat Uluğtekin, *Hilâl-i Ahmer'den Kızılay'a*, Türk Hava Kurumu Basımevi İşletmeciliği, Ankara, 2000, pp. 170–171.





▲ Red Crescent tents, Hafir



▲ Palestinian front, a picture from the surgery



▲ *Palestinian front, a picture from the surgery*



▲ *Red Crescent's mobile hospital at Hadımköy*



▲ Wounded soldier carried out of a hospital ship in Istanbul



▲ Training of nurses at Kadirga Hospital (Istanbul)





▲ *Transportation of the wounded by camels*



◀ *Classroom converted to a hospital ward at Istanbul University*



▲ Medical staff at Ayastefanos Hospital (Istanbul)

The Red Crescent appointed Dr. Âşaf Dervîş Paşa, professor at the Faculty of Medicine, to lead its newly established War Zone Delegation (*Dârü'l-Harp Murahhaslığı*) in early 1915. As head delegate, Âşaf Pasha was tasked both with establishing supply relay points to facilitate the shipment of medical equipment from Istanbul to the Red Crescent's health units on the Caucasus Front and with inspecting Red Crescent medical contingents stationed along the transit corridor from Konya to the front lines. He detailed his activities in a report submitted to the Red Crescent Headquarters on 22 April 1915, noting that efforts to curb the spread of infectious diseases in Konya, Ereğli, and Ulukışla, whence he sent his report, were successful. He also reported that the Red Crescent's hospital in Konya had been closed and relocated eastward in Sivas to reinforce the organization's efforts to quell the spread of typhus in the area and to support the recently established supply center. Concurrently, shipments of medical equipment both for a planned 500-bed convalescent facility in Erzurum and other nearby medical installations were dispatched from storage depots in Istanbul and Eskişehir. To provide logistical support for these consignments, Âşaf Pasha set up relay points first in

Kayseri and Sivas and then in Erzincan and Erzurum. Over the course of his three-month tenure, Âşaf Pasha worked in Konya, Ereğli, Kayseri, Sivas, Erzincan, and Erzurum where he reinforced the infrastructure needed to sustain the Red Crescent's medical services on the eastern front.<sup>17</sup>

While the Red Crescent dispatched multiple medical teams to and established numerous hospitals in Palestine and Iraq, soldiers wounded during the Battles of Gallipoli were transferred to Red Crescent hospitals behind front lines in Istanbul.

## **Red Crescent Operations during the Battles of Gallipoli**

Although the Red Crescent had initially structured its medical services to address the needs of fronts located outside of Anatolia, the rising number of casualties sustained at the Gallipoli Front prompted it to expand its efforts. In response to a request from the Army Field Medicine Inspectorate, the Red Crescent opened several hospitals for the wounded in Istanbul in March 1915. These included facilities within the Faculty of Medicine and Galatasaray High School as well as additional sites in Galata, Taksim, Cağaloğlu, Kadırga, and Dârüşşafaka. Approximately 20,000 wounded soldiers who were evacuated from Gallipoli by ship in these hospitals.

Field kitchens set up by the Red Crescent in Akbaşı, Lâpseki, Ilgardere, and Değirmen Burnu which in addition to serving as forward gathering and staging points for the Field Medicine Inspectorate, provided soup, tea, and bread to wounded soldiers. Several Red Crescent workers were stationed at the front lines where they served tea and meals to soldiers manning the trenches at Soğanlıdere, Arıburnu, and Anafartalar.

Wounded soldiers from Gallipoli were sealifted to Red Crescent hospitals in Istanbul aboard ships leased from two maritime companies—the privately owned Şirket-i Hayriyye and the state-owned Seyr-i Sefâ'in. At the start of the war, the Red Crescent refitted the *Edremit* and *Gülrihal* to accommodate patient transport. As the number of casualties increased, however, steamships numbered 60, 61, 63, and 70 were rented from Şirket-i Hayriyye and the *Akdeniz* from Seyr-i Sefâ'in to facilitate the evacuation of wounded soldiers to Istanbul. These vessels bore the Red Crescent emblem, thereby marking their use for humanitarian purposes. Subsequently, with assistance from the German Red Cross, the *Reşid Paşa*—also leased from Seyr-i Sefâ'in—was incorporated into the Red Crescent's growing fleet. Among the medical staff aboard was the aforementioned Şâfiye Hânım. Upon arrival at Sirkeci, wounded soldiers were provided tea and bread at a teahouse run by Kemâl 'Ömer Bey, a member of the Red Crescent's headquarters in Istanbul, before being transferred by Red Crescent vehicles to various hospitals.<sup>18</sup>

17 Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, pp. 81–83.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 84–85.

Amid the threat to Istanbul during the Battles of Gallipoli, the Red Crescent's Board of Directors entrusted Dr. İsmâ'il Besîm Pasha and Muhlîş Bey with relocating the majority of the organization's funds and valuables to Eskişehir for safekeeping. In conjunction to this measure, the Red Crescent's Eskişehir Branch took steps to acquire a farm which would help provide Istanbul's various kitchens with food and livestock.

## **Red Crescent Medical Services on the Palestine (Suez) Front**

The Red Crescent dispatched medical teams from Istanbul to the Palestine (Suez) and to Iraq fronts. As military operations progressed and the army repositioned, these medical teams and hospitals were relocated accordingly. Though operating under the General Headquarters, they were required to coordinate with the army.

The Ottoman Empire fought against Great Britain at the Suez Canal and in Palestine during WWI. Given the importance afforded to the Palestine Front, Naval Minister Cemâl Pasha was appointed commander of the Fourth Army in Syria. On 14 October 1915, the army's headquarters was moved to the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem. Cemâl Pasha established an extensive supply network that included warehouses, hospitals, and water supply systems throughout the Fourth Army's area of operations. Supply points were also set up along the routes leading to the Canal. Beersheba, chosen as the Canal expedition's assembly center, became home to the Desert Supply Inspectorate. To support forces advancing on the Canal's right and left flanks, Nahl and Arish were designated as key supply hubs.<sup>19</sup>

Preparations to launch an offensive against the British position at the Suez Canal began in early 1915. On 23 January, troops were ordered to move from Jerusalem to the Tih Plateau in the Sinai Desert. The plan called for units to depart from Beersheba and march in battle formation at night until they eventually crossed the Sinai and made their way toward the eastern banks of the Canal. The 30<sup>th</sup> Regiment, part of the 10<sup>th</sup> Division, reached the Canal after a grueling nine-day trek on 2 February, joining the attack the next morning. The assault against the British ultimately failed, resulting in 1,360 casualties, including missing, wounded, and fallen soldiers<sup>20</sup> Following Cemâl Pasha's unsuccessful attempt to cross the Canal, the British eventually launched their own offensive in late 1916, capturing the Sinai Peninsula and pushing all the way to the Syrian border.

19 Münim Mustafa, *Cepheden Cepheye*, Vol.1, Ege Basımevi, İstanbul 1940, p. 21 and Nevzat Artuç, *Cemal Paşa Askeri ve Siyasi Hayatı*, TTK Yay., Ankara, 2008, p. 275.

20 Artuç, p. 230.





▲ Photos from the Suez Medical Committee

The Red Crescent deployed a medical team—known in Turkish as the “*Süveyş Hey’et-i Şihhiyyesi*” (Suez Medical Committee) or the *Süveyş Hey’et-i İmdâdiyyesi* (Suez Relief Committee)—to serve on the Palestine Front. Documents show that Dr. Neş’et ‘Ömer (İrdelp) Bey, a faculty member at the Istanbul School of Medicine, was appointed to head the mission. The committee, led by Dr. Neş’et ‘Ömer Bey, arrived in Jerusalem on 15 February 1915,<sup>21</sup> where, in coordination with the army’s medical corps was settled in, it took up positions in

21 Çapa, Kızılay (*Hilâl-i Ahmer*) Cemiyeti (1914–1925), p. 85.

former French and Russian hospitals. Soldiers wounded during the Suez campaign received treatment in the hospitals the committee opened. To help contain the spread of infectious diseases, it set up laboratories to produce serum and vaccinations to servicemen. As the conflict unfolded, the committee continued its work in support of the Fourth Army, opening additional hospitals in Auja al-Hafir (henceforth Hafir) and Wadi al-Sirar in Palestine.<sup>22</sup>

Shortly before the launch of the Second Suez Offensive, the medical committee opened a fully equipped hospital in Hafir, located on the road to the Suez Canal in the Sinai Desert in July 1916. One month later, Neş'et 'Ömer Bey was appointed chief physician of this hospital. This hospital primarily treated patients sent by the Second Field Hospital, with transfer orders detailing each soldier's ailment, identity, and what personal effects they had on them. One such patient, Haydar—born in the village of Aziziye near Düzce in 1894—arrived with a raincoat, bread bag, keffiyeh, summer clothing, and a worn-out pair of Yemeni shoes. In addition to servicemen, the hospital occasionally admitted civilians, albeit this was more of an exception than a rule. The Hafir Red Crescent Hospital remained in operation until the Ottomans, having lost the First Suez Offensive, began withdrawing from the desert. After British forces entered Arish on 21 December 1916, the hospital moved to Jerusalem. Before departing from Hafir, however, the Red Crescent left behind a 25-bed mobile hospital unit—supported by a camel transport detachment—to assist in the evacuation of remaining patients.<sup>23</sup>



▲ *Pictures from the Hafir Red Crescent Hospital*

22 TKA, 126/82, 588/1.

23 Mesut Çapa, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Filistin (Kanal) Cephesi'nde Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti'nin Çalışmaları," *Trakya Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, No. 16, (July 2018), pp. 57–73.



▲ *Hafir (Sinai Peninsula)*

On the evening of 23 December 1916, the Third Division issued orders to evacuate the Red Cross hospital situated three kilometers west of Hafir along the rail line and reestablish it east of the city. As part of the relocation process, the Red Crescent's belongings were first sent to the Ottomans' military headquarters in Beersheba and then to Jerusalem. Then, on 27 December, the Desert Supply Inspectorate and Expeditionary Force Command ordered the complete transfer of the hospital's equipment. However, the operation experienced

unexpected setbacks, including heavy rainfall in Beersheba under which the Red Crescent's supplies lay exposed for several days. Once informed of the situation, the Inspectorate intervened and coordinated the transfer to Jerusalem, the last shipment of which arrived on 1 January 1917. The Red Crescent staff—composed of one physician, four clerks, three nurses, three laundry attendants, sixty-one enlistees, and other support staff—arrived from Hafir two days later, on 3 January. Among the seventy-five individuals who arrived were Dr. Cemâl Bey, Eşref Bey, 'Ömer Bey, Dāniş Efendi, Henri Efendi, İshâk Efendi, Ferîd Efendi.<sup>24</sup>

A new 100-bed field hospital was established in Hafir as the Red Crescent's supplies were en route to Jerusalem. As the military situation in the area stabilized, the Third Division ordered that the hospital's capacity be expanded to two hundred beds, with all necessary equipment to be supplied by the army. The Red Crescent, acting on directives from the Expeditionary Force Command, departed Hafir on 12 January 1917 and arrived in Jerusalem three days later. Of the 260 patients admitted to the hospital between 15 December 1916 and 15 January 1917, eight had sustained combat-related injuries—one from machine-gun fire and the remaining seven from bombs dropped over Hafir by enemy aircraft. At the time of transfer, the hospital had 327 wounded individuals, three of whom ultimately succumbed to their injuries.<sup>25</sup>



◀ Jerusalem (1331 /1915)

Upon returning to Jerusalem from Hafir, the medical team, acting on orders issued from the military council, established a new field hospital at Wadi al-Sirat, the railways departure point in Palestine. This facility served as the primary site for treating sick and wounded soldiers. Those with minor injuries were transferred to permanent hospitals behind front lines after their alimentary needs were met. Dr. Ḥasan Ferîd Bey was appointed acting chief physician of the hospital. Communication between Jerusalem and Wadi al-Sirar was initially conducted

<sup>24</sup> TKA, 394/34, 34.1. 394/15.2 TKA, 394/37.3.

<sup>25</sup> TKA, 394/15, 15-1.

by telephone and subsequently confirmed via telegraph. By 5 June 1917, sixty individuals—thirty-six wounded enlisted men, two sick officers, and twenty-two sick enlisted men—were undergoing treatment at the hospital. By 6 August of the same year, this number had risen to seventy-six, comprising forty-three wounded enlisted men, five sick officers, and twenty-eight sick enlisted men.<sup>26</sup>

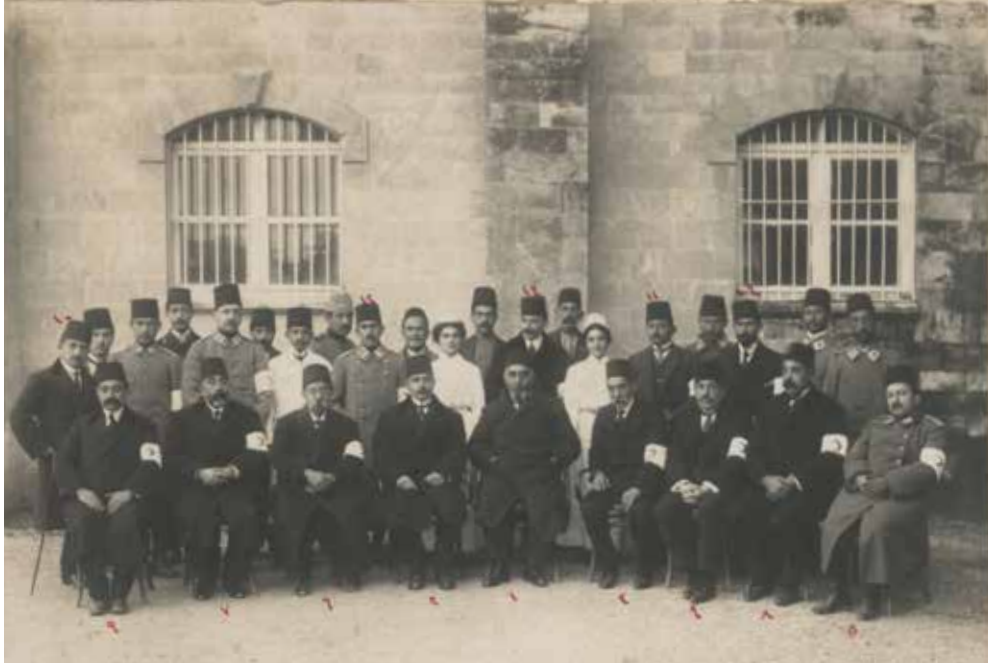
The Red Crescent remained active at Wadi al-Sirar until November 1917, when the British advance rendered operations untenable. As British forces closed in, the team found itself treating a growing number of wounded men while simultaneously attempting to evacuate its personnel and equipment northward. The rapid pace at which the British moved forward compelled the team to vacate Wadi al-Sirar in haste, leaving behind only enough personnel to care for those who could not be moved. In the chaos, the Red Crescent was forced to abandon much of their equipment while much of what was successfully evacuated was subsequently destroyed during aerial bombardments carried out by the British. Between the onset of the withdrawal and the Red Crescent's 14 November departure, the hospital was bombed four times. The raid on 10 November proved particularly devastating, when four individuals were killed and twenty wounded. Among the reinforcements sent from the Wadi al-Sirar Forward Supply and Transport Station to support the hospital, two soldiers were killed and two medical attendants sustained injuries. During the same period, the Ottomans completed their withdrawal from the area, retreating to the Ramla during the night of 13–14 November.

The Red Crescent left Jerusalem on 19 November as the British advanced steadily closer to the city, traveling to Damascus from al-Masoudiyya train station north of Nablus. Meanwhile, supplies initially intended for Afula were rerouted to Damascus. The Suez Committee's return was concluded on 26 November in Damascus; shortly thereafter, British forces entered Jerusalem on 9 December.

The Suez Committee established a 200-bed hospital in Damascus. Meanwhile, a second facility, opened in Dera'a along the Hejaz Railway, was dismantled shortly after the British occupied the area. Although the medical team wanted to return to Damascus and open a new hospital there, this endeavor was cut short when, in September–October 1918, the Ottomans were forced out of the cities of Amman, Beirut, and Damascus by the British. Upon withdrawing from Damascus, the Ottoman army entrusted one of its local military hospitals, as well as the French and British hospitals in the city, and 300 wounded patients to the care of the Red Crescent. The Red Crescent continued to treat the sick and wounded for a time under British occupation before eventually being released in accordance with the Geneva Convention. At the time, Dr. Ġalib 'Atā Bey, former head of the Hejaz Red Crescent, led the Suez Committee.

---

<sup>26</sup> TKA, 746/3.



▲ *Celalettin Bey, Governor of Aleppo, and Macit Bey, Sub-Governor of Jerusalem in their visit to Red Crescent's Suez Committee*

Over the course of its operations, the Suez Committee provided medical care for thousands of patients. These included 1,549 at the infectious diseases hospital in Jerusalem, 2,520 in Hafir, 702 at the hospital for wounded soldiers in Jerusalem, 3,346 in Wadi al-Sirar, 296 in Damascus, 123 in Amman, 110 at the hospital for captured officers in Damascus, and 371 in Dera'a. An additional 6,699 sick and wounded soldiers received treatment at the Second Military Range Hospital in Jerusalem, where supplies were furnished directly by the army. While stationed in Wadi al-Sirar, the Committee administered initial care to and saw to the immediate alimentary needs of 30,029 wounded soldiers before facilitating their transfer to Jerusalem, Hasriyya, and and Damascus. The Committee worked diligently to control outbreaks of cholera and smallpox on the Sinai Front as well as to combat diseases such as dysentery, syphilis, typhus, rabies, and tuberculosis.<sup>27</sup>

As the British moved out from Gaza toward Jerusalem, the Committee withdrew and, following a grueling journey, regrouped in Damascus, where they continued providing medical services until 1918. The Committee then made its way to Beirut and from there sailed to Izmir. The Sinai and Palestine mission that had begun on 15 February 1915 in Jerusalem had thus ended.

27 Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, pp. 87–91.



## The Red Crescent's Work with POWs

At the outset of the First World War, responsibility for POW affairs rested with various branches of the Ottoman Ministry of War. Over time, however, shifting political and military realities necessitated the transfer of responsibility to the Red Crescent, mirroring the humanitarian role played by the Red Cross in Russia and Austria. In contrast, the administration of POW affairs in France and Germany remained under the jurisdiction of their respective ministries of war throughout the conflict.



▲ *Seyd-i Beşir Ottoman Prisoner Camp, Alexandria, Egypt*

After assuming responsibility for POW affairs, the Red Crescent adopted methods akin to those employed by the Red Cross. Early during the Battles of Gallipoli, when the ICRC requested a list of British, French and other Entente prisoners held by the Ottomans, the Red Crescent was unable to comply as it lacked such comprehensive records. Similarly, no systematic records on Ottoman POWs held by Entente forces existed at the time. To address this issue, the Ottoman Ministry of War established the POW Commission. Following the



transmission of British and French POW lists to the Red Cross in April 1915, efforts to compile information on Ottoman POWs were initiated. By late 1915, formal requests for comparable information were sent to Austro-Hungarian and German Red Cross Societies. At the behest of the Austro-Hungarian Red Cross, head of the POW Commission, İzzet Bey, conducted a nine-day visit to Vienna in April 1916. There, he closely examined the organizational structure and accounting procedures of the prisoner departments, which comprised approximately 3,000 personnel. Upon his return to Istanbul, İzzet Bey implemented the observed practices within the Ottoman administration.<sup>28</sup>

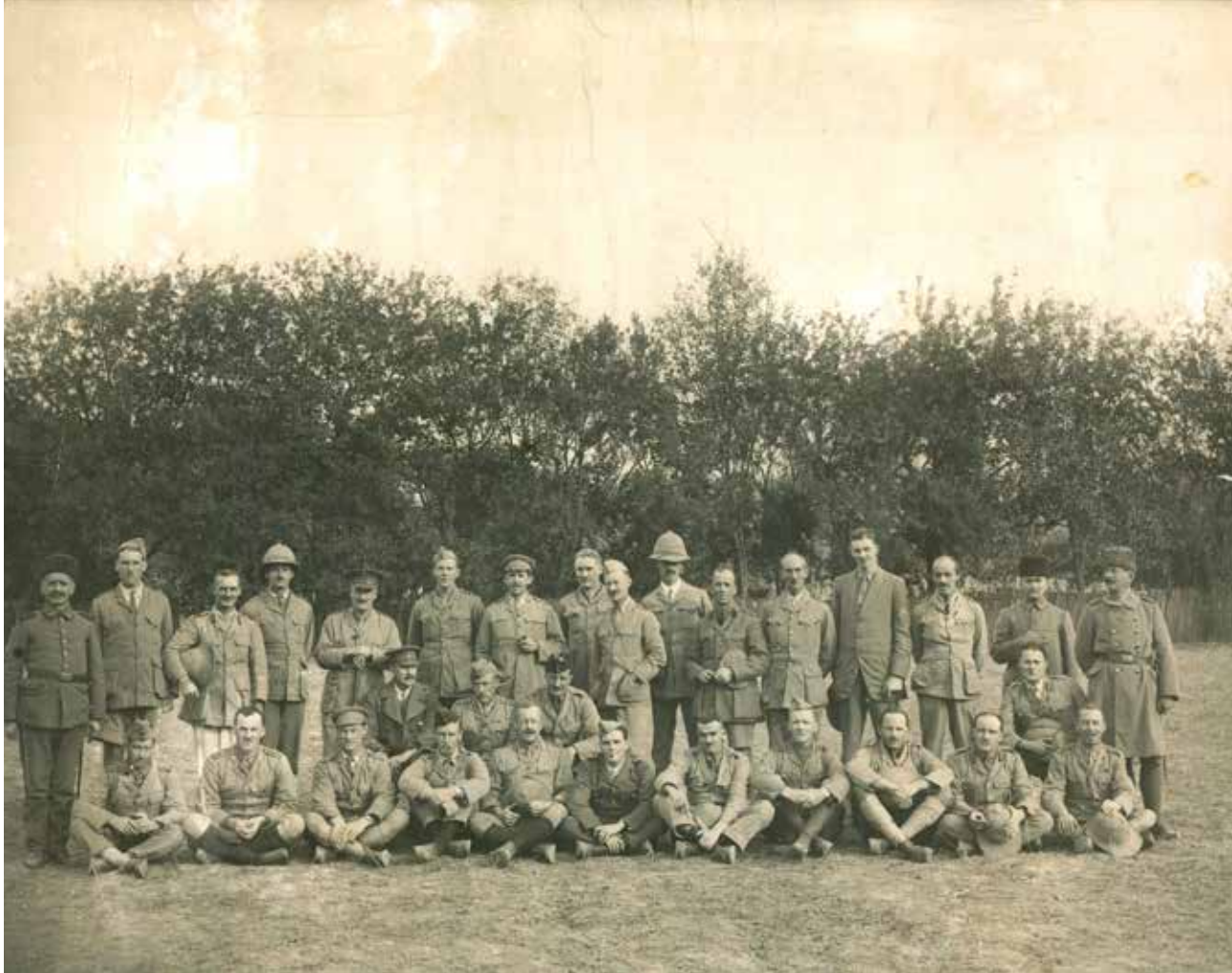


▲ British prisoner officers in front of the Ankara Government House

Thousands of Ottoman, British, and Russian soldiers were taken prisoner on the various fronts over the course of the war. The Red Crescent, in addition to identifying POWs in order to facilitate communication with their families, worked to ensure that detainees received the money, clothes, and books sent to them. In coordination with officials from the Red Cross, Red Crescent conducted routine inspections of POW camps. In 1917, Yüsf Akçura traveled to Denmark and Russia as the Red Crescent's official delegate to survey the conditions of Ottoman POWs interned in Russian camps.

<sup>28</sup> Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, p. 110.

By 1916, the Ottoman Empire held over 26,000 prisoners of war in camps across its territory, 10,494 had been captured from British forces, while the remainder included 5,549 Russians, 8,537 Indians, 114 French, and 2,002 Romanians.<sup>29</sup> A substantial portion of these were taken following the British surrender at Kut al-Amara on 29 April 1916, when 13,309 troops, including General Townshend, were captured. Of these, 2,869 were British and 10,440 were Indian.<sup>30</sup>



▲ *Kastamonu POW Garrison, WWI*

<sup>29</sup> TKA, file. 520, (1912–1916).

<sup>30</sup> Yusuf Hikmet Bayur, *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi*, Vol. III / Book 3, Ankara, 1991, p. 105.

Matters involving POWs during the First World War were regulated by a directive issued by the Ministry of War.<sup>31</sup> As per this directive, interned officers received a monthly salary equal to that of Ottoman officers of corresponding rank. Lower-ranking officers and enlistees were provided only food and rations, consistent with their Ottoman counterparts. The directive explicitly prohibited all forms of cruel and unusual treatment. Interned officers were, insofar as conditions permitted, accommodated in hotels or other lodgings befitting of their rank and dignity. Although postal services for POWs were free of charge, all incoming letters, parcels, and newspapers were subject to censorship. Prisoners were allowed to observe their religious rites and attend services provided that they did not contravene local and military regulations. While officers were exempt from performing all forms of physical and menial labor, enlistees received a daily wage for the work they performed. The housing, provisioning, medical care, record keeping, transport, and all other administrative affairs were overseen by POW Commissions. These commissions maintained three separate records for each prisoner—one for personal identification, one for disciplinary or administrative incidents, and one for financial allocations. Special attention was paid to ensure that all names were simultaneously recorded in Latin script following French orthographical conventions.

## **Entente POWs in Anatolia**

In keeping with its international obligations and the principle of reciprocity, the Ottoman Empire granted the Red Crescent and Red Cross open access to inspect POW camps. Inspection reports submitted to the Red Crescent headquarters in Istanbul documented the overall state of camps and the conditions of prisoners.

Early in WWI, a Red Crescent committee, which included Yūsuf Rāzī Bey and his secretary, ‘Alī Mācid (Arda) Bey, visited British and French POWs in Ankara and Çankırı. Their report indicated that twenty-five British officers were housed under the supervision of Reserve Lieutenant Rüşdī Bey in Ankara, where they resided in a hotel and a house allocated to them. The officers in the hotel enjoyed comparatively better conditions, while those in the house complained of cramped conditions, low-quality furnishing, dirty and rudimentary lavatory facilities, and discomfort caused by sleeping on straw cushions infested with bed mites. Seven British enlisted men were assigned to serve the officers and maintain their living quarters. Yūsuf Rāzī Bey also noted that two British soldiers were receiving treatment at the military hospital. Reserve Lieutenant Rüşdī Bey informed them that although the Fifth Corps had approved his request for more suitable and spacious accommodations for the officers, they would have difficulty in providing the requested furniture.

---

31 *Üserā’ Hakkında Ta’līmātnāme*, Maṭba’a-i ‘Askeriyye, Istanbul, 1322/1916.

Later, upon his return to Ankara from Çankırı, Yūsuf Rāzī Bey found that several of the officers previously residing in the hotel, as well as several from the overcrowded house, had been relocated to a new building, thus relieving the overly cramped conditions they had earlier reported. Although a few stools and a couple of tables had been provided to the officers, their bedding remained unclean. The Red Cross committee also noted that several people were required to share a single washbasin. In an effort to improve conditions, the Red Crescent purchased several bolts of cambric fabric, which, having been sewn into sheets and pillowcases, were distributed to each prisoner alongside a small washbasin. Despite efforts to supply all the enlisted soldiers with new mattresses and straw cushions, the scarcity of cotton and high cost of wool meant that they could only provide them with ready-made mattress covers and pillowcases. The prisoners submitted a number of requests to the Red Crescent, including that packages, letters, and money sent to them be delivered in a timely manner, that they be permitted access to English books, that they be allowed to write more than four lines of text about important events in their letters, that they be provided medicine, and that they be allowed to procure certain foods and other personal items from Istanbul. Yūsuf Rāzī Bey observed that the officers were in good health, their meals were prepared in accordance to their preferences by enlisted orderlies, and that their rent and food expenses were covered by the salaries they were provided by the Ottoman government. Furthermore, officers were permitted to move freely throughout the city and its environs accompanied by an unarmed Ottoman soldier.<sup>32</sup>

According to the Red Crescent committee's report, Çankırı housed a total of 324 prisoners—nine French and 315 British. The barracks in which they were housed were located roughly half an hour from the city. Though somewhat dilapidated and missing a few windowpanes, the area in which prisoners were accommodated was, overall, in good condition. As replacing the missing glass panes was not financially feasible, windows were boarded up to retain whatever heat was produced by the wood- and coal-burning stoves scattered throughout the ward. Although gas supplies were short, thereby limiting the amount of lighting in the facility, each ward was nevertheless afforded gas lamps. After raising complaints to the garrison commander, the French prisoners were relocated to a separate ward; however, they informed the committee that they were still expected to cover their own heating and lighting costs, despite the poor quality of both.

Although the American Embassy provided the POWs in this facility with large quantities of clothing and other staples, many of the needs went unmet. Prisoners lacked adequate winter clothes, coats, bed linens, and shoes. The Red Crescent initially purchased 210 pairs of shoes, Yemeni leather slippers, and socks in addition to 210 undershirts and sashes from local suppliers in Çankırı, which were stored in special warehouses. The delivery and distribution of *mest* shoes

32 TKA, Ds.520 (1912–1916). Mesut Çapa, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türkiye'de İtilaf Devletleri Esirleri," *Toplumsal Tarih*, no. 66 (June 1999): pp. 49–56.

and Yemenis that had yet to be crafted were entrusted to ‘Ulvī Bey, a former governor and head of the Çankırı branch of the Red Crescent. Both Ankara and Çankırı held exiled civilians and non-military detainees who were subjects to belligerent nations.<sup>33</sup> According to official records, 601 Russian, 460 British, and three French prisoners were held in Ankara in 1916.



▲ *Parcels destined to the prisoners of war being sorted in the POW Commission*

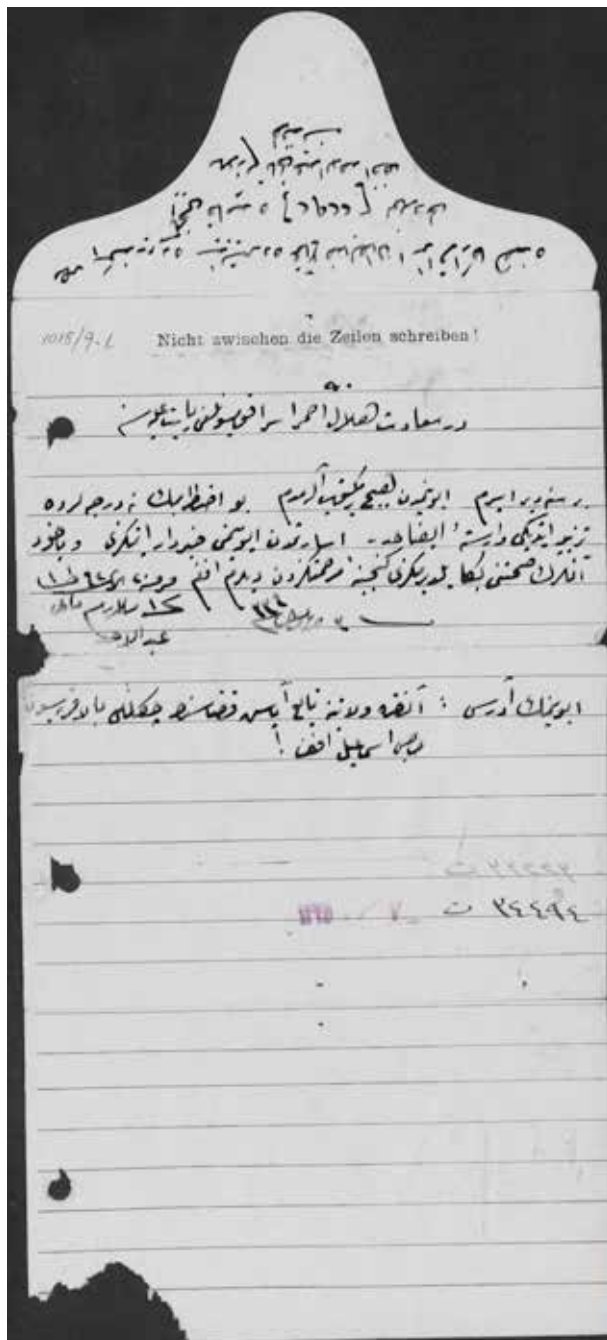
Kemāl ‘Ömer Bey, a member of the Red Crescent General Headquarters, visited the Afyonkarahisar Garrison on 14 January 1916. Joined by the garrison’s commander, ‘Āsım Bey, he inspected the eighty-six POWs—composed of twenty-three officers, thirty-six civilian captains and engineers, twenty-seven soldiers—interned there, as an additional twenty-one officers were scheduled to arrive in the camp. Moreover, 305 POWs who had been held in a madrasa before the Red Crescent delegation’s arrival were relocated to Pozantı. There, they were accommodated in two of the city’s finest houses and a nearby madrasa. The houses boasted spacious gardens where the prisoners took walks, gardened, and played various games. Although lavatory facilities in rural areas were located outside the house in an adjoining structure, typically consisting of no more than a deep pit, large amounts of

<sup>33</sup> Çapa, “Birinci Dünya Savaşı’nda Türkiye’de İtilaf Devletleri Esirleri,” p. 51 and TKA, file. 520 (1912–1916).

water were used to clean them each day. One house was occupied by Russian officers and the other by French officers as well as enlistees who served them. Prisoners' water needs were met either by boiling unsanitary city water or transporting fresh spring water from the surrounding area. As for food, prisoners either received it through the garrison as a form of military requisition or procured it themselves from outside sources, sometimes having it brought in from Istanbul by a private business. Prisoners leveled no complaints about the food and were satisfied with their arrangements. As bedsteads were unavailable in the city, custom-made wooden frames were used instead, covered with mattresses and cushions or simple bedding. Despite the modest conditions, however, they slept on clean beds and wore tidy clothes, including well-kept shoes and coats. Since prisoners received their laundry and other effects through the American Embassy, the residence housing the British and Russians was cleaner than that in which the French stayed. Overall, prisoners were in good health. Whereas POWs were initially required to pay five piastres to receive treatment in the municipal hospital, the garrison commander arranged for services to be provided to them free of charge at the military hospital. Remarkably, however, no lice outbreak was reported in the garrison despite the high number of prisoners. By 14 June 1915, a total of 329 POWs had been vaccinated against typhoid three times and smallpox once by the central medical staff.

Prisoners held in the Afyonkarahisar Garrison were at times employed as laborers in exchange for daily wages. Those sent to Pozantı were reported to have worked for the railway company, while several electric and machine specialists had previously been sent to Sivas and a number of agricultural specialists to Adapazarı. Two Catholic priests were appointed to administer religious services to the prisoners. Officers requested that their salaries be paid in full on time. Complaining that the daily allowance of four shillings—equivalent to that provided to Ottoman POWs in Entente custody—was insufficient in the face of rising food prices, they requested that housing and food expenditures be covered separately.

Prisoners also expressed dissatisfaction with postal services. Based on the correspondence POWs had received, they estimated that roughly a quarter of the parcels sent by the French and British had gone missing, requesting that the Red Crescent investigate the matter. They also reported significant delays in the delivery of letters and postcards. Lieutenant Commander Henry Stoker, commander of the Royal Australian Navy's submarine *AE2*, sought the Red Crescent's assistance in retrieving a box containing letters from his fiancée that he had left at the Central Command in Istanbul, describing them as being of great sentimental value to him. Russian POWs asked the Red Crescent to inform the Russian Red Cross that they had yet to receive any letters or packages. French POWs similarly reported that they had received none of the packages sent to them between 1 and 28 August 1915.



#### PRISONER LETTER

*Bihî*

To the High Presidency of Red  
Crescent's Prisoners of War  
Commission in Dersaadet [Istanbul]

I have been a prisoner of war for a year. I have not received a single letter from my parents. The extent to which this agony has increased is beyond the need for explanation. I humbly request, out of the depths of your compassion, that you kindly inform my parents of my captivity, or let me know about their well-being, sir.

Dated 3 September 1334 / 1918

20<sup>th</sup> Division, 62<sup>nd</sup> Regiment, 1<sup>st</sup>

Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Company

Second Lieutenant Abdülehad

Address of my parents:

To Hacı İsmail Efendi, from the village of Çengelli Bala, in the district of Ayaş, province of Ankara.

From Second Lieutenant Abdülehad, prisoner of war in the second camp at the Ottoman officers' POW headquarters in Sidi Bishr, Alexandria, Egypt, registration number [2292].



The 184 British POWs interned in the Konya garrison were relocated to various places in January 1916. The government paid for the hotels in which POWs would be lodged until their repatriation. There, they had recreation opportunities, including scheduled soccer matches, recreational outings, and, once every three months, visits to the city's public baths. The garrison staff consisted of a commander, a provisioning officer, a pharmacist, a translator, two clerks, and thirty guards. Also in 1916, the prisoners held in Kütahya's POW camp were kept in to four separate houses in the city center after the initial notion to transfer them to the village of Emet was abandoned. Officers were housed on the upper floors of the houses while civilian captains and engineers—treated as officers—occupied the lower floors. Officers and enlisted men were stationed separately, with orderlies quartered in an adjacent barrack.

A British officer at the Kastamonu POW camp described the prisoners' living conditions in detail in a letter published in *The Times*. There were 120 POWs housed in six residences, with twenty men in each. The officer shared a small room with a major. The prisoners were allowed to leave once a week to shop in the city's marketplace. They also went on recreational trips and played both cricket and soccer—the latter with a ball made of wool.<sup>34</sup> In Mardin, the company commander of the Russian prisoners submitted a report on 13 October 1916 in which he states that each prisoner was issued a new coat, a suit, a set of clothes, new undergarments, a pair of woolen socks, a cotton vest, and a goatskin. The prisoners interned in the headquarters were taken to the public baths once a week, and their laundry was washed with soap and ironed at the same interval.

The distribution of written correspondence and remittances was administered by the army at the beginning of the war. However, hiccups in delivery were common, as the staff was unfamiliar with the Latin alphabet. Moreover, letters were often times slow to arrive to their recipients due to censorship procedures. Such complaints gradually began to subside, however, once the Red Crescent assumed responsibility for distributing mail in November 1915.<sup>35</sup>

Supplies, food, and money sent to POWs in Ottoman territory typically reached the Red Crescent via the American and Dutch embassies, after which they were forwarded to POW camps. In December 1915, a remittance sent from Istanbul to Afyonkarahisar was handled as follows:

In a letter dated 4 December 1915 from Istanbul, Vice President Dr. Besim 'Ömer (Akalın) Pasha informed the garrison commander overseeing Afyonkarahisar's POW camp that a sum of nineteen liras and eight piastres had been transferred to the Ottoman Bank on behalf of several prisoners held there under his command. This remittance consisted of 10.50 liras for Officer Piraspi of the submarine HMS *E15*, 440 piastres in gold coins for Emil Viktor (POW no. 453) from the submarine *Marya*, 220 piastres for Michel Antoine (POW no. 455), eighty-eight piastres for Hektor Havadek (POW no. 414), and 110 piastres to Kiper (POW no. 441). In a letter to the POW Commission dated 8 December, the garrison commander requested that the funds be withdrawn from the bank and distributed to the designated recipients in return for signed receipts. Two days later, on December

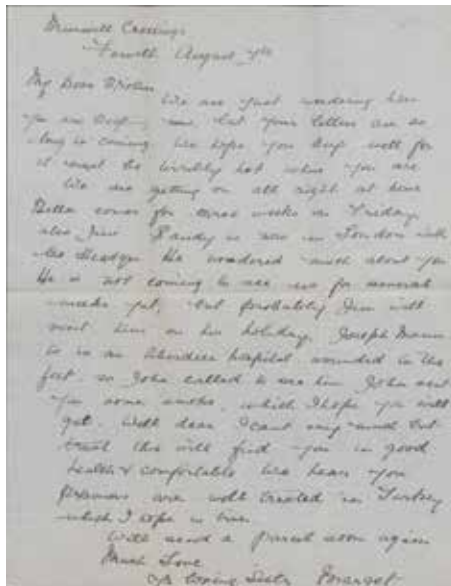
34 TKA, file. 520 (1912–1916)

35 TKA, file. 520 (1912–1916) and Çapa, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türkiye'de İtilaf Devletleri Esirleri," p. 54.

10, Senior Captain Mehmed Lütfi Bey confirmed that the payments had been made and that five triplicate receipts had been duly signed. In a follow-up letter dated 12 December, the garrison commander informed the Red Crescent General Headquarters that the funds had been delivered and enclosed one copy of each of the five signed receipts as confirmation. Copies of the receipts were likewise forwarded to the American Embassy for its records. This event demonstrates that remittances reached their intended recipients in a prompt manner, taking approximately one week from the time of receipt to delivery in this particular case.

Afyonkarahisar served as the primary distribution center for remittances and packages sent to garrisons in Anatolia. A lack of postal wagons and high fees demanded by shipping companies, however, complicated the transportation of the said packages.<sup>36</sup>

Between 1915 and 1918, a total of 8,765 bales of goods and food were delivered to the Red Crescent via the Dutch and American Embassies. The Red Crescent also distributed eight wagonloads of supplies provided by the Dutch Embassy to POW camps. Additionally, the organization delivered a total of 684,961 liras—transferred in 42,410 installments—to Entente POWs held in various camps.<sup>37</sup>



#### ◀ Murwill (?) Crossings

Faruell (Last Name?). August 7<sup>th</sup>

My Dear Brother,

We are just wondering how you are keeping now. But your letters are so long in coming. We hope you keep well, for it must be terribly hot where you are. We are getting on all right at home. Bella comes for three weeks on Friday, also Jim. Sandy (?) is now in London with the Headgr (?). He wondered much about you. He is not coming to see us for several weeks yet; but probably Jim will visit him on his holiday. Joseph Maun is in an Aberdeen hospital. Wounded in the feet. So John called to see him. John sent you some smoke, which I hope you will get. Well dear I can't say much but trust this will find you in good health and comfortable. We hear you prisoners are well treated in Türkiye which I hope is true.

Will send a parcel soon again.

Much Love.

Your loving sister Margel

36 Askerî Tarih Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Arşivi (ATASE Arşivi), folder.1274, file.588, folio.1/48.

37 Çapa, *Kızılây (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914-1925)*, p. 118.

## **Red Crescent Delegate Yūsuf Akçura's Journey to Russia: Ottoman POWs in Russia**

It is estimated that, in addition to civilian detainees, between sixty and seventy thousand Ottoman soldiers were taken prisoner by Russian forces during WWI. Russian authorities deported Muslims from Ardahan, Kars, and Batumi whom they deemed unreliable, relocating them to the interior regions of Uralsk and Siberia. Maintaining contact with the POWs captured on the Eastern Front proved difficult, as they were transferred to Nargin Island (modern-day Boyuk-Zira Island) off the coast of Baku and to various camps across Siberia. Most Ottoman officers were sent to Irkutsk near Russia's border with China. Nevertheless, the Red Crescent succeeded in delivering aid through Ottoman Embassies by cooperating with relief organizations of both allied and neutral states. The Ottoman ambassadors in Vienna and Stockholm—Hilmî Pasha and Cevâd Bey—worked diligently to ensure that a delegate from the Red Crescent would be dispatched to Russia alongside German, Hungarian, and Austrian representatives.

The first information about POWs in Russia was obtained in the summer of 1916. An official named Râğîb Bâkî, who had been dispatched from Stockholm to Petrograd (St. Petersburg), reported through his contacts at the Spanish Embassy that a large number of Austro-Hungarian and German POWs were being held in Russia. This mobilized the Red Cross into action, prompting the Red Cross delegations of Denmark, Sweden, and other countries to cooperate with the embassies of neutral states to address this issue. The Red Cross was also consulted to help identify Ottoman POW camps and facilitate the delivery of aid to them.

Appointed as the Red Crescent delegate at the Danish Red Cross in Copenhagen in September 1917, Yūsuf Akçura made contact with Ottoman POWs in Russia with the intention of gathering information about their places of residence and health conditions. He also worked to facilitate contact between POWs and their families, coordinate with the Swedish and Danish Red Cross Societies to send money, gift parcels, and books to POWs in Russia, and to welcome sick and wounded Ottoman POWs repatriated through Scandinavia, providing them with money and gifts upon their return. At this time, Denmark invited the Ottoman Empire to attend a conference in Copenhagen to discuss a planned prisoner exchange between Russia and the Central Powers. Yūsuf Akçura joined the delegation, which included the head of the Red Crescent's Prisoner Commission, İzzet Bey, and two military officers.<sup>38</sup>

At the Copenhagen Conference, an agreement was signed establishing the terms of the proposed prisoner exchange and the regulations governing prisoner treatment in POW camps. The agreement lacked a legal foundation, however, since its ratification hinged on the endorsement of government officials. Nevertheless, the text of the Copenhagen Agreement served as the basis for the subsequent prisoner exchange conferences in Petrograd. By the time Yūsuf Akçura

38 Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, p. 114.

arrived in Copenhagen, the Danish Red Cross had already made contact with the POW camps in Russia holding Ottoman soldiers and had facilitated correspondence between prisoners and their families. To make it known that a representative had been dispatched to Russia by the Red Crescent, Akçura sent postcards to the camps that had been identified and letters to Turkish-language newspapers in Russia. While in Copenhagen and Stockholm, he forwarded letters from Ottoman POWs in Russia to the Red Crescent's Istanbul headquarters via an Ottoman courier.

After visiting Germany, Denmark, and Sweden, Yūsuf Akçura oversaw matters concerning Ottoman POWs in Russia on 12 January 1918–1 February 1919. As the Brest-Litovsk negotiations with the Russians commenced, Yūsuf Akçura, acting at the behest of Premier Ṭal'at Pasha, then in Berlin, joined the delegation en route to Petrograd as the Red Crescent's representative. The members of the delegation—Ġālib Kemālī (Söylemezoğlu), Ṭurhān Bey, Remzī Pasha, and Mīralay Tevfik Bey—arrived in Petrograd on 12 January 1918. The details of this delegation's work in Russia are duly documented in a report published by Yūsuf Akçura in 1919.<sup>39</sup>

The political upheaval in Russia following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution had an immediate impact on Ottoman POWs. Under Tsarist rule, a few facilities did attempt to meet prisoners' health and nutritional needs, while others left them to languish in locked wagon cars for days without a source of heat, resulting in many deaths. Upon seizing power, however, the Bolsheviks abolished the distinction between officers and enlistees, going so far as to releasing all POWs. The cessation of state aid left many former prisoners, and specifically officers, in dire straits. Freed enlistees scattered about, taking up jobs as laborers, tradesmen, and, in some cases, engaging in small-scale wartime commerce to carve out a modest living. Although some officers also engaged in trade, most opted to remain in the facilities where they had been interned. Others moved into private houses and gradually left the cities in which they had been held.

As acting Red Crescent Delegate, Yūsuf Akçura extended material aid to the POW camps that had been identified across Russia. He also sent letters accompanied by books and newspapers that he had purchased in Moscow and Kazan. At the time, the Ministry of War's representative, Major Hakkı Bey, together with Swedish and German delegations, provided aid to Ottoman POWs. The Northern Turks—a conglomeration of Muslim Turks and Tatars in Russia—used the humanitarian associations they had founded under Tsarist rule to facilitate the delivery of aid to Ottoman prisoners. Yūsuf Akçura, while still in Scandinavia, established contact with the Muslim Commission for Aid to Turkish Prisoners of War operating in Moscow. The newspapers *İl*, *Yıldız*, and *Waq̃t* published by Tatars in Kazan launched public aid campaigns. During his time on the ground in Russia, Akçura actively collaborated with various Turkic-Tatar organizations to coordinate and expand relief efforts.

39 'Oşmānlı Hilāl-i Aḥmer Cem'iyyeti Rūsyā Üserā' Muraḥḥaşı Yūsuf Akçura Bey'in Raporu, Dersa'adet, 1335 (1919).

In March 1918, Yusuf Akçura traveled from Petrograd to Moscow, where he met with the local aid committee before proceeding to Kostroma, where Ottoman prisoners were interned. Upon learning that the prisoners held in the POW camp in Chukhloma—a city in the Oblast of Kostroma—had been transferred to Siberia three days earlier, Akçura made his way to Vologda and then returned to Moscow.

The signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk expedited the transfer of POWs. The returning Ottoman diplomatic delegation had, by then, settled in the new capital of Moscow. Arriving in Moscow before the Ottomans, the German diplomatic delegation created a central commission together with seventeen subordinate commissions to facilitate the repatriation of their own POWs. Under the terms of the agreement, this commission was also made responsible for overseeing the transfer and return of Ottoman POWs. Major Hakkı Bey, represented the Ottoman Ministry of War in the central commission. In coordination with Hakkı Bey, Akçura introduced a series of measures to streamline the transfer process. He appointed several Turkish-speaking students enrolled in Moscow State University as clerks and medics. These students played an instrumental role in receiving prisoners arriving in Moscow, seeing to their immediate needs, and arranging for their transport to the German border. Muslims residing in Moscow hosted a communal iftar for fifty-three Ottoman POWs, to be attended by Akçura at the Turkish-Tatar School in Ramadan 1918. Red Crescent nurses prepared holiday gift packages to be distributed in POW camps and among prisoner convoys passing through Moscow and Petrograd during Eid al-Fitr. Each parcel contained tea, coffee, sugar, biscuits, cigarettes, matches, and printed Eid card.

While the transfer of POWs from camps in Western Russian to Moscow had largely been completed, fifteen to twenty officers reported to be in the Volga-Ural basin—particularly in Kazan—had not yet reached Moscow. Additionally, many military and civilian prisoners held in areas south of Moscow were thought to have remained untransferred. In the summer of 1918, Yūsuf Akçura set out from Moscow for Kazan, where he spent five months working to ease the plight of Ottoman POWs. He began his journey on 28 July 1918, traveling via Nizhny Novgorod. Upon his arrival, he was informed by members of the German sub-commission and local Muslim communities that no Ottoman prisoners remained in the city.

Continuing his journey through various Muslim Turkish-Tatar villages while en route to Simbirsk (modern-day Ulyanovsk), Akçura learned that the seventy-eight Ottoman POWs once held there had already been transferred to Moscow in June. During their time in Simbrisk, these prisoners had received assistance from the Swedish delegation and the Commission for Aid to Turkish Prisoners of War, an affiliate of the national organization known among Turkish-Tatars as the National Council (*Millî Şūrā*). Akçura did find six Ottoman soldiers in Samara and an additional seventy-three housed in workers' barracks in Ufa. Civilian prisoners, however, did not reside there permanently; they frequently traveled to Siberia and

other places for commercial purposes, engaging in the fruit trade, baking, and hotel keeping. Political upheaval in eastern Russia and a lack of material resources at his disposal prevented Yūsuf Akçura from visiting POW camps in Siberia. After several months of travel, he returned to Moscow in January 1919. His route unfolded as follows: He left Kazan by car on 14 August 1918 and arrived in Simbirsk on 20 August; continued by river to Samara; departed Samara by train on 12 September, reaching Ufa the next evening; and finally returned to Moscow by train from Ufa, arriving, 1919 after a ten-day journey, on 4 January. Yūsuf Akçura describes the train journey they took from Ufa to Moscow with the prisoners as follows:

On the 4<sup>th</sup> day of Kanûn-ı sâni (4 January, 1919), we boarded the train cars. The soldiers were overjoyed — they kept singing and dancing the hora non-stop. Among the civilian officers, some bakery owners brought sackfuls of bread for their fellow countrymen. Right then and there, they also collected and distributed a few hundred rubles. That evening, our train departed. (Although the Ufa–Moscow route normally took two and a half days, it took ten days this time.) These few days — spent eating, drinking, and listening to folk tales and songs with joyful compatriots excited to return to their homelands — are among the most delightful days of my life.

Yūsuf Akçura accompanied the prisoners who had arrived from Ufa as they were quartered in the workers' barracks near the Moscow train station. Yet Moscow was, at the time, gripped by such high inflation that the price of a single *okka* (≈2.82 lbs) of black rye bread had soared to forty-five rubles. With money scarce and conditions deteriorating, the prisoners' transfer needed to be expedited. With the German border sealed and the uncertainty surrounding Austria-Hungary, Akçura arranged for the prisoners to be sent to Ottoman territory via Ukraine. The group, consisting of two officers and 148 enlistees, departed from Moscow for Kyiv on 1 February 1919 escorted by two guides.

Having seen the last group of prisoners in Moscow off to Ottoman lands, Akçura left Moscow on 17 February and, following a short layover in Finland on 22 February, reaching Stockholm on 1 March. Following a three-week stint there, he continued on to Berlin, arriving on 23 May. During his time in Sweden and Germany, Akçura continued to attend to the needs of Ottoman POWs stranded in Siberia. Several months later on 7 August, Akçura would depart Hamburg on the ocean liner *Gül Djemal* (formerly the *SS Germanic*), arriving in Istanbul on 23 August.<sup>40</sup> By the time Akçura's journey through Russia drew to a close in September 1919, it was estimated that some 10,000 prisoners remained in Soviet territory.

40 Çapa, *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, pp. 114–117 and Mesut Çapa, "Yusuf Akçura'nın Rusya Seyahati ve Türk Esirleri," *Türk Kültürü*, No. 366, October 1993, pp. 32–46.



## **In Anatolia at the End of the First World War**

Following the signing of the Armistice of Mudros, the Ottoman Red Crescent dispatched relief delegations from Istanbul to Eastern Anatolia, a region heavily affected by the Russian occupation during the war. Delegations were sent to Trabzon, Erzurum, and Erzincan, and operated there throughout 1919. The Red Crescent organized three major relief teams for the provinces of Trabzon, Erzurum, Erzincan, and Elazığ—regions most severely damaged by the war. Each delegation was composed of a leader accompanied by an administrative officer, two physicians, two clerks, two nurses, and six attendants. The Trabzon delegation was led by Dr. Behçet Bey, the Erzincan delegation by Şaffet Bey, and the Erzurum delegation by Dr. Lütfi (Kırdar). Although initially assigned for four months of service, these teams carried with them 700 tons of staple goods such as corn, wheat, flour, and lentils, as well as powdered milk, sugar, footwear, socks, printed fabrics, undergarments, shirts, quinine, and various other medicines. The Trabzon and Erzincan-Elazığ delegations departed from Istanbul on 25 June 1919, while the Erzurum delegation left on 30 June 1919—each heading to Trabzon with their personnel and supplies.<sup>41</sup>

In the postwar period, the administrative structure of the Red Crescent was also redefined. As of 5 February 1918, the board of directors included Dr. Âkil Muhtâr, Hâmit Bey, Kilisli Rifat, Dr. Celal Muhtâr, Berç Keresteciyan, and Dr. 'Adnân Bey. Dr. Âkil Muhtâr and Hâmit Bey were appointed vice presidents of the society. In 1920, following the official occupation of Istanbul, the Red Crescent's Secretary General Dr. 'Adnân (Adivar) Bey relocated to Ankara. His position was then assumed by Şaffet Şav Bey, head of the Red Crescent's Prisoners of War Department.

## **Conclusion**

The Ottoman Red Crescent was engaged in a wide range of activities throughout the First World War—from providing frontline medical support to addressing challenges related with a growing POW population. Importantly, women played a crucial role in ensuring that operations ran smoothly and at the highest capacity possible.

The First World War triggered both a military and profound humanitarian crisis for the waning Ottoman Empire. In such trying times, the Red Crescent proved indispensable, effectively complementing the state's medical and relief services from the very onset of the conflict. Through its efforts in the trenches and at home, the Red Crescent demonstrated just how robust and resilient of an organization it was to the military apparatus and society as a whole.

---

41 Mesut Çapa, "Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sonrasında Kızılay Heyeti'nin Trabzon Vilayetindeki Çalışma ve Gözlemleri", *Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi*, No. 17 (Winter 2014), pp. 101-112.

The Red Crescent set up field hospitals to care for sick and wounded soldiers, deployed mobile hospital trains for patient transport, and created provincial branches and volunteer networks to expand medical services throughout Ottoman territory. The active involvement of volunteers, and especially of women volunteers, illustrates the extent to which society as a whole was able to mobilize effectively in extremely difficult circumstances.

Among the organization's most comprehensive international initiatives were its efforts on behalf of POWs, including those captured by Ottoman forces. The delegation headed by Yūsuf Akçura collaborated with various Red Cross societies to ensure that prisoners' basic needs—food, clothing, and communication with their families—were adequately met. These efforts exemplify the Red Crescent's ability to adopt innovative, far-reaching strategies to deliver humanitarian services to some of the most neglected and marginalized individuals who, more often than not, found themselves languishing in camps far away from home.

The Red Crescent's wartime efforts laid a solid foundation for its postwar transition into a humanitarian organization capable of operating effectively during peacetime. The institutional model, relief strategies, and operational practices developed over the course of the war formed a lasting legacy that would shape its subsequent evolution into a modern, reputable humanitarian actor. In this regard, the First World War was a pivotal juncture for the Red Crescent—not only in terms of its expanded capacity to deliver essential humanitarian services but also in solidifying its position and legitimacy in the eyes of the society.

A significant factor in the Red Crescent's success was the unwavering, selfless dedication of its idealistic leadership. Ahmet Emin Yalman likened the organization's leaders to *Akıncılar*—historically those who served as the army's vanguard—remarked:

They were deeply devoted to the Red Crescent. To them, the advancement of its mission and avoidance of any misstep was a matter of honor and conscience. They refused to succumb to petty jealousy. Each was a man—or woman—of integrity whose character and moral excellence had been tried, tested, and found to be of the highest quality.<sup>42</sup>

Throughout the war, the Red Crescent proved itself to be an effective national and international humanitarian organization through its extensive service behind the front lines.

---

42 Yalman, p. 282.

## References

### Archives

Askeri Tarih Stratejik Etüt Başkanlığı Arşivi (ATASE Arşivi)

Başkanlık Cumhuriyet Arşivi (BCA)

Türk Kızılay'ı Arşivi (TKA)

### Books and Articles

Akgün, Seçil Karal and Murat Uluğtekin. *Hilâl-i Ahmer'den Kızılay'a*, Türk Hava Kurumu Basımevi İşletmeciliği, Ankara, 2000.

Artuç, Nevzat. *Cemal Paşa Askeri ve Siyasi Hayatı*, TTK Yay., Ankara, 2008.

Bayur, Yusuf Hikmet. *Türk İnkılabı Tarihi*, Vol. III/Book 3, Ankara, 1991.

Besim 'Ömer. *Tokuzuncu Vaşington Şalib-i Ahmer Konferansı'na Me'mûriyyetim ve 'Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer Cem'iyyeti'ne Tekliflerim Hakkında*, İstanbul, 1328 AH.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Hânımefendilere Hilâl-i Ahmer'e Dâ'ir Konferans*, (n.d.).

Çapa, Mesut. *Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti (1914–1925)*, Türkiye Kızılay Derneği Yay., Ankara 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Birinci Dünya Savaşı ve Millî Mücadele'de Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti ve Kızılaycılar*, Atatürk Araştırma Merkezi, Ankara, 2023.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Osmanlı Hilal-i Ahmer (Kızılay) Cemiyeti," *Osmanlı*, Vol.5 (Toplum), Yeni Türkiye Yay., Ankara 1999, pp. 129–143.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Birinci Dünya Savaşı Sonrasında Kızılay Heyeti'nin Trabzon Vilayetindeki Çalışma ve Gözlemleri," *Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi*, No.17, (Fall 2014), pp. 101–112.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Filistin (Kanal) Cephesi'nde Kızılay (Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti'nin Çalışmaları," *Trakya Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* No. 16 (July 2018), pp. 57–73.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Kızılay (Osmanlı Hilâl-i Ahmer) Cemiyeti Hastabakıcıları," *Prof. Dr. İlker Alp'e Armağan Kitabı*, Çanakkale, 2021, pp. 157–169.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Birinci Dünya Savaşı'nda Türkiye'de İtilaf Devletleri Esirleri," *Toplumsal Tarih*, No. 66, 1999, pp. 49–56.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Yusuf Akçura'nın Rusya Seyahati ve Türk Esirleri," *Türk Kültürü*, No. 366, October 1993, pp. 32–46.

*Hânımlar Hey'et-i Merkeziyyesi Tarafından Tertib Edilen Takvîm*, 1916.

Irmak, Sadi. "Kızılay Düşüncesinin Tarihimizden Gelen Kaynakları," *I. Millî Kızılay Konferansı*, 11–13 Haziran 1964), Ankara, 1964.

Münim, Mustafa. *Cepheden Cepheye*, Vol.1, Ege Basımevi, İstanbul 1940.

'Osmānlı Hilāl-i Aḥmer Cem'iyeti Rusya Üserā Muraḥḥaşı Yūsuf Akçura Bey'iñ Raporu, Dersa'adet, 1335 AH.

'Osmānlı Hilāl-i Aḥmer Cem'iyeti'niñ 1335 (1919) Senesinde Mün'akid Hilāl-i Aḥmer Meclis-i 'Umūmîsi Hey'et-i Muḥteremesine Takdīm Edilen 1330–1334 Senelerine 'Â'id Merkez-i 'Umūmî Raporu. İstanbul, Maṭba'a-i Orḥāniyye, 1335 AH.

*Türkiye Kızılay Derneği, 73 Yıllık Hayatı (1877–1949)*, Ankara, 1950.

*Üserā Hakkında Ta'līmātnāme*, Maṭba'a-i 'Askeriyye, İstanbul, 1332/1916.

Yalman, Ahmet Emin. *Yakın Tarihte Gördüklerim, Geçirdiklerim*, Vol. I., İstanbul, 1970.

