

AL FRONTE

La Grande Guerra
fra interventismo, cronaca e soccorso

a cura di

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British Humanitarian and Medical Missions in Serbia in the 1914-1918

World War the First was the largest-scale war conflict in the history of mankind to that date. Thirty-six countries, accounting for three-quarters of the then world population, participated in it. Seventy million people fought in the war; of this, ten million were killed, five million died of different diseases, and 19 million were wounded.¹ World War the First caused catastrophic and unprecedented human losses and material destruction.

Serbia did not escape war and destruction either, becoming one of the main theatres of war in the first and the second year of warfare. The war caused enormous human losses, resulting in a great number of refugees, injured and homeless people. Great swathes of the population were struck by different diseases, and famine and poverty set in. As available data reveal, by the time the war ended Serbia had gone through a demographic and economic catastrophe. It lost 1,257,000 people or a quarter of its total population, while war damages came to between seven and ten billion gold francs.²

In view of this, many famous British political and public personalities engaged in spontaneous or organized efforts to assist Serbia and its population, by providing money, food, and publicity. Many of

¹ S. Skoko, *War Year 1918*, in: *Serbia in 1918 and the Creation of the Yugoslav State*, Collection of Papers, Vol. 7, SASA Institute of History, Belgrade 1989, p. 280.

² V. Ivetić, *Contribution of the Serbian Army to the Creation of Yugoslavia*, in: *Yugoslav State 1918-1998*, Collection of Papers, Belgrade 1999, p. 136.

them headed humanitarian and medical missions that came to Serbia in the 1914–1918 period. It is estimated that around six hundred British doctors, nurses and other supporting staff spent time in Serbia during the Great War in order to assist the ill and the injured.³

The *Serbian Relief Fund*, set up in London in September 1914, provided substantial financial, material and humanitarian assistance to the Serbian people, and its ill and injured. Members of this fund included famous representatives of British politics and public life of the time: Lloyd George, Foreign Affairs Minister and Prime Minister from 1916 onwards, archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans, politician Winston Churchill, Valentine Chirol, journalist of *The Times*, Ser Charles Chadwick Oman, Lady Constance Jane Boyle, Dr James Berry and his wife Dr Frances Dickinson Berry, Cardinal Born, Lord Haversham. In February 1915, Queen Mary, wife of the British King George V, assumed patronage of the Serbian Relief Fund, becoming its honorary president. In total, the fund had around seven hundred members.⁴ Its key objective was humanitarian work. It was organized in the form of sub-committees for: finance and publicity, staff, stocks, education, prisoners of war, supply. In the first two years of warfare, the Fund's key task was to set up and finance ambulance missions in Serbia. From March 1915 onwards, the Fund was under the auspices of the British government.⁵ Estimates are that during four years of war the Fund collected assistance worth a million pounds sterling.

During the war, representatives of the Fund's management organized numerous manifestations, concerts and plays, and delivered lectures, in order to draw English people's attention to Serbia's plight and to collect contributions to the Fund. On October 15, 1914 already, *The Times* published a text by Lady Paget, *The Need for Quick Assistance to Serbia*, calling for urgent assistance to Serbia in the form of

³ S. Popović Filipović, *To Courage and Humanity. Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia and with Serbs During World War 1 1914-1918*, Belgrade 2007, p. 119.

⁴ S. Popović Filipović, *Serbian Relief Fund in Serbia and with Serbs in World War 1 and the Post-War Period*, www.rastko.net/medicina.2012-10-08, pp. 291-292.

⁵ U. Ostojić Fejić, *List of Members of the Serbian Relief Fund (1916-1918)*, *Miscellanea*, Vol. 20, 1990, Belgrade 1990, pp. 115-116.

food and medications. Over the next several days, weeks and months, this newspaper published similar texts.⁶ On March 24, 1915, *The Manchester Guardian* published a long text by Sir Thomas Lipton, famous tea producer, about his journey to Serbia which was already devastated by war. British press publicity in favour of Serbia and its war cause underwent a renaissance of sorts during 1914 and 1915. Estimates are that over one hundred British newspapers wrote about Serbia and the Serbian people during this period, in more than two hundred and fifty articles.

From November 1914 until June 1915, the Serbian Relief Fund dispatched five fully equipped hospitals to Serbia. The first Serbian Relief Fund hospital, run by Lady Louise Margaret Leila Paget, was sent to Skopje, where it operated from November 1914 until March 1916. Her mission numbered fifty-six people. The second hospital, organized by Lady Cornelia Wimborne, arrived in Skopje on February 1915 to assist Lady Paget's mission; her team included surgeon Dr Lancelot Barrington Ward. The third hospital, run by Mabel St Claire Stobart, arrived in Niš in April 1915, but was forwarded to Kragujevac, where it worked during the great typhus epidemic. This hospital's team also set up a mobile hospital to accompany the Šumadijska Division, and in the summer of 1915 opened seven so-called road ambulances to provide healthcare to people in the country's interior. These mobile units had the task to teach peasants how to maintain good hygiene and take care of their children and ill ones. The fourth hospital operated in Belgrade, and the fifth in Požarevac. All members of Serbian Relief Fund hospitals in Serbia, except for Lady Paget's mission, participated in Serbian army's retreat across Montenegro and Albania. Members of the mission headed by Lady Paget decided to stay; the hospital continued to work in the occupied Skopje and its entire staff was repatriated in March 1916. Members of the Serbian Relief Fund also set up a hospital in Corfu which, after the reorganization of the Serbian army and ambulance, was transferred to the Salonika Front. Help and support to the Serbian army through

⁶ U. Ostojić Fejić, *Contribution to Research of British Public Opinion on Serbia in 1914, Collection of Papers: Battle of Kolubara. Serbia's War Efforts in 1914*, Vol. 3, Belgrade 1985, p. 165.

the provision of medical and social services continued on the Salonika Front, Corsica, Biserta.⁷

The Serbian Relief Fund sent its special envoys bringing concrete assistance to towns such as Skadar, Durres, Thessalonica and Corfu, but also Corsica, Marseilles, and Biserta. In Corfu alone, from November 1915 until March 1916, 14,500 blankets, 36,600 coats, sixty tons of rice, thirty tons of beans, ten tons of sugar and other food was distributed.⁸ The Fund's assistance was particularly significant during the typhus epidemic in Serbia in 1914 and 1915. In 1916, a special education committee, chaired by Carrington Wilde, was formed as part of the Serbian Relief Fund. This committee assumed the obligation to educate 350 Serbian boys placed in homes in London, Oxford, Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Cambridge. The schooling was in the English language, but Serbian teachers were brought in as well. In three years, the British government donated seventy-five thousand pounds to further the Fund's educational goals. Around fifty boys graduated from British universities, many with excellent grades. Members of the Serbian Relief Fund also wished to promote the Serbian tradition, culture and spirituality.

Particularly active in providing humanitarian assistance to Serbia was the Scottish Women's Hospital run by Dr Elsie Inglis. It set up a total of fourteen hospitals, ten of which were for Serbs in Serbia, and on the Salonika and Russian Fronts. Women only worked in these hospitals: English, Scottish, Irish, Welsh, American and Canadian. They were, in effect, doctors without borders, while at the same time spearheading the struggle for women's rights and equality.⁹ It should also be mentioned that Scottish Women's Hospital sent its first humanitarian mission to Serbia in December 1914, during the typhus epidemic, when 125 out of 425 doctors died of typhus.¹⁰ The great Scottish Women's Hospital in Kragujevac, with 150 beds, was first

⁷ S. Popović Filipović, *Serbian Relief Fund in Serbia and with Serbs in World War 1*, pp. 293-300.

⁸ Serbia's Greatest Benefactors in War, *Nova Evropa*, No. 16, 1 December 1925.

⁹ S. Popović Filipović, *To Courage and Humanity*, p. 2.

¹⁰ E. Inglis, *Scottish Women's Hospitals*, *Nova Evropa*, Vol. XII, No. 16, 1 December 1925, p. 487.

run by Dr Soltau and then Dr Chesney. This hospital was one of the best organized hospitals in Serbia. It had a fully equipped concreted operating theatre and an X-ray cabinet.¹¹

The hospital in Valjevo with 200 beds under tents was run by Dr Alice Hutchinson, while the hospital in Mladenovac was run by Dr Haverfield. The most important doctor of the Scottish Women's Hospital was Elsie Inglis. This noble woman studied medicine in Glasgow and Edinburgh. At the age of 27, she obtained her doctor's and surgeon's licence. She joined the suffragette movement early, becoming honorary secretary of its Edinburgh branch. She will be remembered as a brave and enterprising woman who in May 1915 came to Serbia with the Scottish Women's Hospital to assist in the typhus epidemic in Kragujevac.¹² Thanks to her, the famous Dr Alice Hutchinson came to Serbia.¹³ It should also be noted that in Kragujevac Elsie Inglis fully equipped a hospital with the capacity for 100 injured, only to enlarge it further so it could accept 500 people. In November 1915, she was taken captive in Kragujevac after refusing to leave Serbia and the hospital. After the Red Cross and the US Government intervened, she returned to Great Britain in 1916 via Vienna and Zurich. She died in 1917 in Newcastle, and was buried in Edinburgh. One of the most famous English women, arrived in Serbia in 1914 to help the Serbian injured and ill, was Flora Sandes. This noble woman will also be remembered as the first British woman to serve as a soldier in World War 1, enrolled in the Serbian army. Together with thirty-six women, and as part of St John Hospital, she arrived in Kragujevac where she joined the Serbian Red Cross and worked for the Second Infantry Regiment of the Serbian Army. In Valjevo in 1915, she stood out as a volunteer nurse when, together with Miss Emily Simmonds, she nursed typhus patients; she contracted the illness, but managed to recover.¹⁴ When the Serbian Army retreated

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² S. Popović Filipović, *op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

¹³ M. Krippner, *Women at War. Serbia 1915-1918*, Belgrade 1986, p. 49.

¹⁴ D. Divljaković, *Epidemic Typhus in Serbia*, in: *Collection of Papers: Serbia in 1915*, Vol. 4, Belgrade 1986, p. 101.

across Albania, she joined the army and earned the rank of corporal. When the war ended, she was awarded the rank of captain.

Married couples also visited Serbia, its capital city and other towns, during World War 1, bringing humanitarian assistance and opening numerous hospitals where not only the Serbian injured, but also Austrian and German soldiers, were treated. Among the first were May Dickinson and James Berry, famous doctors from London who had first been to Serbia in 1904 for the crowning of King Petar I Karadorđević. May Dickinson Berry was an anaesthesiologist, and her husband a renowned surgeon. At the request of Mabel Grujić, who was an American and wife of Slavko Grujić, Serbian diplomat in Great Britain, this couple accepted the proposition to come to Serbia with their team of doctors and medical staff to help treat the Serbian ill and injured, and attend to the typhus epidemic.

Mr and Mrs Berry and their medical team made up a large part of the British mission of doctors and nurses called the *Anglo Serbian Hospital*, which was active in different parts of the Kingdom of Serbia until Austrian occupation of the country in late 1915. This was the official name of the Berrys' team but it was almost never used, as it was popularly called the *Berry Mission*. It was one of the best equipped of all hospitals arrived in Serbia.¹⁵ It is interesting to note that in its own country the mission was called *Royal Free Hospital Unit*.

The mission comprising fifty-four members headed by Dr James Berry and his wife May Dickinson arrived in Vrnjačka Banja, Serbia, in February 1915. Berry's team included doctors of different specialties, nurses, cooks, housewives. They brought with them medical equipment, medications, beds, pyjamas, blankets, food, footwear, boots worth a total of 7,057 pounds. The mission remained in Serbia for a year, when it had to leave the country at the request of occupation authorities. Immediately upon its arrival, Dr Berry's hospital started working. This humanitarian mission was in charge of six hospitals with a total of 360 beds. In addition to fifty-four mission members, hospital staff also included Austrian captives working as technical staff or engineers, and Serbs, which means that between sixty

¹⁵ M. Krippner, *op.cit.*, p. 41.

and seventy people worked in British hospitals in Vrnjačka Banja. Working conditions were very good, and mission members were accountable to Serbian Army Headquarters in Kragujevac. Each mission member got three dinars per day from the Serbian government, to use for daily purchases of food and hospital and medical equipment. Further, the Serbian government also supplied petrol and paraffin oil to Berry's mission. In particular, mission members focussed on suppressing typhus, managing, in a very short time period, to construct a separate hospital for this purpose – a barrack for typhus patients only. An estimated 150,000 people died in Serbia from typhus during 1914/1915.¹⁶ It is interesting to note that this was the first hospital of the type built in Serbia to that date. It comprised a special isolation unit for suspected and confirmed typhus cases.¹⁷

After the Austrian army entered Vrnjačka Banja in early November 1915, the mission continued its everyday medical tasks, in line with the decision of the occupation authorities. Over the next several weeks, the Dickinson-Berry's hospital provided treatment to Austro-Hungarian soldiers and injured who had fought on the Russian and Italian fronts. Austrians treated members of the British team, but also Serbs remaining in the hospital and the town, with respect. Dr Berry even wrote in his book that during their captivity of sorts under Austrian occupation authorities, the Austrian army performed no crimes or acts of violence other than occasional looting. Still, the hospital had fewer and fewer patients, the British doctors and medical staff had less and less work, and in early 1916 occupation authorities ordered that the mission of British doctors and humanitarians was to leave the town and Serbia and head towards Kruševac, which they did on February 18, 1916. After almost a year, doctor Berry, his wife May and 25 mission members left Vrnjačka Banja and returned to London.

Mabel St. Clair Stobart, head of the third unit of the Serbian Relief Fund numbering 70 persons, arrived in Kragujevac in spring 1915. Although she had no formal education, she was a very well-read, energetic and capable woman. Bravely combating the typhus epidemic, she contracted the illness herself but managed to heal. When Austrian

¹⁶ D. Divljanović, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 104.

offensive on Serbia began, she formed a Flying Corps from a part of her hospital and retreated towards Kosovo and Metohia, that is, via Priština and Peć to Andrijevica and then further on to Skadar and port San Giovanni di Medua, from where she took an Italian ship to Brindisi, and then via Rome and France to London.¹⁸

Evelina Haverfield also provided substantial assistance to the Serbian people during the Great War. She was commander of one of the branches of Women's Volunteer Reserve. Together with Elsi Inglis, she arrived in Kragujevac, Serbia, in May 1915 as member of the Scottish Women's Hospital. For a while, she administered the Lazarevac hospital. She too refused to leave Serbia after the Austrian invasion in November 1915. She left Lazarevac for Kruševac where she joined her friend Dr Elsi Inglis and continued medical and humanitarian work. From there, together with other members of allied missions, she was repatriated in February 1916 via Vienna and Switzerland to England.

One of the first Englishwomen who came to war-ravaged Serbia in October 1915 was Ellen Chivers Davies, member of the Farmers Unit. She wrote of her impressions of Belgrade and Serbia in her book *A Farmer in Serbia* published in 1916. She did not particularly like the city. It was too sombre and empty for her taste. At the time, Belgrade was a theatre of war and was all in ruins, which she described in her book.¹⁹

British writers Alice and Claude Askew visited the Serbian capital twice as members of the First British Field Hospital. They first came to Belgrade in late September 1915 when, as they noted, there was an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear as an Austrian plane had thrown several bombs killing a number of people. They thought Belgrade was the only Serbian city in the true sense of the word, and were particularly fond of the long main street paved with wood.²⁰ They left invaluable details on Belgrade and other Serbian towns they visited in their work *The Stricken Land: Serbia as We Saw It*.

English humanitarian missions comprised persons of profound sensibility, and, most of all, great humanity, who left an indelible mark

¹⁸ M. Krippner, *op. cit.*, pp. 146-150.

¹⁹ N. Petković, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

in the history of Serbia and its people. Their contribution in allaying the evils and troubles borne by the suffering population will remain inscribed in gold letters in the history of British-Serbian relations in the first half of the 20th century. Many members of these humanitarian and medical missions came to share the destiny of their patients. Elizabeth Ross, Louisa Jordan, Margaret Fraser, Agnes Minshull, Lorna Ferris and Mabel Dearmer are only some of the brave English-women who died while helping the Serbian ill and injured.