

Humanitarian aid: From the Spanish Civil War to the early days of post-war Europe

There is an extensive bibliography dealing with what might be termed “the history of humanitarianism” and the different expressions adopted during a lengthy process of evolution that, beginning with the concept of helping one’s neighbour, extends to what is known today as humanitarian action in a context of globalisation, which has transformed the paradigm of “humanitarianism.”¹ Throughout History, great civilisations have assumed, through different religious or philosophical conceptions, principles of solidarity, charity, altruism or philanthropy. These principles form the basis of what is understood by humanitarian or humanitarianism: a set of ideas anchored in the principle of helping one’s neighbour, helping others, in an attempt to relieve their suffering and provide them with decent living conditions.

So humanitarianism, humanitarian and their extension in the concept of humanitarian aid, are expressions that refer to human beings and their welfare. Essentially, humanitarianism is an attitude, a predisposition, a feeling, a way of living that brings it close to the sphere of the history of emotions.² But not only that, it also takes the form of an intellectual movement that reflects upon poverty, hunger, misery, disease, war and their consequences; whilst it seeks to elaborate a theoretical corpus with a legal framework designed to seek solutions to these challenges.

There is no consensus with regard to the double and complementary concept of humanitarian and humanitarian aid, in spite of the continued use of both terms, particularly since the 1970s.

As Axelle Brodiez and Bruno Dumons point out:

Alors qu’il désignait à l’origine la gestion des actes de secours envers les victimes de guerre, son sens s’est progressivement étendu, produisant une catégorie ‘at-trape-tout’ à connotation positive, pouvant désigner la moindre action de solidarité sur le territoire national comme à l’étranger. Il se confondrait avec l’histoire du XX^e siècle.³

The principles that form the basis of humanitarian aid are neutrality, independence, impartiality and universality. To these should be added solidarity and justice. This kind of aid is necessary for the survival of human beings. If it did not exist, catastrophes would have a far greater impact upon their victims, deepening their suffering. In spite of this, humanitarian aid is a term invested with considerable ambiguity and even its underlying principles have been repeatedly questioned or at least “contaminated”.

For help offered to another to be qualified as humanitarian it must be directed towards assisting individuals or groups that find themselves in a situation of vulnerability

caused by military conflict, natural catastrophes or famine resulting from extreme poverty. The ultimate goal is to create conditions that enable people to survive, overcome the critical conditions in which they find themselves and look to the future with hope.⁴

Humanitarian aid must by its very nature be voluntary and disinterested, and in order to be effective needs to be channelled via organisations. In this respect, during the period that is the focus of this Dossier and earlier, most embers were volunteers acting within a framework of largely unprofessional structures of an independent nature in the sense of the absence of political-military interference in their activity; nowadays NGOs are highly professionalised organisations where volunteers play a small role, largely dependent upon official subsidies and in which the term mediation has been replaced by negotiation, within a framework fully encompassed by the field of international relations.

Humanitarian aid initially takes the form of emergency aid or assistance with immediate survival needs within a limited timeframe. A second phase would include humanitarian aid proper oriented towards social rehabilitation and the economic reconstruction of the communities or groups of people affected. A third phase or stage would refer to development aid that involves political actions on a medium- or long-term basis. Here we encounter the concept of humanitarian action which includes prevention, the protection of victims and their dignity via the defence of their human rights, political denunciation and pressure and the search for peace in situations of military conflict.

According to Rony Brauman, “la première génération de l’action humanitaire de guerre est née dans l’Europe impériale à l’âge du télégraphe et du chemin de fer. La deuxième génération est apparue au milieu de la guerre froide, à l’époque de la décolonisation, des transports aériens et de la télévision.”⁵ In both cases the beginnings coincide with armed conflicts, the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Biafran War (Nigeria, 1967-1970).

Leaving aside the “prehistory” of humanitarianism,⁶ “modern” humanitarian aid is linked to the names of the creator of the nursing profession, Florence Nightingale, and of Henry Dunant, who in 1863, along with four Geneva citizens, founded a Committee of Help for the Wounded, the embryo of the future International Committee of the Red Cross, as it was known from 1875 onwards.

The practice of humanitarian aid preceded its legal regulation in international law and above all law in relation to war, which prioritised soldiers rather than the ci-

vilian population also affected by armed conflict. At the dawn of the First World War international humanitarian law was in its infancy. There were only three international conventions ratified by the warring countries which addressed the situation of combatants, but there was no legislation regulating the internment of civilians along with military prisoners of war, the protection of both on the fronts, the practice of forced labour r forced deportation or displacement.

June 1914 saw the outbreak of what was regarded as the First World War. The term “World War” (Weltkrieg in German) was used for the first time in Germany that year, expressing the feelings of those who lived through the conflict. This was the first total war where industrial technological development was employed for the destruction of the enemy, not only on the battle front but also in the rearguard via strategic bombing.⁷ The human, political, and economic consequences facing Europe in 1919 were of an unprecedented magnitude, and along with the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War in Russia resulted in, as Bruno Groppo has noted, a sea change with regard to forced displacements and the refugee problem that would affect entire nations.⁸

May 22, 1919 witnessed the birth of the Save the Children Fund, set up on the initiative of sisters Eglantyne and Dorothy Jebb. It was the first non-governmental organisation in history to concern itself with children on an international scale. It understood the exercise of humanitarian aid in a disinterested, voluntary and non-discriminatory sense. It was organised efficiently and functionally with the ultimate goal not only of procuring emergency aid but also of providing children with decent living conditions in the long term. It used the mass media and “advertising” to attract the attention of public opinion and raise money.

In the 1920s the number of refugees in Europe grew steadily. In order to tackle the problem of the so-called “White Russians” and their stateless condition, in 1921 the Society of Nations organised a conference in Paris that led to the creation of a High Commission for Russian Refugees. It was headed by the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen (“passport Nansen”).⁹ According to Michel Marrus, in 1926 there were estimated to be around 9.5 million Europeans displaced from their places of origin.¹⁰ Some of these Europeans left for American countries willing to take them in, but the economic crisis of the end of the decade and the increasingly tense political situation gradually rendered these forced displacements more and more difficult.

In parallel fashion, throughout the 1920s the humanitarian organisations already in existence reorganised themselves to adapt to the new post-war situation, while new entities appeared. In 1920, for instance, a group of pacifists led by engineer Pierre Ceresole created the International Civil Service, based in Switzerland.

The Spanish Civil War opened a new phase of humanitarian aid for civilian populations and anticipated many of the actions that would be undertaken during the years of the Second World War in this sphere. If, as Joanna

Bourke indicates, the classic images of the First World War were mud-covered soldiers in the trenches, those of World war two would be pictures of dead, maimed, orphaned, evacuated or displaced children.¹¹ But children had already become war victims in 1936 in Spain, where strategic bombing of the civilian population was used to undermine enemy morale, destroy economic infrastructures (especially industrial centres) and strike hardest at those who represented the future of the country, in other words, children. In short, everything involving the annihilation of the enemy, his total defeat. In the words again of Joanna Bourke:

It was the aeroplane that transformed the Second World War into ‘total war’. During the First World War, the aeroplane had limited (albeit still terrifying) uses. The first major hint of the power of the flying machine in destroying masses of people came with the bombing of Guernica.¹²

The Spanish Civil War mobilised, in unprecedented fashion, public opinion in the democratic nations of Europe and America in defence of the civilian population. In these countries, along with the different stances in favour of or against the belligerents, solidarity movements developed to provide aid to the civilian population, children in particular, supported by political parties, trades unions and numerous organisations of a diverse nature: of defence of human rights, pacifists¹³ and specifically of humanitarian aid.¹⁴

The brutality of the Second World War transcended all previous conflicts and seriously damaged some of the basic ethical principles of humanitarianism, such as independence and neutrality, as a result of what happened to the Jews and other communities (political and religious dissidents, ethnic groups such as gypsies, those accused of deviancy, like homosexuals...) in the Nazi concentration camps.

To these should be added the millions of people displaced from their homes by the horrors of war. In an attempt to address this situation the allied governments created the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), in November 1943, with the main objective of coordinating the distribution of aid, especially food, clothing and medical supplies, in the territories that had been liberated. This was really the first great international humanitarian organisation. It was active until 1947.

All the above provides the necessary frame for the seven articles that constitute this Dossier undertaken within the framework of an I+D+I project: *Humanitarian Aid in France during the Second World War* (Reference HAR2014-58043.P) and the principal investigator of which is responsible for this introduction.

The Dossier opens with Luis Manuel Calvo Salgado’s article: Swiss humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War. The journey of Anna Siemsen and Regina Kägi-Fuchsmann. The author assumes an analytical perspective linked to the history of emotions in order to study the account of Anna Siemsen and Regina Kägi-Fuchsmann’s

journey to Spain in May, 1937, so as to coordinate humanitarian aid to the civilian population of the republican zone provided by the organisation Schweizerisches Arbeiterhilfswerk (SAH, Swiss Workers' Relief Agency). Anna Siemsen wrote a travel book that was published in 1938. Regina Kägi-Fuchsmann's text is a chapter from her autobiography which she dedicated to this trip, published in 1968. This time lapse results in a subsequent reflection and recreation of the events experienced which is not the case of Anna Siemsen's account. In the article the author offers a comparison of both narratives in order to know not only how both women expressed what they witnessed and experienced, but also to see how the life of each of them influenced their memories.

The civil war very soon became an international conflict on a political and military level and in terms of its impact upon public opinion. Media like the cinema and the press were fundamental channels of communication for the development of propaganda in favour of or against the two sides, and also to stir consciences vis-à-vis the human dramas that the war was causing. Photographic reports, newsreels and films showed in thousands of ways the havoc wrought by indiscriminate bombing upon a helpless and unprotected civilian population. This was the most effective propaganda because it directly impacted upon people's feelings and predisposed them to seek to help the work of the humanitarian organisations operating in Spain, via voluntary service or the donation of diverse material and money.

This is the line followed by the works of Laura López Martín and Natascha Schmöller. The former (Help Spain by showing films. British film production for humanitarian aid during the Spanish Civil War) studies the nature of British humanitarian aid and the use of cinema by some humanitarian organisations as a means of informing public opinion and raising funds. Because the British film industry barely involved itself in the war, the films were shown off the commercial circuit. Some of the films were made by professionals and produced by the organisations themselves. Others were of a more amateur nature. Newsreels too featured information about bombings, the evacuation of children or medical relief.

Natascha Schmöller's article (Swiss humanitarian aid in Spain and Southern France through Paul Senn's camera, 1937-1942) focuses on the figure of Swiss photographer Paul Senn, who came to Spain in 1937 accompanying a convoy of Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Spanienkinder (SAS, Swiss Aid for Spanish Children). He also witnessed the Withdrawal via the border crossing of Le Perthus. In January 1942 he returned to the south of France and photographed not only the Spanish refugees but also the Jewish victims alongside them in the Rivesaltes and Récébédou camps. He also provided visual testimony of life in the Swiss Aid reception centres. In this sense, part of his photographic activity during these years was closely linked to this organisation and helped to inform Swiss public opinion, via his reports published in the journal *Zürcher Illustrierte* and others, of the dramatic impact of the war upon the civilian population.

One of the most active aid agencies during the Second World War was the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) founded in May, 1940 and dependent upon the American Unitary Church. It was modelled upon the American Friends Service Committee of the American Quakers, but differed in several aspects, a particularly important one being that of neutrality. The USC members positioned themselves in favour of the defenders of freedom and democracy and this drew them towards the Spanish exiles in Vichy France.

In his article (The Unitarian's Service Committee Marseille Office and the American networks to aid Spanish refugees, 1940-1943) Aurelio Velázquez analyses the work undertaken by the USC from its Marseille office to provide medical assistance to camp internees in the south of France. This relief was offered in collaboration with other agencies that together formed transnational networks of solidarity. The USC developed a specific programme of aid for Spanish republicans financed by the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee presided over by Doctor Edward Barsky, veteran of the International Brigades.

Luiza Iordache's work on The Humanitarian Aid of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross in France to the civilian population: children, women and internees (1940-1946), focuses upon the humanitarian work carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the League of Societies of the Red Cross through a joint body, the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross (JRC), set up in 1940 as an instrument to locate, obtain, transport and distribute humanitarian aid to Europe's civilian population during World War Two.

This body did not have its own funds so depended exclusively upon donations or the allocation of funds by national institutions, aid committees and humanitarian organisations from various European and American countries. The author concentrates in particular on aid provided for the civilian population in France. In total the aid provided by the JRC was modest when compared with that offered by other humanitarian organisations. Moreover, like these, the JRC had to face a series of obstacles, in particular the absence of a legal statute protecting the civilian population affected by armed conflict. The experience of the years 1939 to 1945 led to the adoption of the four Geneva conventions passed on August 12, 1949 by the "Diplomatic Conference for the Establishment of International Conventions for the Protection of Victims of War", held in Geneva between April 122 and August 12 of that year. The fourth convention is specifically dedicated "to the protection of civilian persons in times of war" and, as Luiza Iordache observes in her study, "marked the beginning of the consolidation of international humanitarian law in the protection of the civilian population".

As I have indicated, the main victims of wars throughout the 20th century and to the present day have been children. During the Spanish Civil War the indiscriminate bombing of towns and cities, along with the siege to which these were laid, forced the Government of the Republic to implement a plan to evacuate the civilian population to safe zones in the rearguard or abroad. This work

involved the collaboration of various governments in countries of Europe and America (Mexico), political and trade union groups and relief committees and humanitarian organisations.

The situation produced in Nazi Germany as a result of the government's policy of anti-Semitism and the increasingly brutal treatment of the civilian population during the Second World war made the evacuation process an essential instrument of survival, especially for those most vulnerable: children, the elderly and the sick. This is the context for the work of Magdalena Garrido Caballero on the subject of *Fractured Childhoods, Identities in Transit: Humanitarian Aid for Central European Refugees from the United Kingdom*, and which addresses the rescue of children by a series of individuals and organisations that, via different channels, brought to Britain some 10,000 children, mostly Jews, from Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, between December 1938 and May 1940. This rescue operation was known as Kindertransport. In her article Magdalena Garrido analyses the process of departure, arrival and reception in the United Kingdom. A final section considers the experiences of these children, the creation of the Kindertransport Association and the evocation of some of the places of memory that recall this event.

A final article by Rose Duroux (*Return to life of the Spanish Women deportees from the Ravensbrück camp. The help of neutral countries*) concentrates on the exiled Spanish women who survived deportation to the work and concentration camp at Ravensbrück. It is estimated that around 400 Spanish women were sent to this camp, following their arrest in France between 1942 and 1944 due, in most cases, to their participation in the Resistance.

The author highlights the problems involved in the identification of Spanish women included in the group of the so-called "French women of Ravensbrück". Her analysis focuses on the repatriation of some of the survivors to Switzerland and Sweden with the help of the Red Cross. Once in both countries, various humanitarian aid organisations helped with their convalescence and recovery. In spite of the fact that the terrible experience of the concentration camp marked them for life, there are relatively few testimonies of these dramatic experiences, testimonies commented upon by the author.

The seven works that make up the Dossier constitute a great tessellated mosaic of humanitarian aid to Europe's civilian population in the 1930s and 1940s of the 20th century. Each one, in accordance with its author's line of research, studies a specific aspect of a story with multiple fragments questioned and reinterpreted by successive generations, because History is exactly that: a continuous imperfect reconstruction in the present, of a past that is unfathomable precisely because it is no longer with us.

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TRANSLATIONS

Text by Rose Duroux, translated from French into English by Teresa and Ivan Bernard.

Text by Luís Calvo Salgado, translated into English by Martina Williman.

The rest of the texts have been translated into English by Mark Hounsell.

NOTES

- 1 Without any claim to being exhaustive and only by way of an initial approach to the meaning of the concepts humanitarianism, humanitarian, humanitarian aid; I refer to the bibliographical references that accompany this Introduction.
- 2 A good approach to the historiographical current based on emotions in: Moscoso, J. (2015): "La historia de las emociones ¿de qué es historia?" *Vínculos de historia*, 4, pp. 15-27. On the relationship between humanitarianism and sensibility, the basis of emotion, see T. L. Haskell's thought-provoking text (1985) "Capitalism and the Origins of the Humanitarian Sensibility". *The American Historical Review*, 90 (2), pp. 339-361 y 90 (3), pp. 547-566.
- 3 In: Editorial: "Faire l'histoire de l'humanitaire". Dossier: L'humanitaire XIX^e – XXI siècle. *Le Mouvement Social*, 2009, 227 (2), p. 4.
- 4 On this see Schroeder, R., et al. (2005) "Les défis humanitaires: les dilemmes politiques de l'aide d'urgence". *Les Cahiers de Caritas*, 3, Luxembourg, Lucerne.
- 5 Brauman, R. (2016) "Guerre et humanitaire". <https://www.msf-crash.org/fr/publications/guerre-et-humanitaire/guerre-et-humanitaire>. By the same author: (2018) *Guerres humanitaires? Mensonges et intox. Conversation avec Régis Meyran*. Éditions Textuel, Paris.
- 6 Ryfman, Ph. (2016): *Une histoire de l'humanitaire*. La Découverte, Paris, p. 11 and ff.
- 7 Regarding the term total war and the ideas in this respect of general Erich Ludendorff, of interest is the essay by D. Benedetti (2010) "Ludendorff: la teoría militar entre la Kriegsideología y el Modernismo Reaccionario". *Cuadernos de Marte. Revista latinoamericana de sociología de la guerra*. Buenos Aires, I (0), pp. 145-165 http://biblioteca.clacso.edu.ar/Argentina/iigg-uba/20120817044135/0_Benedetti.pdf.
- 8 Groppo, B. (2003) "Exilés et réfugiés. L'évolution de la notion de réfugié au XX^e siècle". *Historia Actual online*, 2. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/876552.pdf>. Véase también: Agier, M. and Madeira, A.-V. (2017) *Définir les réfugiés*. Press Universitaires de France, Paris.
- 9 Coudry, G. (1996) "Notes sur le passaport Nansen". Dossier Hommage à Daniel Meyer. Exilés et réfugiés politiques dans la France du XX^e siècle. *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps*, 4, pp. 19-21.
- 10 Marrus, M. (1986) *Les exclus. Les réfugiés européens au XX^e siècle*. Calmann-Lévy, Paris, p. 58 and ff.
- 11 Bourke, J. (2002) *La Segunda Guerra Mundial. Una historia de las víctimas*. Paidós Ibérica, Barcelona, p. 23.
- 12 *Ibidem*, p.29.
- 13 Romeu Alfaro, F. and Rahona Saure, A. (2017) *Memoria en sombra. La Internacional de Resistentes a la Guerra (IRG / WRI) y la Guerra Civil Española*. Ediciones de Intervención Cultural / El Viejo Topo, Vilassar de Dalt (Barcelona).
- 14 Petrus, G. (2015) *La ayuda humanitaria en la Guerra Civil Española (1936-1939)*. Editorial Comares, Granada.

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