

## **Editorial**

### **Eastern Europe -**

# **A new field of humanitarian history**

By Yves DENÉCHÈRE\*

Defining “humanitarian” is by no means a simple endeavour: that is a sign of the considerable polysemy of the term, as well as of the debates that animate it. “Humanitarian” refers to a form of action (humanitarian action), work (humanitarian work), commitment (humanitarian commitment) for the benefit of people in need who require care, food, shelter; natural disasters, wars, economic crises generate deficiencies and violations of human dignity (imprisonment, abuse, torture). Philosophical and ideological debates, but also highly pragmatic considerations, have contributed to the emergence of humanitarian policies and of a global humanitarian space. Some even suggest a ‘humanitarian government’, meaning the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary policies, with the advent of a genuine “humanitarian reason” (Fassin, 2010).

Historical milestones that led to major humanitarian mobilisations (the Biafran war in the late 1960s, the Boat People in the 1970s, instances of famine in Africa in the 1980s, the civil wars of the 1990s, mainly in the former Yugoslavia, the 2004 tsunami etc.) have always been followed by intense reflections on the nature of the humanitarian as a societal phenomenon. As defined by sociologist Marcel Mauss<sup>1</sup>, a total social fact is an activity linking the individual and the social that has implications in all spheres of society. Consequently, the study of social facts such as the humanitarian requires addressing various areas of social life: politics, the economy, religion, interpersonal relationships, representations and media, sentiments, morality... Not to mention history.

Historians are latecomers among the social scientists that took an interest in humanitarian policy and humanitarian action. They started as late as the 1990s, alongside the debate on intervention advocated by some major figures in the humanitarian field, and rejected by others. For historians - now in possession of archives on the interval known as “the second century of the humanitarian”,

---

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

<sup>1</sup>Marcel Mauss (1872-1950) is considered to be one of the founding fathers of anthropology, especially due to one of his major works: *Essai sur le don. Forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (1925), Introduction de Florence Weber, Quadrige/Presses universitaires de France, 2007.

beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s – it was all about going back to basics, to the fundamentals of the humanitarian, and explaining the developments within the field (Ryfman, 1999). Until then, the “story” of the humanitarian had mostly been addressed through its actors, who were likely to deliver their “memory” and build a case for their own views, and sometimes engaged in internecine fighting (Junod, 1947 [1982]; Kouchner and Bettati, 1987; Brauman, 2006). Today, looking back has become imperative, and actors themselves invite historians to grasp the humanitarian in all its historical depth (Barnett, 2011).

Researchers have clearly identified several major stages in the modern history of the humanitarian: the 1863-1918 interval, dominated by the Red Cross (Boissier, 1963-1985); the inter-war period, with net movement toward the transnationalisation of the humanitarian (Marshall, 1999; Watenpaugh, 2013); the failure of the humanitarian during World War II (Le Crom, 2009); the novelty of the UN-system international organisations after 1945 (Black, 1996); the emergence and development of the *sans-frontiérisme* from the turn of the 1960s (Vallaëys, 2004) and the advent of a globalised humanitarian (Irye, 2002); finally, the interrogations about the links between the humanitarian and geopolitics after September 11, 2001 (Weissman, 2004).

There are certain broad general issues crossing these time segments: how did the humanitarian become, during the 20th century, a leading dynamics on the international stage? Who are its main actors and protagonists? What about their motivations? How can one chart the process of maturation leading to the controversial claim of a right or a duty of humanitarian intervention? To answer these questions, it is necessary to keep in mind the many interactions between actors, as well as their great diversity: the Red Cross, international organisations, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), great personalities, not to mention the states and the media. Humanitarian history issues are therefore part of several areas within the discipline: social history, political history, history of international relations, but also cultural history and history of mentalities.

This thematic dossier of *EJES* focuses on the 1945-2000 interval and a on geographical framework that has so far been quite neglected by the historiography of the humanitarian: Central and Eastern Europe. Indeed, although the historiographic production on the humanitarian has increased since the 1990s, very few works have been devoted specifically to Central and Eastern Europe.

Humanitarian practices during the Cold War have been studied mainly in the West, because the United States has strongly invested in the humanitarian space (Meernik, Poe and Krueger, 1998). Created in November 1945 and derived from the American philanthropic tradition, the Committee for Assistance and Remittance for Europe (CARE) dealt with the sending of food parcels funded by US donors to European individuals. The CARE model was part of a

humanitarian economy and rapidly became an instrument of the diplomacy of compassion. In a way, the packages stamped “CARE-USA” privatise certain practices developed by the US Army (Farré, 2014, see the review by Yves Denéchère in this issue). Americans and Canadians were sponsoring foreign children by sending a monthly sum of money for their daily lives. Some saw their involvement as an ideological act in order to reduce poverty, a fertile soil for communism (Brookfield, 2012, pp.135-136). The CIA funded genuine ‘screen’- NGOs during the Cold War (Osgood, 2006; Montclos Perugia, 2012, pp. 61-63). In April 1975, by launching Operation Babylift to remove 2,000 children from Vietnam before it fell to the communists, Gerald Ford bowed perhaps not so much to the pressure exerted by NGOs, as to the temptation to fight a final victorious battle ... at the end of a lost war (Denéchère, 2013).

The thrust of Maciej Stanecki’s article addresses the issue of the instrumentalisation of the humanitarian in the relations between the United States and the countries of the Eastern bloc, namely Poland in the 1950s and 1960, after the “Polish October” (1956). The two case studies dealing with the American medical aid towards Poland perfectly demonstrate the political dimension of US aid to the “captive nations” beyond the Iron Curtain. The humanitarian is therefore one of the “soft” methods used by the United States to reach the countries of Central and Eastern Europe.

Obviously, the Soviet domination over Eastern Europe and the Cold War context are essential explanatory factors for the historiographic delay regarding the humanitarian, in Central and Eastern Europe. In addition to the procedures for the exercise of the historical profession in the people’s republics, the realities of the humanitarian were quite different from Western Europe<sup>2</sup>. In the Western part of the continent, the deployment of the international organisations within the UN galaxy (WHO, UNICEF, UNESCO ...), the establishment of the welfare state, the development of private and associational initiative that led to the constitution of NGOs, and the development of the media have shaped a humanitarian where multiple players operate in an open space. In Central and Eastern Europe, on the other hand, the situation was very different. When the Cold War reached its peak in the early 1950s, Ludwik Rajchman, a Polish physician who had dedicated his life to humanitarian issues, health director at the League of Nations and founder of UNICEF, was suspected in the East of

---

<sup>2</sup> On March 21, 2013, on the occasion of the International Red Cross Committee’s 150th anniversary, a round table on “Protecting the population in wartime and humanitarian action in the USSR” was organised in the Russian capital by the Moscow regional delegation of the IRCC, the Moscow Franco-Russian research centre, and the Russian State University of social science. For the first time, historians and humanitarian actors shared their scientific knowledge and practices on the Soviet experience in aiding civilians, and were able to assess the Soviet mechanisms in this respect. See the review by Juliette Denis: <http://www.grotius.fr/laide-humanitaire-sous-lunion-sovietique/>.

being a pro-American agent and was stripped of his diplomatic passport by the Polish authorities and was not able to retrieve his papers until 1956. But, in the United States, McCarthyist circles accused Rajchman of being a communist spy; in 1957, while he was in New York, he had to hurry back to France to escape trial (Balińska, 1998).

However, humanitarian issues relative to refugees have been addressed by research in Central and Eastern Europe (Loescher, 2001; Elias, 2007), including works on refugees after World War II (Frank, 2011). For example, in 1948-1949, in the bleak context of the Cold War, the International Refugee Organisation (IRO) was facing a major crisis: the relocation of isolated Polish children. These children were part of the Polish population deported by the Soviets in the aftermath of the invasion of Poland. The IRO wanted to reinstall the children despite strong opposition from the Polish government. This crisis highlights both the means and the political and diplomatic limits of the IRO, in the context of the East-West division, and the avatars of international humanitarian action (Kénovian, 2009).

The article authored by Gusztáv Kecskés offers a valuable study of the role played by the United Nations (UN) in the matter of Hungarian refugees after the 1956 revolution, allowing for a renewal of earlier approaches (Holborn, 1975). Relying on multiple sources provided by international organisations (UN, UNHCR, ICRC, NATO) and by various states (France, Hungary, Sweden), it convincingly demonstrates how the UN has advanced the humanitarian case of the Hungarian refugees. By developing a legal framework, by mobilising skills and resources, the UN has pushed the states to intervene for humanitarian reasons. In the meantime, NATO member-states considered that this was a dimension of the Cold War and an action against Soviet domination in Central and Eastern Europe.

The end of the people's democracies and of the USSR has totally changed the historiographic context. Many works by sociologists and political scientists focus on humanitarian policies and humanitarian aid to Central and Eastern Europe, from the West (Wedel, 2001). The emergence of a new international humanitarian norm after the Cold War ("responsibility to protect") led to interventions in the former Yugoslavia, and the terms of these interventions have called into question the very philosophy of the humanitarian: the notions of peace-keeping and humanitarian intervention are so vague that they can be used for political ends (Kuperman, 2008). The crises in the Balkans have shown that the international community was not yet ready to intervene effectively, and raised the issue of a charter dealing with the rights of intervention (Weissman, 2004).

The humanitarian rush towards Romania after Ceaușescu's fall has already been addressed by sociologists puzzled by the enthusiasm of Western civil societies (Pirotte, 2006), yet not so much by historians, perhaps due to the fear of debating the Romanian "revolution". In the early 1990s, images of

institutionalised Romanian children affected the whole world and particularly the Francophone Western Europe, which discovered a Latin people at the other end of the continent. Humanitarian aid was directly and conditionally linked to Romania's position in Europe. Some aid has even been the subject of political bargaining with certain states and with the European Union (Denéchère and Scutaru 2010).

In the globalised world of the 1990s where information is open, all scales, from the local to the transnational, are indeed called into the "world of causes" (Saunier, 2012). Beatrice Scutaru's article has the great merit to go down to the local level by studying the mobilisation of a French NGO in favour of the Romanian population, after the 1989 revolution. Like many other NGOs, the humanitarian initiatives of *Pharmacists Without Borders* (PSF) point to a decentralised cooperation approach. The goal is to get Romanian and French individuals to meet and know each other, to help them articulate needs or improve the ability to respond, respectively. The results are not always great, but bridges have been built between two different societies.

The contributions collected in this folder of *EJES* invite researchers from all fields of social science and humanities to address humanitarian issues in Central and Eastern Europe. A retrospective look is indeed essential to a better understanding of current practices relative to the humanitarian mobilisation of individuals and societies. Many questions arise about the evolution of the humanitarian and its relationship with the states: some researchers boldly refer to a 'governmentalisation' of NGOs, the latter being more financially dependent on institutional donors (Avril, 2002). It is true that, facing a proliferation of private initiatives, from the best adapted to the most dangerous, the states - who have never abandoned the control or even the instrumentalisation of the humanitarian - have further strengthened their regulatory role.

The problems raised by the Russian humanitarian convoys to the Donbass in Ukraine are properly illustrated by Andrei Scrinic, who has accurately studied the ins and outs of the various humanitarian motives of Russia and of the European Union. For both Russia and the EU, humanitarian intervention is one of the aspects of their policy in a complex situation. This is reminiscent of the political motives behind the previous Western humanitarian actions in Central and Eastern Europe, to counter the influence of the USSR. A real competition has been established in the humanitarian field, each of the two protagonists wanting to show that it has the best ability to offer assistance (and protection) to Ukraine. This study also looks at how the EU could use its humanitarian aid policy to set up a partnership with the Eastern countries that are concerned by Russia's Eurasian projects.

Alongside the state's resurgence in the humanitarian arena, it seems that today a particular attention must be given to another topic: the growing assertiveness of the international political institutions. The United Nations, with

its Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), as well as the European Union, with its European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO), tend to invest more in the humanitarian sector, by financing programs devised by NGOs whose autonomy is consequently reduced. Here is one of the many issues pertaining to the humanitarian field that deserves to be informed by the humanities and by social science.

## References

- Avril, V. (2002), Des ONG aux OG: le processus de 'gouvernementalisation' des organisations humanitaires internationales. Kosovo, 1999/2000, in: Conoir, Y. and Verna, G. (dir.), *L'action humanitaire du Canada*, Presses de l'Université Laval, 2002, p. 126-144
- Balińska, M. (1995), *For the good of humanity: Ludwik Rajchman, medical statesman*, trans. Rebecca Howell, Budapest: Central European University Press, 1998.
- Barnett, M. (2011), *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Black, M. (1996), *Children First. The story of UNICEF, Past and Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Boissier, P. (1963), *History of the International Committee of the Red Cross*. Volume I: *From Solferino to Tsushima*, Volume II: *From Sarejevo to Hiroshima*, Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute, 1984-1985.
- Brauman, R. (2006), *Penser dans l'urgence. Parcours critique d'un humanitaire*, Paris: Seuil.
- Brookfield, T. (2012), *Cold War comforts: Canadian women, child safety, and global insecurity, 1945-1975*, Waterloo (Ontario): Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Denéchère, Y. and Scutaru B. (2010), International adoption of Romanian Children and Romania's admission to the European Union (1990-2007), *Eastern Journal of European Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, p.135-151.
- Denéchère, Y. (2013), Babylift (Avril 1975): une opération militaro-humanitaire américaine pour finir la guerre du Viêtnam, *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, No. 252, pp.131-143.
- Elie, J. (2007) The UNHCR and the Cold War: A Documented Reflection on the UN Refugee Agency's Activities in the Bipolar Context, *The UNHCR and the Global Cold War*, Vol. 1984.
- Farré, S. (2014), De l'économie de guerre au secours philanthropique: CARE et les enjeux de l'aide américaine dans l'Europe de l'après-guerre, *Relations Internationales*, No. 2011/2, pp. 25-41.
- Fassin, D. (2011), *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press.
- Frank, M. (2011), Reconstructing the Nation-State: Population Transfer in Central and Eastern Europe, 1944-48, in: Reinisch, J. and White, E. (eds.), *The Disentanglement of Populations: Migration, Expulsion and Displacement in Postwar Europe, 1944-1949*, London: Palgrave, pp. 27-47.

- Holborn, L.W. (1975), *Refugees: A Problem of our Time. The Work of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 1951-1972*, Vol. I, Metuchen: N.J. The Scarecrow Press.
- Irye, A. (2002), *Global Community. The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World*, Berkeley: California University Press.
- Junod, Dr. M., (1947), *Warrior without weapons*, Geneva: CICR, 1982.
- Kévonian, D. (2009), Histoires d'enfants, histoire d'Europe: l'Organisation internationale des réfugiés et la crise de 1949, *Matériaux pour l'Histoire de notre Temps*, Vol. 3, No. 95, pp.30-45.
- Kouchner, B. and Bettati, M. (2004), *Le devoir d'ingérence*, Paris: Denoël.
- Kuperman, A. J. (2008), The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans, *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 1, pp. 49-80.
- Le Crom, J.-P. (2009), La Croix-Rouge française pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale, *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire*, No. 101, p.149-162.
- Loescher, G. (2001), *The UNHCR and the World Politics. A Perilous Path*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marshall, D. (1999), The Construction of Children as an object of international relations: the Declaration of Children's Rights and the Child Welfare Committee of League of Nations, 1900-1924, *The International Journal of Children's Rights*, Vol.7, No. 2, p.103-147.
- Meernik, J., Krueger Eric L. and Poe C. (1998), Testing Models of U.S. Foreign Policy: Foreign Aid during and after the Cold War, *The Journal of Politics*, No. 60, pp 63-85.
- Osgood, K. (2006), *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas.
- Pérouse de Montclos, M.A. (2012), *Les humanitaires dans la guerre*, Paris: La Documentation française.
- Perret, F. and Bugnion, F. (2009), *De Budapest à Saïgon: Histoire du Comité International de la Croix-Rouge, 1956-1965*, Geneva: Georg éditeur.
- Pirotte, G. (2006), *L'épisode humanitaire roumain. Construction d'une « crise », état des lieux et modalité de sortie*, Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Ryfman, P. (1999), *La question humanitaire. Histoire, problématiques, acteurs et enjeux de l'aide humanitaire internationale*, Paris: Ellipses.
- Pierre-Yves Saunier, P.Y. (2012), La secrétaire générale, l'ambassadeur et le docteur. Un conte en trois épisodes pour les historiens du monde des causes à l'époque contemporaine, 1800-2000, *Monde(s) histoire espaces relations*, No. 1, pp. 29-46.
- Vallaëys, A. (2004), *Médecins Sans Frontières. La biographie*, Paris: Fayard.
- Watenpugh, K. (2013), Are There Any Children for Sale?: Genocide and the Transfer of Armenian Children (1915-1922), *Journal of Human Rights*, No. 3, pp. 283-295.
- Wedel, J.R. (2001), *Collision and Collusion: The Strange Case of Western Aid to Eastern Europe*, New York: Palgrave.
- Weissman, F. (2004), *In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action*, London: Hurts.