When major disasters occur anywhere in the world, efforts begin immediately to provide relief for the victims. The mass media are able to keep ordinary people from all over the world abreast of the disaster. The Red Cross, Red Crescent, and other nongovernment organizations raise money and send experts and supplies to the location.

The American reaction to the treatment of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire became one of the largest humanitarian responses in the history of the United States. Fundraising efforts were coupled with a public relations campaign designed to elicit sympathy for the Armenian orphans and refugees. Bureaucracies evolved to handle the distribution of money and materials for the Armenians. In many ways, the relief campaign for the Armenian Genocide provided a prototype for relief work in the twentieth century.

For decades foreign powers condemned the Ottoman Empire for its abuse of minority rights but failed to intervene directly in the affairs of the empire. During World War I, however, foreign observers took measures to provide food and shelter for Armenians, even though they could not convince their own countries to intervene militarily.

As early as April 1915, missionaries from Germany and the United States began helping Armenians in various cities of the Ottoman Empire. In September 1915, Ambassador Henry Morgenthau realized the scope of what was happening to the Armenians and urged the U.S. government to help prevent the complete destruction of the Armenian people. In response, the State Department asked the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to undertake an emergency drive to collect money. James L. Barton and Cleveland H. Dodge founded the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief with the support of President Woodrow Wilson. Through their efforts to raise awareness, the phrase “starving Armenians” became part of everyday speech. The money raised was sent to the American Embassy in Constantinople, which in turn distributed the funds to missionaries and consuls in Turkey. This line of support was temporarily interrupted when the United States entered the war in April 1917. But within a short time the committee, renamed the American Committee for Relief in the Near East (ACRNE) in 1918, reorganized and expanded former operations to include Armenian communities in Russian

Project SAVE Armenian Photograph Archives, Inc., Photo courtesy of Hermine Manigian.

Armenia. In 1919, the committee was incorporated by an act of Congress as the Near East Relief (NER).

An article in The Literary Digest explained to the public “How Your Gift Is Saving The Armenians”:

There are no starving Armenians in Yerevan...A building and site for the orphanage have been bought by the committee, and is being enlarged by refugee workmen. Dr. G. C. Reynolds, the veteran missionary from Van...is in charge of orphan relief and the orphanage. He conducted a large orphanage in Van. His purpose, he says, is not by any means to gather all orphans into institutions, but to train a hundred picked boys and later the same number of girls, who may become leaders of the Armenian people. There are hundreds of orphanages being well maintained by the Armenians themselves, through their joint Armenian committee. Something like 7,000,000 rubles every six months is spent by this committee.

All the work upon the new orphanage is being done by refugees, from the building of the walls to the construction of the beds and the tables and garments. Other relief work for the children is the furnishing of milk for the babies, and the maintenance of a physician, and the opening of a hospital.

In the Yerevan district [Russian Armenian]...there are approximately 50,000 persons being aided, directly or indirectly, by the American committee.

...The outstanding factor in Armenian relief has been the American committee. Its work has been on a large scale, and systematic form. All of it has been supervised by Americans, and the subordinate workers have been men and women trained in American mission schools, and known personally to the missionaries. Professors have not hesitated to become relief agents in villages, or accountants or actual workers in the industrial department. Had it not been for the fact that there were available a force of American board missionaries knowing the language and the land and the people, and with trusted helpers at hand, the wonders that have been wrought in the way of repatriation, rehabilitation, and the maintenance of life, and self respect would have been impossible.

In July 1918, James L. Barton, the chairman of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief said that even though $10 million had already been raised and distributed, the need would continue into the postwar years.

One of the most successful strategies of the American Committee for Armenian and Syrian Relief was a national poster campaign. Using strong graphics and minimal text, the images grabbed the public's attention, sent a message, and offered the average citizen an opportunity to make a difference.

Between 1915 and 1930 American relief organizations raised $116,000,000 of assistance, delivering food, clothing, and materials for shelter. The committee also set up refugee camps, clinics, hospitals, orphanages, and vocational training programs. It is estimated that during that time the Near East Relief cared for 132,000 orphans from Tiflis and Yerevan in the Caucasus to Constantinople, Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem.
Why do you think President Wilson was willing to support humanitarian assistance but unwilling to make a military commitment to intervene to stop the genocide?

What is necessary to rehabilitate refugees and survivors of genocide? What needs to happen? Who needs to be involved?

Examine the posters for Armenian relief.

Look at the image, and describe it exactly as you see it.

Notice how the posters use shape, images, and perspective to communicate a message. Look for the way the artist uses symbols. What emotion is the artist trying to evoke?

What is the message? To whom is it directed? Is it a single message? Or do others in your class interpret the work in other ways? Finally, make your own judgement about the poster.