

Martti Muukkonen
Joensuu, Finland
martti.muukkonen@joensuu.fi
<http://cc.joensuu.fi/~muukkone>

Martti Muukkonen

**THE ROOTS OF THE WORK WITH REFUGEES -
THE STORY OF THE YMCA AND VICTIMS OF WAR**

ABSTRACT

This presentation gives a glimpse on how the work with victims of war begun in one social movement, namely Young Men's Christian Association, how it evolved, transformed, diffused, and was institutionalised.

The work with victims of war has two roots. The American YMCA was the first organisation which put mobile service units to serve armed men during the American Civil War. The other root is in the fields of the Battle of Solferino. After the battle Henri Dunant proposed to his Geneva YMCA to start the work among wounded soldiers.

In the First World War YMCA canteens served armed men on both sides of the front. When some of these men became prisoners of war (POWs) the YMCA served them as well in co-operation with Red Cross. After the war the YMCA experience was used for the service of American immigrants.

During the Second World War the World Alliance of YMCAs concentrated on POWs and left the other military work to national movements. While the Red Cross focused on camp inspections and material help, the YMCA concentrated on mental and spiritual helping of the POWs.

After the war ended, many of the POWs became displaced persons and refugees. The YMCA organisation was again transformed to serve these new victims of war. From the YMCA the model for the refugee aid diffused to the churches and to the UNHCR.

THE ROOTS OF THE WORK WITH REFUGEES -

THE STORY OF THE YMCA AND VICTIMS OF WAR

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INTRODUCTION

In this presentation I give a glimpse on how the work with refugees begun as an activity of one social movement, Young Men's Christian Association, and how it evolved, transformed, and institutionalised. This happened during the period 1855-1955, and during that time the YMCA grew from a network of local Bible-clubs to the largest youth organisation in the world.

After the Second World War the World Alliance of YMCAs had its first post-war conference in 1955 in Paris. It was the hundredth anniversary of the organisation. The mission view of the YMCA was articulated in a statement called the Centennial Declaration. The fifth statement of the Declaration was as follows:

That as a world-wide Christian fellowship, the YMCA should concern itself fully and without reserve with the promotion of international understanding; the easing of tension; the abolition of war; and the establishment of world peace.¹

These words had a long history behind them. It was nothing new but merely an articulation of the ongoing activities. Everything big grows from a 'mustard seed'. Basically the seed was written in the Bible. There is an old dream based on the prophecy of Micah:

But in the last days it shall come to pass, that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established in the top of the mountains, and it shall be exalted above the hills; and people shall flow unto it. (4:1)
... they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up a sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. (4:3)
But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree; and none shall make them afraid: for the mouth of the LORD of hosts hath spoken it. (4:4)

¹ And Now - Tomorrow 1957, back-cover.

The story of the work with the victims of war starts with the lesson of neutrality.

2. THE LESSON OF NEUTRALITY

The World YMCA was built on the vision of unity. The founders did not actually search for the Christian unity but recognised it because of the belief in one Master and Lord. However, they felt that there were forces that could weaken this unity, and thus the question of neutrality was present already in the First World Conference of YMCAs in Paris 1855. The second paragraph of the YMCA constitution, Paris Basis, reads:

Any differences of opinion on other subjects, however important in themselves, shall not interfere with the harmonious relations of the Constituent Members and Associations of the World Alliance.

The paragraph was a result of American Civil War that was about to burst out. There was fear that the war would divide also the American YMCA associations². The words became the cornerstone of world wide unity because they pointed that nationalism, political opinions, etc. are less important than Christian unity. This principle was tested some years later in Europe where the Franco-Prussian war broke out. Five days after Napoleon III had declared the war in 1870, the French Swiss YMCA publication 'Journal', wrote:

Brothers of France, we weep with you, we humiliate ourselves with you, we pray with you and for you. Let us not forget how much our brothers of Germany also need our prayers.³

This was the beginning of an effort by the Geneva YMCA to mediate through their Journal between the Associations of France and Germany. The crucial point was the ancient dilemma of which one comes first: Caesar or Christ? The whole discussion published in Journal was also published in England and in US and thus all the founders of World Alliance were aware of this question. The

² Occasional Paper No III 1856,16f.

³ Shedd 1955,179.

issue was of first importance when planning the VI World Conference in Amsterdam in 1872. There the second Paragraph of Paris Basis was underlined and it was shown that the problems between French and Germans were similar to the situation during the American Civil War. The result was that the Basis was reaffirmed and the YMCA Movement had passed its first serious test.⁴

After the Franco-Prussian war YMCA activities in the field of unity were not as dramatic but no less significant. Tracy Strong writes in World Alliance History:

When youth was dragged from its natural pursuits and became "destiny's draftees", facing a world of paradoxes and clashes such as the "Clash of Arms", the "Clash of Colour", the "Clash of Ideas", and the "Clash of Faiths", the YMCA tried to interpret to youth the world-wide slogans.⁵

When the First World War broke out, the Executive Committee in Geneva was afraid that the division of the world would break the YMCA as well. The Executive chose two principles to be the cornerstones of their policy: Paris Basis and absolute political neutrality. The task was not easy. Both belligerent sides felt that the World Alliance was too friendly to the other side.⁶

The wounds of the war were bitter. The question of war guilt kept the churches, which had been loyal to their countries, suspicious of each other.⁷ Similarly the relations between German YMCA and the movements in Allied Countries were bad. Especially relations between the French and the Germans were almost totally broken. It took almost ten years to build bridges between these two movements. The reconciliation was one of the major tasks of World Alliance.⁸

It was not until Helsinki World Conference in 1926 than the wounds of the war had been healed. The resolutions pointed the

⁴ Shedd 1955,178-190.

⁵ Strong 1955b,461.

⁶ Strong 1955b,469.

⁷ Sinnemäki 1986,99. Karlström 1993,531.

importance of education and grass-roots contacts (camps, conferences, etc.) in promoting peace.⁹ The discussion was not anymore in the past division but the focus was laid more towards future and to mechanisms of how to strengthen the unity.

3. THE WORK FOR THE MEN IN ARMED FORCES

The roots of the YMCA service among soldiers¹⁰ are in two wars: The American Civil War and the Franco-Austrian War and especially its Solferino Battle 1859.

In 1861 the American Civil War had brought a totally new challenge: Young men joined in armies away from the Churches¹¹ and local YMCAs. If the YMCA wanted to keep contact to these men it had to go along. Thus, the YMCA organised a Christian Commission to work amongst soldiers. Besides the spiritual guidance the work also included nursing and carrying messages home. This was the first time that any organisation placed mobile units for the service of soldiers during the war.¹²

Two years before the war in America Henri Dunant had found himself in Solferino battlefield helping the wounded. Dunant was one of the founders of World Alliance of YMCAs and the *primus motor* of Geneva YMCA. In 1864, when it was sure that there would be 'Geneva Convention' he returned to Geneva and urged Geneva Association to remember the religious needs of soldiers. He planned that the association of Geneva could be even the centre, or at least one of the centres, of the spiritual branch of this

⁸ Strong 1955b,478ff.

⁹ Youth Faces Life s.a.(1926),236f.

¹⁰ YMCA work with soldiers during both World Wars is the most studied field of YMCA action. From the numerous reports, memoirs and studies the most significant are **Service with fighting men** edited by **William Howard Taft** and **Conrad Hoffmans In The Prison Camp of Germany** both of which are about the First World War. From the Second World War the most interesting books are **André Vuillet's** three reports and **Hugo Cedergrens** memoirs **Mit Liv med KFUM**. These books are the ones which the other YMCA historians have cited.

¹¹ One must remember that unlike in Europe in the US there were no state-churches, which had long traditions of military chaplains.

¹² Shedd 1955,164.

relief action. The assembly was interested of his short description of the activity carried by the American Associations during the Civil War. The Geneva Association thought, however, that "his ideas were too vague"!¹³

The work among soldiers obtained its permanent place in the USA during the Spanish-American war in 1898¹⁴, in India in 1907¹⁵, in Britain in 1902 and in Germany in 1914¹⁶. Before the First World War the YMCA work amongst the soldiers and sailors had expanded greatly.¹⁷ Youth in armies was served by the national YMCAs in all the major wars.¹⁸ The YMCA was in that sense ready when the Great War burst out. The World Alliance began to serve both the men in the armies and the prisoners of war.

YMCA Armed Services Departments were official organs of the British and American armies. During the First World War 9/10 of the welfare work among American forces in Europe was conducted by the YMCA. More than 26 000 professional workers were recruited to serve about 19 Million men¹⁹. In the British forces there was a YMCA unit in every division, and 50 000 women were working through the National Women's Auxiliary²⁰. The Indian YMCA had 591 secretaries in France, India, Mesopotamia, Egypt and Palestine²¹. This might be the first time when a Christian religious worker comes from the Third World to hold services in Europe.

In other countries the YMCA did not have as clearly an official status but the Monarchs often supported and sometimes asked YMCA

¹³ Shedd 1955,175,note 1,179.

¹⁴ Canfield 1902,7-10.

¹⁵ David 1992,132.

¹⁶ Hjelt 1918,4-6.

¹⁷ Shedd 1955,387.

¹⁸ Civil War, USA (1861-65), German-Danish (1864), Franco-Prussian (1870), Spanish-American (1898), British-Boer (1899-1902) and Russo-Japanese (1904-05). Strong 1955a,546n.

¹⁹ Greiner 1960,7.

²⁰ Hubbard 1960,8f.

²¹ David 1992,133.

to start the work with armed forces²² and thus the YMCA had a semi-official status. In Germany, for example, there were 1000 Soldiers Homes in 1918²³. In Switzerland the earliest records of YMCA Army-work are from 1856²⁴ (Sic! Three years before Solferino).

In practice, the task was shared in a way that so called 'big YMCA countries' took care of themselves, and the World's Alliance started the work in those belligerent countries where such work did not exist (Austria-Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria). Often this work was closely related to the work of the Red Cross relief activities²⁵. It is noteworthy that work in armies seems not to have been regarded against the policy of neutrality. Perhaps it was categorised to the same class as distributing the Bibles to the soldiers. It was easier for the YMCA to obtain the permission for the work among soldiers than among POWs²⁶. YMCA work with armed forces also created civilian YMCAs in countries where soldiers were served. Most YMCAs, for example, in Balkan were founded in that time²⁷.

The military work of the YMCA had its dark sides as well. Among the US troops in France there were also black soldiers. The YMCA had a special programme and own secretaries for them. Although it was good in principle, it did not work that well in practice because the American version of apartheid flourished in this service as well as in other segments of American society. Black YMCA secretaries got fewer resources than their white colleagues and faced structural resistance for their work. However, the experience of liberal atmosphere in French society sowed a seed for black human rights activity in the US YMCA.²⁸

²² Anderson 1963, 24f,27. Guskov 1995,17. At least two princes were National presidents of YMCA: Bernadotte in Sweden and Paul in Yugoslavia.

²³ Hjelt 1918,6.

²⁴ Geissberger 1960,11.

²⁵ Strong 1955a,550f.

²⁶ Strong 1955a,550f.

²⁷ Anderson 1963,20-25.

²⁸ Chandler 1995.

In 1940 the US system was changed. YMCA, YWCA, National Catholic Community Service, Salvation Army, National Jewish Welfare Board and National Travellers Aid Association founded the United Service Organization to run the joint task of service for armed forces.²⁹ Similar trends also took place in other countries but practically not much changed. For example in Britain the share of YMCA was larger than other organisations' share together.³⁰

Before the Second World War in 1939 the Executive Committee had resolved that:

...in the event of war where service to the men in the military forces is undertaken, this should be the responsibility of the National Alliance concerned; whereas service of an international character, such as work for prisoners of war, should be the responsibility of the World's Committee.³¹

In this sense the work of World Alliance among the armed forces ceased. World Alliance prepared itself to serve men behind the barbed wire.

4. THE WORK FOR THE PRISONERS OF WAR

The work for the Prisoners of War (POWs) was a natural continuity to the work with armed forces (prisoners were also armed forces). During the First World War the Prisoners Aid of YMCA ran projects in Austria-Hungary, France, Belgium, Italy, Russia, Serbia and Bulgaria. In Great Britain the responsibility laid on the British National Council. In non-belligerent countries such as Denmark, Holland, Japan, Sweden and Switzerland services were given to internees.³²

The most serious crisis of the work became when the USA joined the war. Because the majority of YMCA work among POWs was done by Americans, German War Ministry forbid all YMCA work among POWs.

²⁹ Greiner 1960.

³⁰ Hubbard 1960,9.

³¹ Strong 1953,28.

The World Alliance had to question if American aid could be acceptable at all when it had such results. After the negotiations the work continued among the Central Powers by the Swiss and Swedish workers³³.

In the second World War the question of neutrality was taken even more seriously. The Executive of the World's Committee concentrated in the service for POWs. In practice, World Alliance negotiated with the National Councils before it started the work in any country. The role of National Councils was to help with contacts with governmental and church authorities. The representatives of the World Alliance were from neutral countries and they ran the work for POWs.³⁴

The relations between the World YMCA and the International Red Cross remained good. There was a mutual understanding in co-operation of these two organisations. Formal agreement was never made but unofficially the burden was shared in a way that War Prisoners Aid of the YMCA took care of educational, recreational, cultural and spiritual activities of prisoners. International Committee of Red Cross concentrated on camp inspection, organising a central information agency with mail facilities, handling of all shipments and distributing all materials sent by the national Red Cross Societies.³⁵

Most of the work was on reciprocal basis - all prisoners were helped in the same way on both sides of the frontier. Exceptions to this rule were Soviet Union and Italy which did not give the YMCA the permission to work in their territory and, thus, Russian and Italian prisoners were excluded from the help. Finally, out of sheer pity many of the camp commandants in Germany urged the YMCA to send in supplies to the Russian POWs as well. Although War

³² Strong 1955a,546-552.

³³ Strong 1955a,553.

³⁴ Strong 1955a,559.

³⁵ Strong 1955a,557f; Cedergren 1969,70.

Prisoner's Aid was not aloud to work in Italy, it served Italian prisoners in Allied countries.³⁶

The work among POWs was so important that it took the whole capacity of the World Alliance staff during war time.³⁷ It also influenced the future policy of the World Alliances to such an extent that one cannot understand the period after the war without it. After the war the POWs were freed but, in many cases, became refugees.

5. WORK WITH REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS

Kommentti [MM1]: Tätä olisi syytä jatkaa jotenkin.

The first YMCA practice in the field of migrants was experienced in the US when State Commissioner for Immigrants suggested in 1906 that YMCA could help immigrants. The International Committee of North American YMCAs answered to the challenge. Tens of thousands of immigrants in educational classes were taught English. Social and religious projects were carried on. Personal help was given from the ship to the point of destination and to find a job and friends. The work expanded from the US to 17 ports in Europe where emigrants were waiting. Thousands of volunteers taught English to immigrants and at the same time learned about their hopes and fears. The work was one of the major laboratories for experience in human relationships.³⁸

Next challenges were during and after the First World War. This time the flood of emigrants came from Russia. Major work was done in France, and Paris became a centre for Russian emigrants. The work revolved around YMCA Press, Theological Seminar and Technical Institute but it also contained traditional YMCA activities such as camps, choirs etc. Especially YMCA Press greatly influenced the

³⁶ Strong 1955a, 562, 573. Cedergren 1969,73f.

³⁷ Cedergren 1969,94.

³⁸ Shedd 1955,440-443.

maintenance of Russian identity and culture by publishing Russian Classics, Orthodox liturgical books etc.³⁹

At the end of the Second World War the flood of refugees and displaced persons (DP)⁴⁰ burst out at the same time when the normal apparatus of government and social control collapsed in Germany and East European countries. The YMCA found itself in the midst of the flood. Without clear understanding what would follow, a start was made on what became one of the largest projects in which the World Alliance has taken a responsibility - namely the World's YMCA/YWCA Refugee Services.⁴¹

It was estimated that in Western Europe there were half a million refugees after the war⁴². The work amongst the POWs turned to work among the refugees and DPs.⁴³ Officially YMCA joined seven other agencies by signing a common contract with the United Nations Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), and officially started its work under the contract in 1945. But that was officially. The term that was used PWX -ex Prisoners of War- describes the YMCA situation. The YMCA was already there in the refugee camps. It was there in two senses: First, the YMCA had been in the same camps when the camps had been prison camps. Second, many of the refugees who had been YMCA members in their countries, organised the work by themselves in the refugee-camps. In a way nothing new was added - the projects that were carried out during the past decades were simply transformed to the new situation. One good example was YMCA/YWCA warehouses which were full of supplies for POWs. This material was given to refugees.

³⁹ Anderson 1963,19. Guskov 1995,17. Rouse 1993,605. Zernov 1993,661f.

⁴⁰ There was a difference in the terms. A refugee had fled from his/her country to another country, a displaced person was a refugee in his/her own country. Their status was officially different. For example, if someone from Eastern part of Germany fled to Western part (s)he was DP but if (s)he fled for example to Austria (s)he was a refugee.

⁴¹ Kilpatric 1955,589.

⁴² Limbert 1955,20.

⁴³ Strong 1955a,572-578.

These houses also became the channel for distributing supplies from the UN, from armies and from churches to refugees.⁴⁴ For two years YMCA was 'the umbrella' under which the churches initiated their spiritual ministry until they secured their own agreements with International Refugee Organisation (IRO).⁴⁵

In the work with refugees YMCA adopted the following principles:

1. Services were available to all without discrimination.
2. The work was concentrated on those fields where YMCA had some special know-how.
3. Refugees should be helped to solve their problems by themselves.
4. Refugee and non-refugee staff members were regarded equals.

Many of these principles were new then and they had a significant influence on both the work and later the policy of World Alliance.

The refugee work was done mainly in Europe but in the Middle East and in India as well.⁴⁶ In Palestine the Jerusalem YMCA membership was mainly Arab-Christian. When the Israel state was founded they had to flee among the at least 850 000 others⁴⁷ to West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza strip. Since that time local YMCAs in Jerusalem, Jericho, Nazareth and World Alliance in Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria have organised activities for Refugees and Resettled people. In the 1940s YMCA was the only organization with Palestinian staff. This was because of the experience from Europe, where the work was in the hands of DPs themselves.⁴⁸ The

⁴⁴ Kilpatric 1955,592ff.

⁴⁵ Strong 1951,1.

⁴⁶ Also in Far East the work was done under the title of 'Reconstruction'.
Limbert 1955,52.

⁴⁷ Limbert 1955,20.

⁴⁸ Limbert 1955,56.

work was carried on by the support of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).⁴⁹

In the refugee work YMCA maintained in all levels close working relationships with most of the inter-governmental agencies, churches, YWCA, Red Cross and other voluntary movements.⁵⁰ When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) started its work after the war, the first and largest agencies that gave assistance were five denominational agencies and YMCA⁵¹. The vision of a social movement had been institutionalised.

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