

BOOK REVIEW

Sébastien Farré, *Colis de guerre. Secours alimentaire et organisations humanitaires (1914-1947)*, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2014, 288 pages, ISBN: 978-2-7535-3419-3.

Yves DENÉCHÈRE*

By suggesting a study on the mutual aid actions by means of the war parcel – one of the most symbolic issues of the support actions throughout this period – Sébastien Farré, a scientist in charge of the History House of Geneva University (Maison de l'histoire de l'Université de Genève)¹, has a new way of seeing the history of humanitarian organisations. By opening the parcel, by wondering about its route from manufacture to distribution to the beneficiaries, he is rebuilding a humanitarian story crossing the social and cultural history of philanthropic acts. Placing himself into the real world, he departs from the literature written by the humanitarian actors; he is placing again the history of the humanitarian institutions in the field of social policies; he is drawing up a study on the humanitarian economy. In this respect the sources are numerous, issued by ICRC, IUWC, CARE, UNRRA, etc. It's about looking into the archives by taking advantage of this sojourn as a researcher invited at Columbia University or at Oxford University. The photographic notebook consisting of 32 pages includes 59 quality photos which are not just pictures but constitute a real iconographic corpus. However, it's a pity that certain photos are not dated and the chronology is manhandled throughout the story.

Each of the twelve chapters mentions a period referring to a specific field of intervention. First of all the author focuses on World War I and identifies the nationalisation of the private parcel. Indeed, being essential elements of the relation between field fighters and civilians behind the front lines, the parcels are misdirected, which leads to a centralisation of their distribution in France as well as in Great Britain. It has already been demonstrated that World War I is also a

* Yves Denéchère is professor of contemporary history at the Angers University and a member of CNRS UMR CERHIO (France), e-mail: yves.denechere@univ-angers.fr.

¹ After being lecturer in the History department and in the Global Studies Institute of Geneva University (2007-2014), Sébastien FARRÉ is nowadays deputy manager of the Maison de l'Histoire. Benefitting from a scholarship at the National Fund for Scientific Research (2010-2012), he was a guest researcher at the history department of Columbia University (New York) and at the Modern European History Research Centre at Oxford University.

turning point as far as the humanitarian aspect is concerned, which is considered a diplomatic instrument by the United States and by Herbert Hoover, head of the Commission for Relief in Belgium. The CRB allows for the parcel delivery, which forges a direct link between donors and beneficiaries and develops an individualisation of the bestowal.

After the war, the American Relief Administration, still under Hoover's leadership, is in charge of controlling the distribution of goods in Europe. It is about feeding populations so as to avoid Bolshevik-style revolutionary movements, especially in Central Europe. In fact, Bela Kun's Hungary is set apart and no longer receives help; on the other hand, Austria and Poland are among the main countries that benefit from ARA. In the 1920s in the USA, Czech, Yugoslav and Polish « ethnic » associations gather money and turn it into individual parcels which become more and more usual products. ARA establishes permanent missions in Central and Oriental Europe. Hoover and his organisation fight an ideological-humanitarian combat in the Soviet Russia by fighting starvation. A future promise, a challenging vector, childhood is at the heart of every humanitarian action and leads to new forms of personal commitments such as « adoptions » of children, actually sponsorships.

Since the beginning of World War II and the destruction of Poland, the first refugees and prisoners have questioned the behaviour of the Western countries. According to Sébastien Farré, in order to reduce their bad conscience, but without organising important operations, Hoover creates a Commission for Polish Relief, also being the President of the USA during the great depression (1929-1933). The work enlightens some less-known aspects about the humanitarian intervention, such as the dramatic situation of Greece, which occasions a debate between Churchill and Hoover. The first thinks that the responsibility of supplying food for people befalls on the German occupier, while the second believes that there is a moral obligation to organise food convoys; OXFAM is born in Great Britain in 1942, when the civil society organised itself. The war resulted in millions of prisoners whom ICRC tried to supply with parcels that played a central part in these people's lives. The greatness of the task leads to some standardisation of the « Red Cross parcels », it is necessary to « produce, pack up, dispatch »: a humanitarian machinery is developed around the object of the « parcel ». These pages are remarkably convincing.

It is obvious that the author tackles the action of ICRC in the deportation camps of the Nazi regime. It is by means of a photo of two prisoners from Dachau holding a parcel that he made his introduction and tackled the general problem within his whole work. The deportees, as civilians, are not the privileged recipients of the parcels, as the latter are supposed to help mainly the war prisoners. Yet, Sébastien Farré proves very well that there is a shift towards civilians around 1943, when parcels are distributed to the deported Norwegians

and Dutchmen from Sachsenhausen. The system is very profitable for the field guards and the parcels are improperly made for the deported people. With national-socialist Germany's crash and the dramatic field evacuations in April 1945, the parcel becomes a means of negotiation in order to accelerate the delivery of the deported people so as to help the humanitarians enter certain fields before the allied soldiers did.

The book finishes with a strong chapter: the detailed examination of UNRRA's actions (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration) and of CARE's actions (Cooperative for American Remittances to Europe), created at the end of 1945. Sébastien Farré masterfully proves how an «international aid machine» starts at the end of World War II. CARE is described as the model institution of a new configuration in the humanitarian field. Having collected the food packages from the American army, the organisation gives them out and then develops a «new food package». This one is placed in the middle of a true humanitarian business, CARE creating even an «economy of the parcel».

All in all, Sébastien Farré tells a convincing story which pleads for a study of the humanitarian interventions from A to Z. The period under study fully documents the building of the charity empire of the United States of America, based on huge resources and the involvement of the civil society. People give credit to the author who talks about a golden age for the charity activities, featured by the emergence of numerous humanitarian institutions. The study of issues related to the aid logistics displays a novel view on the history of humanitarian organisations. The major interest of this book is to make the parcel look like an object of the market economy which adapts to the donors' attempts and the recipients' needs. It shows how the parcel facilitates the crystallisation of a community of donors and an area of human intervention created by means of the non-governmental organisations, the international organisations and the countries under war. The beautiful book of Sébastien Farré is a major contribution to the new approaches to humanitarian history and it will remain as such.