

## VOLUNTEER MEDICAL MISSION "AMERICAN WOMEN'S HOSPITALS" IN ALBANIA DURING AND IMMEDIATELY THE GREAT WAR

### ДОБРОВОЛНА МЕДИЦИНСКА МИСИЈА "AMERICAN WOMEN'S HOSPITALS" ВО АЛБАНИЈА ВО ТЕКОТ НА ПРВАТА СВЕТСКА ВОЈНА

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#### ABSTRACT

The paper/work/thesis processes an episode from the hardest moments in the Albanian history, the years of the First World War and immediately after it. It is the time when Albania was transformed into an area of armies of the occupation zones of both Imperialists blocs.

The life in the poor mountain country Albania, under pressure of the everyday requisitions of food, livestock, household and force labour of everything that was capable of work, became unbearably difficult. The contagious diseases which the army brought with itself, the absence of medical service, ignorance and the low health culture of the population, additionally complicated this situation.

For the presence of the most different pathology of contagious diseases and the huge mortality of the unprotected population, especially children, was also informed international public. The main role in saving many lives was played by the international solidarity. By arriving of the sanitary missions on the Albanian soil the condition evidently started to change. Particularly, the most numerous were volunteers, doctors and nurses from the Red Cross and the mission "Hospitals of the American women".

Their work was partly preventive and larger part social medical, in terms of opening hospitals, ambulances and institutions for childcare of orphans. Their programs were focused on the surgical care especially of old and neglected wounds, cataract operation as a result of the increased number of blind children mainly among the younger population, dentist protection, program of the child protection and education of the population from the place from where the support medical staff for work was recruited, and which actually lacked a lot.

**Key words:** Albania, First World War, contagious diseases, sanitary missions.

#### INTRODUCTION

First World War is an event that changed the face of the world forever. It was not the same afterwards. This war was considered as the biggest humanitarian catastrophe that happened till then with great disappointments, destructions and millions of victims. Purpose of the paper is to present the role of the international solidarity of the "American Women Hospitals" mission in providing medical prevention in the occupied and separated Albania during the hard years after the First World War. **Material and method:** For writing this paper it was used historical-researching method while the subject of research is the problem with the chronological order and analysis of the researched material. Except the written

material it is used photo-documentation, reports, letters, working reports and newspaper articles.

Some contextual aspects of the historical moment. The collapse of two great empires of the end of 1918 had a significant impact on the inhabitants of the Balkans and Albania.

The doom of Albania in the First World War was not nothing better than in Macedonia on which territory the population were fighting on the so called Macedonian front from October 1915 to September 1918. Everything that happened in Macedonia, also happened in Albania, and life under occupation, poverty, and diseases.

In late 1915 and Albania became the scene of the First World War. The Austro-Hungarian army carried out the occupation of the northern parts of Albania and expelled Esad Pasha to Greece. Regency government in Vlora functioned until Valon in November 1916 is not occupied by Italy. France in November 1916, occupied Korca and parts of southern Albania. In December, France and Italy have established a local government with legislative rights. Italy on June 23, 1917, declared the creation of the Republic of Albania as the Italian protectorate. There is also the emergence of the guerrilla movement.<sup>1</sup>

The First World War was drawing to a close in the Balkans and elsewhere in Europe. Austro-Hungarian forces had been forced to withdraw from Albania in early November 1918. Shkodra was occupied by an Allied garrison under French command, that included a British detachment. The situation was chaotic and Albania's very survival as an independent country was in question. Brigade General G. F. Phillips, head of the British Military Mission in Albania, arrived in Shkodra at the end of December 1918 and described the situation in the country as he found it.

But, with the beginning of the Great War and the humanitarian catastrophe in Albania, the new heroes of the war were born and they did not have weapon in their arms but they were making steps led by the idea of humanism. The voice of the humanism surpassed the war and the steps that the kings, leaders and politicians took. Although the signed treaty meant end of the Great War, there was no treaty for the diseases. According to Dr Barbara Hunt, the director of the mission "American Women Hospitals (AWH)"<sup>2</sup> when she found out about the signed treaty she said: "The war has been won; now the peace must be won."<sup>3</sup>

#### WELFARE WORK IN ALBANIA



The presence of the international sanitary missions in The Albania during the Great War and several years afterwards was welcomed and necessary. The Great War that brought great sufferings, did not only changed the world forever, but also put the international solidarity on a test and without it the number of the victims from the epidemic and pandemic diseases, famine and poverty would be more tragic and bigger. The international

sanitary missions represented a huge saviour for The Albania and one of them belong to the mission The American Women's Hospitals and The American Red Cross.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout, Albania, Serbia, Greece, and the Near East, American women physicians and nurses met medical emergencies, established public health programs, and provided social welfare services under the auspices of AWH. Typhoid fever, influenza, malaria, tuberculosis, venereal disease, pneumonia, smallpox, cholera, and a variety of skin and eye diseases literally plagued Europe; and, in many areas.<sup>5</sup>

Immediately after the war, eleven women physicians were certified by the American Women's Hospitals to the American Red Cross for work in the Balkans.

Some of these were sent to Albania, where they assisted in the organization of hospitals which were afterward closed or carried on limpingly by local agencies. At a later date, health service was undertaken by the American Women's Hospitals in cooperation with the Albanian-American School. For the AWH, medical care embraced transportation of patients, public health projects, temporary housing, and nurses' training as well as the more traditional optical, dental, surgical, and emergency treatments. The AWH shared medical work with the Red Cross and similar groups and complemented these efforts through joint social and economic programs.<sup>6</sup>

Is worth mentioning that, just before the arrival of the sanitet mission "American Women Hospitals" a research of C. Luther Fray was done of the situation in Albania which was published by the university Columbia press. This report gives us a whole picture of the situation in Albania at that time, from which it could be concluded that such a sanitet mission in Albania was a must.



*Dr. Mabel E. Elliott*



*Ambulance transport AWH*



The dearest possession of this Tirana, Albania, girl is the clean garments she has just received.

According to C. Luther Fray Albania was a wild, isolated section of hills and dales, mountains, valleys and gorges, rocky stream beds in summer, and torrents in winter. Foreign colonizers had not been kept out by the dauntless courage of the original inhabitants. The health question was one of the most serious that confronts Albania. Because of their poverty and

ignorance, the people were undernourished and very susceptible to disease. The three great scourges were syphilis, tuberculosis and malaria.<sup>7</sup>

Women suffered more than men from lack of medical attention, because, as a rule, Mohammedan women will not let male doctors attend them. Girls got married at an early age and were very young when they begin to bear children. It seemed that a few women doctors could perform a great service in Albania. Fray wrote that the Albanians were illiterate but intelligent, eager for education. Without modern conveniences, methods of production and protection, they are at a disadvantage, but they are not so sure that they are all wrong and the rest of the world is all right. Outsiders have brought them diseases, which they cannot control. Partial immunity has not been developed by ages of infection, and these afflictions run through their ranks like fire through a virgin forest.<sup>8</sup>

The American Women's Hospitals has become so impressed with the health needs of Albania that it has recently sent two workers there to start public-health and anti-malarial work in coöperation with the Albanian-American School of Agriculture at Kavaje.

Nurses in Albania worked under great difficulties. Women flocked to them for help, but English-speaking interpreters were scarce, and life, outside of a few towns, was primitive in every aspect. Each family supplied most of its own needs in the way of food and clothing. Furniture

was in the future. Bedsteads had not been introduced. Large families bedded together on the floors of miserable huts. They knew nothing about the transmission of disease, and had no means of protecting themselves from infection.

Syphilis was a curse brought upon them by foreign soldiers. Tuberculosis, malaria and trachoma were also curses.<sup>9</sup>

Albania is a hard country on nurses. Only the indomitable make the grade. Special development is necessary for successful service in that land of mud and mountains.

Nurses should be born on the highlands and inured to climbing up and down. They should never be allowed to leave their natal place lest they fall into the luxurious habits of other lands and become disabled hamstrung as it were for work in their native environment.

Reporting a visit to a mountain district in the northern part of Albania in 1927, Miss Edith Wood, an A. W. H. nurse, wrote as follows: "As we were leaving, the headman shouldered his gun and said his corn would not be watered that day because he wanted the honor of escorting us down the mountain.

I had taken his name in order to send him some medicine which was badly needed in his village. While I was walking, where the trail was too steep to ride, my horse



An Albanian Nurse and Patient



Edith Wood, RN, who served with the A.W.H. in Albania



fell and got two deep gashes in his belly, either of which, had it been a little deeper, would have left me stranded among the 'Peaks of Shala.' At the next stop I got out my first aid kit and fixed up the horse. The entire population gathered around and witnessed the operation with gasps of astonishment. One of the women had a child with a burned and blistered foot, crusty with dirt, which I washed and dressed, in spite of the fact that the villagers said it would be useless to wash it because it would get dirty again." <sup>11</sup>

There are no passenger railways in Albania and our nurses and physicians have used every means of transportation from donkeys to airplanes. The old Roman Road, out of repair for ages, has been improved upon in some sections, and, barring slides and washouts, the distance from the northern to the southern boundary of the country can be covered in less than two days with a Ford. But this takes the local flavor out of the trip, and for economical souls in search of thrills I, personally, recommend a seat with

the driver of the mail lorry. A dollar goes a long distance in Albania, and the mailman enjoys the novelty of an American woman passenger.<sup>11</sup>



*Nell Bartram in World War I uniform with soldiers at Albanian clinic. A clinic was held every Monday by Dr. Nell Bartram after a two hour ride in a cannon. From 50 to 225 patients were seen during the day.*

#### WEEKLY BULLETIN OF THE ST. LOUIS MEDICAL SOCIETY

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#### American Women Doctors Assist Red Cross In Reconstruction Work Overseas

Nineteen American women doctors are now in the Balkan, assisting the American Red Cross in its work of caring for the sick and destitute. These doctors are from the American Women's Hospital at New York and are located in Serbia, Montenegro and Albania. Already their work has earned the warmest commendation of the government. Some of them have received decorations or been cited for conspicuous service among the soldiers and refugees.

In Serbia, where the most sickness and destitution exist, the following women physicians are at work: Dr. Margorie Burdham of Ashtabula, Ohio; Dr. Mary H. Elliot of New York; Dr. Harriet M. Gervais of Dorchester, Mass.; Dr. Alberta M. Greene of Judith Bay, Mont.; Dr. Lulu Peters of New York; Dr. Marion C. Stevens of Reading, Mass.; Dr. Regina Flood Keyes of Buffalo, N. Y.; Dr. Mabel Flood of Elmira, N. Y.

Dr. Catherine M. Cook of Washington, Pa. and Dr. Dana E. Bowman of Kansas City, Mo., are assisting the American Red Cross doctors in Montenegro; Dr. Nell G. W. Bartram of Huntington, Pa.; Dr. Mary J. Hyndman of Philadelphia and Dr. Sarah E. Foulks of Burlington, N. J. are doing similar work in Albania.

Discussion by Drs. Sidney L. Schwab, Wm. W. Graves, G. Canby Robinson, Frank R. Fry, Joseph Grindon, Wm. Engelbach and David S. Booth; Dr. Fordyce closing.

Dr. Soper moved that Dr. Fordyce be elected an honorary member of the St. Louis Medical Society. Seconded by Dr. Robinson. Carried.

Adjournment 11:15 p. m.

Attendance 112.

Arthur Gundlach, Assistant Secretary.

#### Morbidity and Mortality Report

WEEK ENDING, SATURDAY, APRIL 19, 1919

	CASES DEATHS	
Leprosy	1	
Influenza	25	11
Ophthalmia Neonatorum	1	
Smallpox	10	
Cerebro-Spinal Fever	1	
Erysipelas	7	2
Chickenpox	46	
Mumps	8	
Whooping Cough	1	
Typhoid Fever		1
Measles	61	2
Diphtheria and Croup	35	2
Scarlatina	19	
Consumption	33	21
Total	250	40

*Dr. Nell Bartram, Weekly Bulletin Of The St. Louis Medical Society April 24, 1919, 67.*  
*Influenza Encyclopedia April 24, 1919*

People, sights and thrills, are different in Albania, and by riding with the mailman you meet the people, see the sights and feel the thrills. It is a coveted privilege to sit with the driver. His seat has springs. The common passengers in the back of the lorry sit on solid wood.

Crossing a rocky stream-bed where the bridge had been washed out, we sighted another lorry moving along the side of the cliff ahead. The road was comparatively level, but that lorry slid gracefully over the edge and down the embankment. Perhaps the driver was a hillman. Anyway, it was a thrilling sight.

Dr. Sara E. Foulks<sup>12</sup> was stationed at Kortcha, Albania in 1919, and her work was so satisfactory that calls for sick relief continued to be received from that town for years after her departure. Kortcha is an inaccessible place situated on a high plateau near the border of Serbia to the east, and Greece to the south. It is distinguished by the presence of a mission school, a center of Christian culture, developed by the Reverend and Mrs. Kennedy by years of self-sacrificing service in His name. The gracious influence of this school is felt immediately by strangers coming into Kortcha.<sup>13</sup>



*Dr. Sara E. Foulks, Medical Director American Women's Hospitals in Albania, Davenport, who has been engaged in post war work in Albania*

Our experience in Albania has been highly educational. Only the love of God, one nurse said, would make work in that country successful. And the results achieved by the Kennedy's at Kortcha bears this out. For many reasons that place appealed to our board, but the advisability of placing an American unit there was doubtful. The old hospital established by the American Red Cross in 1919 was in sad need of assistance, and finally, satisfactory arrangements were made in this connection, which are still maintained.

Mrs. Melville Chater, a nurse who had served with the American Women's Hospitals in Greece, accompanied her husband, a noted writer, on a trip through Albania, which is described in the National Geographic Magazine, February, 1931. Mrs. Chater made a survey of health conditions for the American Women's Hospitals, and strongly recommended that a special mountain medical service be established for the benefit of the Dukagini

tribes in the mountains north of Scutari. While this matter was under consideration, strikingly similar recommendations were received from remote mountain districts in southern states. Funds were limited, and after careful consideration, a decision was reached in favor of establishing a rural and mountain medical service in our own country.<sup>14</sup>



*Nursing staff of the Kortcha Hospital, where nursing was unknown*



*Men's Ward, Kortcha Hospital, Albania.*

Funds were limited, and after careful consideration, a decision was reached in favor of establishing a rural and mountain medical service in our own country.



*DR. MARY ELLIOTT WITH PATIENTS AT A VILLAGE CLINIC IN ALBANIA.*

*May 1919*



Albanian patients in front of the A.W.H. dispensary at Scutari with Dr. Sara Foulke.



*Xhanfise Frasheri*<sup>46</sup>



*Dr. Marie J. Hyndman, dentist in Albania 1919*<sup>45</sup>



*Dr. Mabel Elliott with a child 1920*



*Dr. Lula Hunt Peters in Albanian Costume*<sup>47</sup>



## LITERATURE

- 1 Essad Pasha Toptani: *Mémoire sur l'Albanie*, Dans: *Guerre européenne 1914, 1919*. Paris, (1919), 16.; *Historia e Popullit Shqiptar II Prishtina*, 1968, pp. 352.
- 2 AWH was partly modeled after Scottish Women's Hospitals, an organization which made explicit links between advocating for female professionals and suffrage. While the AWH was in contact with Carrie Chapman Catt of NAWSA during this period, these links were informal. Dr. Rosahe Slaughter Morton explicitly denied connection with the suffrage movement, disavowing such 'propaganda' and assuring that the AWH was solely interested in war service.
- 3 Ellen More Singer, *Women Physicians and the Profession of Medicine, 1850-1995*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, (1999), 147.
- 4 *Medical woman's journal*, Volume XXVIII, Number 10, 62.
- 5 *Women's Medical Journal*, 29 (1919), 7.
- 6 Walker, Gertrude, *The American Women's Hospitals*, *New York Evening Post* 33, 1918, 304.
- 7 Esther Pohl Lovejoy, *certain Samaria* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1933), 13-20.
- 8 *ibid*
- 9 Report the War Service Committee of the Medical Women's National Association for the Year 1918-1919, Box 1, Folder 5, AWH Papers.
- 10 Report on AWH activities, April 22 1922, Box 3, Folder 20, AWH Papers.
- 11 *ibid*
- 12 Sarah Elizabeth Foulcs was born 1880 -1962 on the family farm in Burlington Township, New Jersey. She later attended an osteopathic type program, and then Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, graduating in 1907.
- 13 *Medical Women's Journal*, November 1921, Vol. XXVIII, No. 11, 281.
- 14 *JAMA*. 1919;73(18):1368-1374.
- 15 This picture of the market shows Dr. Marie J. Hyndman, at the time, the only dentist in Albania. As well as caring for Albanian civil population, Dr. Hyndman cared for Italian soldiers and officers who were in Albania with the Italian army of occupation.
- 16 Frasher-Bhasa Xhanfise ("Djanfise") graduated from Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania in 1936.
- 17 Dr. Lulu Hunt Peters (1873-1930) was born in Milford, Maine and attended the Maine State Normal School in Castine, Maine before moving to California. She attended the University of California, Berkeley and graduated in 1909 as a Doctor of Medicine.

Note: All photos are property of Special Collections on Women in Medicine, Hagerty Library, Drexel University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

## ДОБРОВОЛНА МЕДИЦИНСКА МИСИЈА "AMERICAN WOMEN'S HOSPITALS" ВО АЛБАНИЈА ВО ТЕКОТ НА ПРВАТА СВЕТСКА ВОЈНА

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### АБСТРАКТ

Трудот обработува една епизода од најтешките моменти во албанската историја, годините на Првата светска војна и непосредно после неа. Тоа е времето кога Албанија била претворена во подрачје на окупациони зони на армиите од двата Империјалистички блока.

Животот во сиромашната планинска земја Албанија, под притисок на секојдневните реквизиции на храна, добиток, покуќнина и принудна работа на се што било работоспособно, станал неподносливо тежок. Заразните

болести кои со себе ги носела војската, непостоењето на медицинска служба, непросветеноста и ниската здравствена култура кај населението, дополнително ја усложниле ваквата состојба.

За присутноста на најразличната патологија на заразни болести и огромната смртност на незаштитеното население, особено децата, била известена и меѓународната јавност. Главната улога во спасувањето на многу животи одиграла меѓународната солидарност. Со доаѓањето на санитарските мисии на тлото на Албанија состојбата видливо почнала да се менува. Конкретно, најбројни биле волонтерите, лекари и медицински сестри од Американскиот Црвен крст и мисијата „Болници на американските жени“.

Нивната работа била делумно превентивна а поголем дел социјално медицинска, во смисла на отварање на болници, амбуланти и установи за згрижување на децата без родители. Нивните програми биле усмерени кон хируршко згрижување особено на стари и запушлени рани, операција на катаракти поради големиот број на слепи лица претежно меѓу помладата популација, стоматолошка заштита, програма за детска заштита и едукација на населението од каде бил регрутиран помошен медицински персонал за работа а кој многу недостасувал.

**Клучни зборови:** Албанија, Прва светска војна, заразни болести, санитарски мисии.