Edited by
Till Mostowlansky
Elmira Muratova

Humanitarianism from Below?

Universalism and the politics of inhumanity

UCLPRESS

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To those who resist imperialism, old and new,
and in memory of Sam Dubal.

Contents

List of figures ix
List of contributors xi
Acknowledgements xv

Introduction: a new politics of humanitarianism 1
Till Mostowlansky and Elmira Muratova

Part I: Geospatial orders

1 Humanitarian transversals: diaspora and solidarity during the West African Ebola crisis 19
Adia Benton

2 Martial citizenship: military voluntarism and the transformation of the Ukrainian nation-state 33
Taras Fedirko

Part II: Shifting ground

3 Goat humanity: housing and Islamic aid in small-town Kyrgyzstan 61
Till Mostowlansky and Mukaram Toktogulova

4 Starving for humanity: Thai youth's hunger strike resistance in the Buddhist kingdom 83
Giuseppe Bolotta

5 Acting out the citizen: humanitarianism on unsteady ground 109
Alexander Ephrussi

Part III: Tactical universalism

6 Protecting Indigenous life: the Ne-Chee street patrol, liberatory politics and humanitarian tactics 137
Krista Maxwell

7 From alter-politics to humanitarianism: the evolution of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea 167
Elmira Muratova

Afterword: humanitarian assemblages 189
Stephan Kloos

Index 197

List of figures

2.1 A painted artillery shell casing from the 17th Battalion of the 57th Separate Motorised Infantry Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, at the Come Back Alive office. 49
3.1 At the edge of Gülchö, Kyrgyzstan. 62
3.2 The entrance to As-Safa’s social town in Gülchö. 68
3.3 A residential alley in the social town. 68
3.4 Playing ulak in Gülchö. 71
3.5 A bridge funded by Gülchö classmates. 73
3.6 An ulak player greeting the audience. 77
4.1 Panusaya and Parit in front of the prison at Prachachuen Police Station in Bangkok, 30 October 2020. 87
4.2 Panusaya hugs her relatives and supporters at the Central Women’s Correctional Institute in Bangkok after being granted bail, 6 May 2021. 100
4.3 Parit, with a wheelchair and an intravenous drip after a prolonged hunger strike, is hugged by his mother as prison guards loom over them, 1 April 2021. 102
5.1 A man sitting in a ferry on the Bosphorus reads a newspaper reporting on the earthquake, early February 2023. 112
5.2 A man being arrested. Drawing after a photograph on the cover of *Hürriyet* newspaper, 13 July 2023. Headline: ‘Over 3,500 illegal migrants caught in Istanbul in the last 6 days’. 117
5.3 Two men being arrested. Drawing after a photograph on the cover of *Hürriyet* newspaper, 11 July 2023. Headline: ‘Instanbul police detects over 500 more illegal migrants’. 118
5.4 Public display of condolences in an Istanbul metro, mid-February 2023. 119
5.5 Mullah Yaqub and Esmatullah with piles of goods collected for earthquake victims, Istanbul, early February 2023. 122
5.6 Mullah Yaqub in his office, Istanbul, late February 2023. 127
6.1 The Ne-Chee Street Patrol appeared on the front page of the local newspaper, *The Kenora Miner and News*, on 10 January 1977. 154

6.2 Ne-Chee Street Patrol at work in 2018. After more than forty years of operation it was disbanded in March 2019 due to funding cuts. 158
7.1 A religious training event for girls organised by the Crimean Childhood initiative, May 2019. 182
7.2 Mumine Saliyeva, a coordinator of the Crimean Childhood initiative, as a member of the Ukrainian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), January 2020. 183

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As this book progressed, openly imperialist framings of the world became truly fashionable again. The history of humanitarianism underlines that imperialism has never really been out of fashion, and humanitarian institutions have played their part in that. Nevertheless, the current moment requires, more than anything, people who resist and demand a different world. We therefore dedicate this book to those who resist imperialism in practical ways, and we remember Sam Dubal (1986–2020), a brilliant young scholar of inhumanity, who would have been part of this intellectual journey had he not passed away far too early.

Introduction: a new politics of humanitarianism

Till Mostowlansky and Elmira Muratova

Cataclysms of war, disaster, disease, social suffering and violent oppression are auspicious events for humanitarianism – not in an optimistic sense, but insofar as they provide continuous opportunity for expansion, transformation and renewed legitimacy. Consider the rise and decline of large-scale non-governmental organisations (NGOs), sudden military defeat, disaster mismanagement, as well as people's responses to extreme inequality, political oppression and stigmatisation. The observation and analysis of such processes has become the focus of our research into the movement of humanitarians and humanitarian discourse across multiple frontiers.

For instance, Mostowlansky has traced how, over the past century, parts of northern Pakistan have become laboratories of humanitarianism and development for Muslim institutions, transnational organisations and the state. This has laid the groundwork for transfers of people and expertise in humanitarian contexts across Asia and beyond – flood relief in Pakistan, healthcare in East Africa, reconstruction in Afghanistan and emergency assistance in Ukraine.

In her work on Crimean Tatars, Muratova, too, has shown how the prolonged war in Ukraine has led to processes of change that could hardly have been imagined just a few years ago. Her analysis of the transnational Islamic organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami sheds light on how oppression and war have pushed the organisation towards human rights advocacy. This is a radical departure from their heretofore anti-Western sentiment and terroristic stigma, and it can be read as a direct result of Russian occupation and religious-political oppression.

In this book, we grapple with questions of theoretical framing. Are these current dynamics of change informed by dominant and long-standing global narratives of humanitarianism, often steered by Western legacies and institutions? Or does this transformation in fact emerge 'from below', from grassroots institutions, people and practices around the world in new and unexpected ways?

Over the course of seven chapters, we – a group of eight scholars in anthropology and political science – address these questions by presenting cases ranging from Indigenous organising to protect lives in 1970s Canada, to African diasporic initiatives in response to the Ebola pandemic, to Islamic economies of giving, to Buddhist concepts of the human, to crowdfunding aid in Ukraine. Following these empirical chapters, medical anthropologist Stephan Kloos, who coined the concept of 'humanitarianism from below' (Kloos 2020), responds in an afterword to the chapters' ethnographic propositions. In this introduction, we lay out the book's theoretical premises, as well as its context within social scientific inquiry into humanitarianism.

This inquiry has undergone some major shifts over the past decades. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, global aid was predominantly represented in the public imagination as humanitarians, development workers, civil servants and volunteers travelling from the 'West' to the 'Third World'. This movement occurred within what Agnieszka Sobocinska (2021) calls the 'humanitarian-development complex': a system encompassing governments, NGOs, private corporations and public opinion. The mono-directionality and relational inequality between 'developed' and 'developing' countries reflected inequality between underlying conceptions of humanity. This relatively static notion of humanitarianism as primarily determined by the political economy of international organisations eventually gave way to more detailed historical and sociological studies (for instance, Barnett 2011; Calhoun 2008; Haskell 1985). These provided insights into the involvement of humanitarianism in colonialism and Cold War politics, and they challenged clear-cut definitions of humanitarianism itself. Craig Calhoun (2008, 73), for instance, posed a number of questions that remain relevant today:

> Do they [humanitarians] seek to improve the human condition, the well-being of all humanity? Or, do they seek to alleviate suffering, impartially, neutrally, and wherever it may occur? Or, do they respond more specifically to 'humanitarian emergencies', seemingly sudden crises in which human conflict creates concentrated human suffering, in which, perhaps, suffering is so extreme as to be dehumanizing?

Over the past two decades, building on the deepening historical awareness of the diverse but also 'dark' aspects of humanitarianism, a comprehensive body of anthropological scholarship has developed around Foucauldian notions of biopolitics and a critique of Western moral genealogies (for instance, Fassin 2011; Feldman and Ticktin 2010; Redfield 2013; Ticktin 2011). More recently, these studies have been challenged and enriched by approaches that seek to decentre the study of humanitarianism (for instance, Mostowlansky 2020a; Moufteh and Barzegar 2022; Osanloo and Robinson 2024; Osella and Osella 2009; Weiss 2015). This has led to substantial engagement with traditions of giving, charity, philanthropy and care outside the Western world, and it has tackled definitions of humanity as well as inhumanity.

Much of this ethnographically fine-grained and theoretically sophisticated literature has taken the point of view of what Čarna Brković (2023, 2) calls 'small-scale humanitarianisms'. Yet, in research on humanitarianism, the concept of scale remains surprisingly under-theorised. Rather than making explicit the use of scale in social interaction, studies of humanitarianism often pitch scalar categories such as 'small', 'local' and 'regional' against 'big' and 'transnational'. In this book, we argue that there is much to learn from a more dynamic approach to scale, one which allows us to observe humanitarianism's movement. This perspective, we maintain, highlights new aspects of humanitarians who, though they represent grassroots initiatives, actively redefine the meaning of humanity and pursue alternative economies and politics.

The main concepts that define this volume – scale, universality, humanity and alter-politics – require a thorough theoretical introduction. Thus, in the following we discuss these concepts in relation to humanitarianism, focusing on the question of what a view from below can illuminate, and where such a perspective might require refinement. We then introduce the seven empirical chapters which respond to three major themes that structure this book: how humanitarianism transforms geospatial orders, the shifting ground of humanitarianism in tangible material and physical terms, and the tactical considerations that encourage humanitarians to adopt discourses of universalism.

Why, what and where is humanitarianism from below?

In his study of Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine) in the context of global health, Stephan Kloos (2020) shows that this particular medical tradition operates with a 'politics of compassion' that is linked to universal ambitions. The transformation and distribution of Tibetan medicine through modern pharmaceutical production and diasporic networks facilitates these ambitions, and in the process, old ways of thinking about human universality have become commingled with more recent global discourse. Kloos emphasises the Buddhist moral framework that informs Tibetan medicine's aspiration to universal legitimacy. Thus, Sowa Rigpa is comparable to Western humanitarian traditions, but not in a straightforward manner. Rather, it constitutes a particular type of humanitarianism – a humanitarianism from below – 'which in many ways mirrors the logics and discourses of global health' (Kloos 2020, 167). However, it does so 'from a subaltern position' – not from a 'position of strength' (contrary to Tibet's once powerful role in Inner Asia), but from one of 'weakness' vis-à-vis Western humanitarian institutions (176).

In Kloos's study, Sowa Rigpa appears as a form of humanitarianism from below whose position is not fixed in the global hierarchy of humanitarianism. To the contrary, its universal, ethical, soteriological and curative ambitions seem to suggest other scales. The question of scalar movement is not a focus of Kloos's article, and his conceptualisation of scale is only implied. However, Sowa Rigpa raises crucial questions relating to scale: How do different types of humanitarianism move, and to what end? When does humanitarianism *from* below cease to *be* below? And are there instances of humanitarianism that navigate along multiple scales simultaneously?

Scale

The ways in which scale has been theorised across the social sciences have been uneven. In anthropology, for instance, specific subtypes of scale have received extensive discussion in relation to place, locality and the field site (for instance, Candea 2007; Clifford 1997; Escobar 1995). Much less work has been done to theorise scale more broadly as dynamic, mobile and continuously being remade. By contrast, geographers have for obvious reasons invested more effort in carving out distinct approaches to scale-making, starting with the critical examination of maps and other spatial representations (for instance, Berg 2004; Brenner 2000 and 2001).

The most common way of conceptualising scale – as a ladder of predefined steps leading from bottom to top – is only one amongst many. Other approaches have organised scale as concentric circles, as a nesting doll, as an earthworm burrow or as a spider's web (Herod 2011). None of these metaphors is able to suit every empirical example equally well. Alternatively, more dynamic conceptualisations of scale allow us to describe the movement of actors between different layers, as well as the movement of the layers themselves. This change in perception has a considerable impact on how we theorise humanitarianism – beyond the static distinctions between local and transnational, universal and particular.

Andrew Herod (2011, 49) offers a useful metaphor to consider, inspired by an adaptation of Bruno Latour's (1996) work on the rhizome: tree roots anchored in the soil, constituting a network whose individual parts are of various length and thickness. These tree roots reflect humanitarianism's various scales. From this perspective, humanitarianism is made up of multiple places, groups of people, institutions and social practices, but it has no specific, singular origin. The roots grow, decline, entwine and merge over the course of time, as do different readings of universality, moral frameworks, practices of giving and care and political forms. There is no predefined hierarchy; hierarchies instead emerge from prolonged, unfinished processes of interaction. Applying this metaphor to humanitarianism as a historical and anthropological phenomenon, the difference between 'transnational' or 'global' forms of humanitarianism and 'situated universalisms' (Brković 2023, 5) is better conceived through analyses of their co-emergence.

Universality

If we continue with the metaphor of the tree roots, then the distinction between different types of universalism is one of degree and not of size. Some forms of humanitarianism may operate with explicitly formulated universal ambitions – the International Committee of the Red Cross, for instance. Other forms may forgo such ambitions for practical reasons, or work with implicit universal assumptions. Religious moral economies play an important role in this distinction. While specific Christian concepts led to the rise of modern humanitarianism in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth century (Fassin 2011), this process is not limited to Christianity. Many religions that address all (human) beings, including Islam and Buddhism, draw on universal frameworks of thought (Huang 2009; Mostowlansky 2020b). Even where, as in Amira Mittermaier's (2019) study on the 'nonhumanitarian' ethics of Islamic giving in Egypt, the focus lies on the relation between humans and God, the assumption is still that redistribution works *universally* through God's will.

From this vantage point, various universal ambitions can exist, compete and entwine in one and the same humanitarian site. Darryl Li's

(2019) study of the presence and legacy of foreign fighters in the 1990s war in Bosnia is illustrative. Li shows how transnational jihad, socialist legacies, United Nations peace-keeping and the US-led Global War on Terror meet and interact. Against this backdrop, it becomes abundantly clear that not all forms of universalism are equal. They are however connected, and their analytical comparison is an important endeavour. An especially illuminating example is that of the mujahideen and UN peace-keepers in Bosnia. Li (10) writes about them as follows:

> Both seek to incarnate particular ways of imagining the human community, bringing together diverse constituencies, especially in facing locals who may be reluctant, hostile, or opportunistic. Both tend to stumble through the local language and oscillate between marveling at the hospitality they have seen and the duplicity that sometimes follows. Both exercise power across boundaries – juridical, racial, and so on – raising serious questions of responsibility and difference. Both offer favored locals resources and the opportunity to become one of them through travel. Both are accused by critics of unrealistic devotion to ideals as well as base motivations that cheapen those ideals. Both are admired for assuming risks despite the apparent lack of an ‘organic’ link to these sites of conflict and face suspicion over their motives for the same reason. Both are engaged in bringing projects of social transformation with questionable local legitimacy, and struggle over how aggressively to pursue those programs and how much to interfere in local dynamics.

The strength of Li’s analysis lies not only in his capacity to make evident the parallels between jihad and peace-keeping. Importantly, he also avoids pitching good against evil, peace-keeping against death-making. Instead, he traces how categories of good and bad, humane and inhumane develop in practice, and how they get assigned to certain humanitarian actors while not to others. This approach further develops lines of inquiry emerging from research into the role of ‘humanitarian wars’ in pretending to save humanity (Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). *Legitimate* humanitarian violence is thereby juxtaposed with the *inhumane* practice of ‘terrorism’, constituting a widespread distinction that continues to hold the politics of humanitarianism in its sway. In all these endeavours, the question of how humans are structured within a global hierarchy of worth has tested the idea of a common humanity.

(In)humanity

Humanitarianism has, since its inception, involved discussions on the meaning of humanity at large. In modern humanitarianism in Europe and the United States, humanity stands alongside the core principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. From a social scientific perspective, humanity is part and parcel of a universalising language that serves a particular end. These core principles describe ideals that are meant to legitimise and bolster this variant of humanitarianism.

Yet, in his work on the *homo sacer*, Giorgio Agamben (1998) shows how the category of humanity has long served to distinguish between those who are part of collective humanity, and therefore deserve protection, and others who fall outside these ranks, and can be left to die or be killed with impunity. Much research on humanitarianism, while acknowledging the often lethal ambivalence of humanity, continues to place emphasis on those who are included in this collective. But what about those who are not? What about the myriad ways in which the humanisation of some requires the dehumanisation of others (Fanon 2008)?

In this book we grapple with precisely these questions. Sam Dubal's (2018) ethnography of former fighters in the Lord's Resistance Army in northern Uganda, titled *Against Humanity*, exemplifies this exploration. Responding to the idea of 'development' as anti-politics in James Ferguson's work (1994), Dubal argues that the discourse on humanity that drives international humanitarianism obscures the politics behind it. He observes that these 'simple moral judgments … reproduce racist modern imaginaries', and that they misrepresent 'lived realities and experiences as it [humanity] attempts to assign moral value' (Dubal 2018, 212), and continuing:

> [Humanity] prescribes a narrow vision of the good rather than being open to the possibilities of and meaning found in forms of life outside of it. For those who find freedom and meaning in life beyond humanity, humanity rejects their lives because of the way it reads their violence, irrationality, animality, and so forth. At its heart, humanity seeks not to democratize access to the good, but rather to monopolize control over it – doing violence to the very concept by dictating the parameters of what counts as good.

Focusing on militant Islam in the early twenty-first century, Faisal Devji (2008) approaches the tradition and language of humanity in a similarly productive and provocative manner. Devji situates the emergence of the 'humanitarian enterprise' within the civilising mission of European imperialism. He argues that, at a time when 'the language of citizenship was largely absent from colonial rule', the language of humanity stepped into its place (7). And as the idea of humanity is tied up with colonial claims of inequality, the turn-of-the-millennium al-Qaeda could employ this language to make its own claims. To this end, Devji notes (7), al-Qaeda's leaders 'almost obsessively' referred to humanity, and to Muslims 'as the contemporary representatives of human suffering'. There can be no doubt that critical accounts of humanitarianism from below require analysis of the politics of both humanity and inhumanity.

Alter-politics

The above-mentioned studies on militancy in Uganda, peace-keeping and jihad in Bosnia and al-Qaeda's conception of humanity are all prominent and stark examples of the kinds of politics that stand in opposition to mainstream humanitarian discourse. Ghassan Hage (2012, 292) calls such politics 'anti-politics', aimed at 'resisting and defeating the existing order'.

Located in parallel to the existing order, we also often find 'alter-politics', which seek to establish an alternative order. For any critical discussion of humanitarianism at this point in history, in which the post-Cold War liberal order has evidently come to an end (Dzenovska and Kurtović 2018), an engagement with both anti-politics and alter-politics appears paramount. While there have been decades of critiques of global liberal humanitarianism as being enmeshed in hegemonic power relations, these critiques, to paraphrase Dzenovska and Kurtović, were an 'appropriate analytical-political tactic' only so long as liberalism was a 'winning' ideology.

So, to better understand how humanitarianism from below relates to or radically departs from other forms of humanitarianism, in this book we focus on the search for 'alternative economies, alternative modes of inhabiting and relating to the earth, alternative modes of thinking and experiencing otherness' (Hage 2015, 1). This involves examining oppositional concerns and open attempts at overturning existing political orders, as well as attempts to lay 'the grounds for new modes of existence' (Hage 2015, 2).

It is important to note that this approach does not imply any moral judgement on our part. Humanitarianism from below is not necessarily 'good'. New modes of existence and alternatives to the humanitarian politics of the past can imply high degrees of violence and dehumanisation. Yet, as we set out to show, sometimes humanitarianism from below proposes new modes of utopian thought which do indeed shake off old shackles and foster new forms of sociality.

Geospatial orders

The first part of this book explores how humanitarianism from below is interwoven with geospatial orders, that is, on the role of locality, space and power in shaping emerging forms of humanitarianism.

In Chapter 1, Adia Benton explores the under-recognised contributions of aid and expertise by West African diaspora communities in the context of Ebola. Benton emphasises that unequal power relations continue to be reinforced through the distinction of 'qualified' humanitarianism versus official, 'big-H' Humanitarianism. The proverbial 'foreign international', even in critical studies, still holds sway over any sense of 'shared humanity'. Describing the efforts of communities from Sierra Leone and Liberia to deliver health education, caregiving and access to therapies, Benton shows that these actions happened alongside mainstream humanitarian endeavours. Though they occasionally intersected with international interventions, these efforts were often bypassed or held up by existing humanitarian networks. In this process, these diaspora communities developed critiques of the perceived inhumanity of mainstream humanitarianism, its reinforcement of racial hierarchies, and its neglect of life beyond minimal preservation. These taxonomies of difference are geospatial in nature. They reach far beyond conventional attributions of global order such as 'North' and 'South' and demand a reworking of geospatial categories that are grounded in the material and metaphorical realities of humanitarianism from below.

In Chapter 2, Taras Fedirko sheds light on power and spatiality in the context of crowdfunding of humanitarian and military aid in Ukraine. As Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine has shifted the terms of geospatial ordering in various ways, the consequences for the humanitarian sphere have been muddied, and on multiple scales. Official arms shipments have dominated the headlines – yet, what to make of the careers of Ukrainian crowdfunding activists who have delivered humanitarian goods and military aid? What is the meaning of nourishing and healing when it occurs alongside killing and maiming? Fedirko argues that the activists' answers to these troubling questions have deflected discussions away from common humanity and towards an affirmation of community. The hierarchical ordering implicit in humanitarianism persists; the distinction between more valuable and lesser humans goes hand in hand with the question of who are worthier or lesser citizens. Amongst Ukrainians, the citizen is being redefined by working or fighting, in contrast to the refugee or the draft dodger. Like the front line itself, Fedirko suggests, once established by the act of war, the distinction between friend and enemy continues to shift, with severe implications on notions of aid, solidarity and the nation.

Shifting ground

The second part of this book looks at the shifting ground of multiscalar humanitarianism from three different vantage points, using ethnographically grounded studies to analyse how humanitarian practices challenge prefabricated notions of scale.

In Chapter 3, on Islamic aid in Kyrgyzstan, Till Mostowlansky and Mukaram Toktogulova observe the erosion of multiple long-standing arrangements that have determined humanitarianism and development in the country. After the retreat of Western aid and the emergence of actors from China and the Islamic world, a foundation from Kuwait rose to prominence in a variety of contexts across Kyrgyzstan. However, in the small town which the authors examine, this foundation's activities have encouraged critique from residents, which has resulted in alternative aid initiatives being organised by generations of 'classmates'. Both fields of engagement draw heavily on Islamic forms of legitimacy. Humanitarianism and development in this town have thus become a space of intra-Islamic contestation, in which questions about the role of top-down approaches, foreignness and alignment with the state are raised. This all happens against a backdrop of 'social town' housing projects built by the Kuwaiti foundation to provide housing for widows. Meanwhile, the 'classmates' have also renovated infrastructure and acquired property for widows through annual large-scale fundraising events featuring *ulak*, a game in which players on horseback compete to place a goat carcass in a goal. Mostowlansky and Toktogulova explore these two different forms of aid in terms of scale, ethics and politics. Both represent different approaches to Muslim solidarity and offer alternative pathways to established institutions that promote humanitarianism and development, but both also express divergent universal aspirations.

In Chapter 4, Giuseppe Bolotta shows how hunger strikes in Thailand allow two key public figures to shift along multiple scales of engagement – geographical, cultural and political. These hunger strikes are set in the context of Thailand's 2020–1 youth democracy movement, in which many activists were charged with the crime of offense to Thai royalty (which carries sentences of up to 15 years in prison). Drawing on extensive fieldwork with Thai youth activists and NGO workers in Bangkok, Bolotta demonstrates the interplay between transnational discourse and socially situated forms of humanitarian engagement, including various commitments to the common good – non-violent resistance, human rights, Buddhist selflessness, (equal) friendship, and (hierarchical) kinship. The two activists whom Bolotta describes are figures of humanitarianism precisely because their hunger strike stands for selfless devotion to the commons, shattering clear-cut distinctions between different scales of humanitarianism. They draw on universal human rights discourse and notions of common humanity, while framing their actions as spontaneous, individually initiated expressions of solidarity. The ambition of such an approach is to counter the hierarchy of Thai royalty, in which the king is positioned high above everyone else. As Bolotta shows, as figures of humanitarianism, these activists put forward the biological commonality of all humans against Thailand's royal exceptionalism.

In Chapter 5, Alexander Ephrussi recounts how the devastating 2023 earthquake in Turkey literally shook state–citizen relations, and how earthquake relief was delivered by often undocumented Afghan migrants who collected funds to support Turkish earthquake victims. Ephrussi explores how the Afghans' impulses to help were guided not only by solidarity, but by Islamic obligation, as well as a political context in which migrants seek to 'demigrantise' themselves in relation to Turkish society and the state. The Afghans' actions thus to some extent reflect a desire for legitimacy. However, going beyond this quest for legitimacy, Ephrussi highlights the role of visibility and performance as migrants involve themselves in a highly contested field of humanitarian politics. At a historical moment in which the presence of migrants in Turkey is openly exploited for electoral purposes and public scapegoating, the Afghans' humanitarian engagement makes apparent their search for alter-political avenues. The Afghans draw on what they perceive as a century of friendly Afghan–Turkish relations, and although they require Turkey's hospitality during a time of crisis in Afghanistan, Ephrussi's interlocutors emphasise their importance and their value as humanitarian ambassadors to Turkey.

Tactical universalism

The third part of the book explores the role of universalism in humanitarianism from below and discusses the tactical employment of universal discourse afforded by specific political moments.

In Chapter 6, Krista Maxwell shows how the provision of grassroots security draws upon universal claims to civil rights. Maxwell discusses how Indigenous political actors, often inspired by Black activists, made tactical use of humanitarian rhetoric and institutions to preserve Indigenous Anishinaabe lives amidst settler colonial violence in the 1970s. Anishinaabe leaders and allied settler activists used a biopolitical analysis to examine preventable Indigenous deaths, which they linked to the settler state's continuing denial of full citizenship rights to Indigenous people. The Ojibway Warriors Society's armed occupation of Anicinabe Park later propelled the establishment of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol. Patrol workers scoured the lakeside town to protect their relatives, unsupervised children, and adults rendered vulnerable by drunkenness to exposure, drowning and white supremacist attacks. The Ne-Chee Street Patrol eschewed the othering of victims characteristic of settler humanitarianism, in favour of relationality, interdependence and kinship. Their practices of protection and care were intimately connected to Indigenous social and political resurgence, and asserted the endurance and inherent value of Anishinaabe knowledge and social relations amid the lethal conditions of ongoing Canadian settler colonialism. Elements of international humanitarian universalism informed the actions of these Indigenous activists; at the same time, this universalism, rooted in the history of colonial violence, became transformed through Indigenous concepts of relationality.

In Chapter 7, Elmira Muratova focuses on the role of Crimean Tatars in the context of the ongoing Russo-Ukrainian war. She explores how Crimean Tatars affiliated with Hizb ut-Tahrir, a transnational Islamist political party that was heavily stigmatised in the Global War on Terror, transformed themselves into human rights advocates. This transition from marginalised solidarity to claims of universality, Muratova argues, is crucial in understanding Crimean Tatars' role in Ukraine's liberal nation-building process. While it remains a pan-Islamic organisation with the goal of reestablishing a global caliphate through non-violent means, Hizb ut-Tahrir employs various humanitarian tactics. This includes aid for Crimean Tatars affected by Russia's annexation of Crimea, for instance in the form of material, psychological, and legal support for political prisoners and their families. The activists also speak about repression in Crimea at international forums, strengthening Ukraine's international position in condemning their aggressor and advocating for the return of its occupied territories. Hizb ut-Tahrir's actions in Crimea shed light on how the organisation shifted away from a critique of Western dominance towards engagement with Western human rights platforms and political institutions. Thus, even as Hizb ut-Tahrir has in many ways maintained its positioning as an alter-political movement, it has progressively adopted a universal discourse and anti-political (anti-Russian) tactics. Drawing on qualitative interviews, social media analysis and expert reports, this chapter highlights areas of humanitarianism in which established categories are challenged and transformed.

Reassessing humanitarianism from below

Reflecting on these chapters in his afterword, Stephan Kloos provides a reassessment of past and present research on 'humanitarianism from below'. Having coined the term in a 2020 article on globalised Tibetan medicine, he discusses how this volume develops an analysis of humanitarianism that extends beyond previous debates, and he identifies a number of themes and questions that run as a common thread through the individual chapters.

Kloos raises the question of what we can gain, analytically and theoretically, when we refer to specific practices, institutions and people as 'from below'. Do we not prolong the hegemony of mainstream humanitarianism by doing so? To be sure, this danger is real. At the same time, Kloos points out, putting diverse humanitarian endeavours in one common, comparative frame decentres humanitarianism at large. Whatever dominance might remain of 'big-H' Humanitarianism dissolves in a sea of humanitarian pluralism. This volume constitutes a map of sorts to provide guidance through this sea.

Kloos also sees the description and analysis of this humanitarian pluralism as a strong achievement of the volume. Humanitarianism's multiple forms are shaped by highly uneven histories and relations of power, and the nuances that emerge from this pluralism require close attention to historiography and a strong ethnographic grounding.

Finally, Kloos situates the emergence of humanitarianism from below at the intersection between a horizontal and a vertical axis. On one axis we can observe grounded practices of solidarity and care; on the other, references to universalism, humanity and globally dominant institutions. The process that occurs at this intersection is one of decentring.

More than just scalar movement, this is a process of scalar transformation. Preconceived hierarchies dissolve in this process, eventually taking shape as what Kloos, in accordance with a rhizomatic view of scale, refers to as ‘humanitarian assemblages’.

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Part I

Geospatial orders

1

Humanitarian transversals: diaspora and solidarity during the West African Ebola crisis

Adia Benton

A 10 September 2014 Facebook post from a Liberian-American youth leader reads:

> A month and three days ago the African Community of Rhode Island staged a public outcry to end the spread of Ebola. Since then I have seen the community try to unite under one cause. It has not been easy … the old ways are still there but we are moving forward. We can still do this together … maybe you don't have time for the meetings and coordinating events but your small contribution is what matters. Come out and be a part of #ebolabegone Kick out Ebola Day. Bring supplies, get answers to the questions your [sic] wondering about the campaign. Enjoy the atmosphere of family and friends. (Amos 2014)

Three days later, a group of Liberian-American[1] youths hosted Kick Out Ebola Day on a sprawling, grassy sports field behind Hope High School on the east side of Providence, Rhode Island – the capital city of America's smallest state.[2] The cost to attend the event was a donation of 'sanitary' items: bleach and other disinfectants, medical grade buckets, rubber gloves, surgical masks, goggles, disposable gowns and other items to prevent the transmission of Ebola. Community members donated food and drinks for all attendees, rented an inflatable bouncy house where the younger children could play, organised soccer and kickball games and set up tables for relevant community organisations to share information about Ebola and various services.

The day was cool and overcast. Two women in their twenties greeted us with clipboards as we entered the high school grounds.

They documented each of the donations carefully, coordinated the placement of the items, and directed people through the gates to the event. As helpers loaded donations into a U-Haul truck, one of the women explained to inquisitive donors that they planned to transport the supplies in a Liberian-owned shipping container for distribution to specific villages and towns where they had kin, along with instructions on how to use the materials.

At the time, Liberia, along with its West African neighbours Sierra Leone and Guinea, was embroiled in what was turning out to be the largest Ebola outbreak, in terms of cases and deaths, in the disease's 40-year history. There had been at least 4,300 confirmed cases in the region, with more than half of those resulting in death (Bullard 2018). Local and regional health systems were pushed to their limits, with too few clinicians and too few resources to prevent in-facility transmission or to deliver dignified, comprehensive care to everyone who needed it (Benton 2014). In August, as a handful of confirmed cases were, incidentally, being treated in the southern US and western Europe, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the pandemic a public health emergency of international concern.

On 18 September 2014, several days after the Kick Out Ebola Day event, the UN Security Council and UN General Assembly passed resolutions declaring the pandemic a threat to international peace and security, and calling for a coordinated UN response (Burci 2014; UNSC 2014; UNGA 2014). Following these resolutions, the United Nations Mission for Emergency Ebola Response (UNMEER), the first-ever UN emergency health mission, was established. An international coalition of foreign militaries, humanitarian and development NGOs, universities and for-profit actors mobilised their resources to mount a massive operation, using the crisis as an opportunity to test and scale various interventions for a complex public health and humanitarian emergency – and to generate political, social, financial and professional capital (Benton 2018; Farmer 2014).

While it took time and considerable effort to organise the typical mechanisms of 'big-H Humanitarianism' (Ross 2017; Ross et al. 2017), the official 'civilian-led, military-supported' response entailed building temporary healthcare and public health infrastructures; developing command-and-control-type coordination mechanisms and protocols to slow and contain Ebola transmission; and fast-tracking the development of emergent diagnostic, treatment and prevention technologies.[3]

Before UNMEER was established, the 'conventional' international response had been sluggish, with only a handful of government leaders and organisations like Médecins Sans Frontières sounding the alarm and organising rudimentary care (Moon et al. 2015). West African civil society groups and individuals, as well as members of West African diasporas in Europe, Africa and North America, developed their own initiatives and volunteered their expertise in the meantime (Putman 2014). Some diaspora organisations lobbied political representatives in their host countries to allocate aid and assistance to the region, while others sent money or travelled to the increasingly isolated region to offer on-the-ground expertise and care (DEMAC 2016; Putman 2014; Ziner 2014a). And in Sierra Leone, the United States, and the United Kingdom, where much of my research during this period was conducted (2014–17), community groups organised events like Kick Out Ebola Day.

One might characterise supply drives and fundraising events, grassroots organising, and expert consultation on Liberian and Sierra Leonean soil as humanitarianism 'from below' – which is to say, a form of humanitarian labour and organising that may be transnational in character, but is also grounded in local social and civic movements and shared humanity 'from a subaltern position' (Kloos 2020, 167). Indeed, the Liberian Community Association of Rhode Island, one of the Liberian-American groups involved in the Providence Kick Out Ebola Day event, included 'providing humanitarian services' amongst the goals set forth in its charter. Their description of certain programme activities as humanitarian legitimises and makes legible their activities to their constituencies – Liberian diasporas and other potential beneficiaries and donors. These constituencies are fluent in the language of the development and humanitarian industries – an artifact of their immersion in the culture of humanitarian assistance during Liberia's protracted civil wars and the subsequent decades of refugee and temporary protected status for Liberians in the United States.[4]

In this chapter, I examine these West African diaspora communities and their (not always realised or fully recognised) contributions of aid and expertise towards the official response to the 2013–16 West African Ebola pandemic. To begin, I address the critical question that emerges from conceptualising diasporan or citizen aid during a crisis as *qualified* humanitarianism – that is, local, grassroots or vernacular humanitarianism, which scholars and practitioners distinguish from international, bureaucratically administered humanitarianism. Specifically, I suggest that if we characterise these practices as 'humanitarianism from below', then the official (big-H) humanitarian response to Ebola, by implication, operates 'from above', indexing the relations of power, direction and scale that shape and are reproduced through the humanitarian enterprise.

In this formulation, 'the foreign international' is the normative framing with which to mobilise a sense of 'shared humanity' in the service of governing and organising assistance during a crisis. This underscores the hegemony of liberal, Western humanitarianism, in which these qualified forms of humanitarianism perform auxiliary roles – they 'add value' to the humanitarian mission only if properly harnessed (DEMAC 2016, 24; compare Reid-Henry 2014, 420).

Next, I recount three kinds of initiatives organised by West Africans and members of the diaspora: first, Liberian and Nigerian diasporan efforts to deliver Ebola education to kin and community at a time when government messaging was conflicting and confusing; second, Sierra Leonean efforts to support health workers, patients and their communities; and third, Sierra Leonean and diasporan clinicians' push to make convalescent serum therapies (CSTs) widely available to Ebola patients. I go on to show how these initiatives operated *transversely* to humanitarian infrastructure, at times intersecting with, or bypassing, existing international and regional networks, at other times being delayed or stopped at choke points along the way. These actions often made an oblique critique of mainstream humanitarianism's perceived inhumanity and parasitic nature, particularly in relation to the global racial hierarchies and minimalist biopolitics subtending humanitarian practice, and the racialised nature of humanitarian organisations (Redfield 2013; Benton 2016b; Pallister-Wilkins 2022; Ray 2019).

On qualified humanitarianism

Social scientists studying humanitarianism have recently tried to theorise and make sense of relief, assistance and aid that emanates not from metropolitan centres, large international organisations, or Eurocentric ideological or moral frameworks, but instead from other ethico-political traditions, based on affinities beyond the human. These forms of humanitarianism, which I refer to here as 'qualified humanitarianism', may be called 'vernacular', 'demotic', 'from below' or 'grassroots' (Kloos 2020; Fechter and Schwittay 2019; DEMAC 2016 and 2022), often with an eye towards decentring the large, international, racialised organisations that have defined, professionalised and operationalised humanitarian principles – and thereby making room 'to imagine alternatives' (Brković 2017).

Humanitarianism is premised on a universalist notion of the human that 'veils the racial hierarchies within [it]' (Pallister-Wilkins 2021;

Benton 2016a) and orients a normative direction for its application – from rich to poor, from white to non-white, from West to East and from Global North to Global South (compare Brada 2016).[5] To put it quite crudely, the humanitarian project too often enlists its torchbearers to behave *as if* their beneficiaries were human.

Thus I wonder if offering an ever-expanding typology of humanitarianism and affixing qualifiers like 'from below' reinforces the hegemony of big-H Humanitarianism, instead of recentring alternative forms of aid. When described this way, big-H Humanitarianism continues to serve as the standard against which all other aid in times of crisis is measured, a political order into which all emergency assistance must be subsumed. The qualification of humanitarianism as 'diasporic' exposes the parochialism of humanitarian practice. It also draws attention away from the material, ideological and systemic realities shaping the need for it to exist, as well as the persistence of 'western humanitarianism … an increasingly institutionalised, systematised and thereby sanctioned form of liberal morality, [which] reproduces the logic of the social order undertaking it' (Reid-Henry 2014, 428).

When I ask if particular acts or systems of care might be described as humanitarian, I am also asking for whom this is true – particularly if one is to use the idea of humanitarianism to qualify the directionality of its actualisation (that is, humanitarianism from below). To identify the subjects and objects of humanitarianism – the actors for whom these definitions are true – is also to identify directionality, the 'above' or 'below' from or about which to speak and act. Or perhaps, more explicitly, the very idea of humanity operates as a particular kind of universality. The foundation of government, intervention, law, affect and ideology compels us to revisit what, precisely, we are talking about when we use 'humanitarianism' to describe organised efforts to palliate collective suffering (elsewhere), and when we ascribe a normative direction (above) and a subaltern one (below) from which humanitarianism respectively emanates and is applied.

As I suggest by bracketing the 'elsewhere' in my description of humanitarian practice, humanitarianism as a professional or practical concern contains a reference to a moral geography and a hierarchical geospatial order. This geospatial order is not just articulated in terms of Global North/South or East/West, but also in terms of perceived proximity and taxonomies of difference that are both metaphorical and material.

More specifically, because these events occur during a public health emergency and its aftermath, the conceptions of humanity at stake in the cases I address in this chapter are tethered to sociospatial orders linking race, disease and expertise. Certain racial groups, signified by their places of origin and residence and by their education, may be presumed to hold expertise. This expertise moves in one direction: to the areas perceived to be bereft of it. Various forms of capital – social, cultural and economic – circulate with foreign experts and ease their passage within mobile networks and humanitarian infrastructures. Some communities' expertise and knowledge are valued more than others. Some are deserving of the best possible care, while others are relegated to a pile of 'mere survival' – the object of minimalist biopolitics that Peter Redfield (2013) describes in his study of Médecins Sans Frontières and medical humanitarianism. This dynamic structures the kind of *inhumanity* to which, and within which, diasporic and grassroots aid responds.

Conventional humanitarian actors have become increasingly interested in the 'value added' of so-called diaspora humanitarianism (DEMAC 2016 and 2022). Much of the industry's grey literature on the subject has been concerned with absorbing or assimilating diaspora organisations and networks into the humanitarian ecosystem, as a 'source of knowledge and learning' in the name of optimising efficiency – or in NGO parlance, to 'minimize duplication and maximize impact'.

In its parastatal form, humanitarianism, like its cousin, development, has been institutionalised and operationalised according to 'racial codes [that] are embedded and naturalized in practices ranging from contract negotiations and … management and bureaucracy … to the power structure of the world system' (Pierre 2020, 89).[6] But, unlike development, it would be difficult to define humanitarianism in aspirational terms – as spurred by the will to improve. That is, while many polities, communities and citizens aspire to and pursue development, occasionally with liberatory aims (Mkandawire 2011), the aspirations, and therefore the achievements, of humanitarianism are minimalist. Humanitarianism is aspirational in its principles – humanity, neutrality, impartiality and dignity – rather than in its outcomes ('saving lives'). It is primarily concerned with restoring humanity through acts of charity, by providing basic needs, or by saving life itself (Agier 2010; Benton 2016b).

If there is an aspirational outcome in the humanitarian space, it is for 'the diaspora' to take on a conventional organisational form, with the intention of becoming a 'real' humanitarian actor that conforms to the professional norms and standards of established humanitarian protocols and practices.[7] Diaspora humanitarianism maintains an intermediary status as a bridge across the imagined rite of passage through which a society in crisis passes – from humanitarianism to development, and from short-term tactics of saving lives to long-term strategies of improvement and progress. But diasporas are diverse and contested political spaces, as many have shown (Rubyan-Ling 2019; Chikezie 2015). Attempts to qualify humanitarianism – as vernacular, from below or diasporic – often serve to harden the boundaries of what constitutes humanitarianism, to strengthen its legitimacy as a political actor and moral institution, and to reinforce its exclusionary and hierarchical conception of 'humanity'. This shapes an opportunity structure in which there are incentives for participation and integration. As Reid-Henry (2014, 427) notes, 'Humanitarian interventions into what are often marginal sites to processes of capital accumulation offer one of the first points of entry to new markets for western producers'; I would add that it is also often a point of entry for experimentation and extraction.

Grassroots and diaspora initiatives

Health education and outreach

Kick Out Ebola Day in Providence, the event described at the start of this chapter, was just one of many events organised by diasporas across the globe. With support from a coalition of Liberian community groups, the event attracted dozens of people from African diaspora communities throughout the region. Some of these groups hosted tables spread with pamphlets and information sheets, where organisation representatives discussed their activities with passersby under a tent alongside the sports field. At the end of the row of tables was one set up for the Rhode Island Department of Health. Dr Fine, the head of the department at that time, explained his connection to Liberia and his office's involvement with the local Liberian community's efforts to stop Ebola transmission:

> We set up phone banks here, so that Liberians could call home and provide their relatives the latest information about Ebola. We also made a hotline so they could call here and have members of their communities answer their questions. We talked to a radio station that broadcasts to parts of Liberia. (Author's field notes, conversation with Dr Fine)

Dr Fine, working with the Yoruba Elders of Rhode Island, a Nigerian diaspora association, also visited mosques and churches to provide outreach there. He told a local reporter that he and his staff had been meeting weekly with members of the West African community, ‘sometimes with four or five people, and sometimes with forty or fifty’ (Ziner 2014b). They visited rallies, fundraisers and churches, spreading information so that people there could ‘in turn provide accurate information to family and friends’ in West Africa (Ziner 2014b).

Care and support outside the suite of humanitarian fare

Elsewhere, people from Sierra Leone urged old friends and acquaintances to attend similar fundraising events in Britain and the Commonwealth. They collected sanitary and hygiene items and money for medical supplies and equipment to send to Sierra Leone, and they raised money for community-based organisations to procure supplies not available locally.

Early on, little official aid and support was offered for health workers, who were working in increasingly dangerous conditions, and who were often forced to live separately from their families. At the same time, most survivors had their belongings taken from them and burned when they entered treatment facilities. Upon discharge, it wasn’t uncommon for them to struggle to reintegrate into their communities; many had several family members who died, while others were stigmatised for their condition. In late August 2014, a women’s group based in Freetown, PowerWomen232, like many other organisations featured by the Community Response Group Sierra Leone, organised food and supply drives ‘to support our health workers risking their lives on the front lines and those who have survived Ebola’ (Community Response Group Sierra Leone 2014).

According to organisational sociologist Ryann Manning, who sat on the board of a Sierra Leonean wellness NGO, a Sierra Leonean businesswoman based in Britain was alarmed to hear, near the end of September, that the government and international NGOs were supporting a three-day shelter-in-place order for the whole of Sierra Leone. In a country where a vast majority live without access to reliable refrigeration, and thus often shop daily for food, how would people eat? She decided to find a way to make and deliver hot meals to communities in Sierra Leone during the stay-at-home period: ‘With little time to establish the organisational infrastructure she needed, she partnered with existing organisations – Ugandan and Kenyan registered charities – in order to repurpose their websites, bank accounts, and ability to collect and distribute funds.’ She also sought corporate sponsorship; solicited publicity from chefs and food bloggers; and worked with a Sierra Leonean NGO to prepare and deliver the meals (Manning 2017, 60).

Laboratory of opportunity

Many diaspora clinicians, epidemiologists, social scientists and administrators returned home to offer their expertise and counsel. Others advised their health worker colleagues based in Sierra Leone to stop treating patients, out of fear for their safety. This was especially heightened after the death in December 2014 of Dr Victor Willoughby, a senior Sierra Leonean physician in private practice in Freetown; physicians in Sierra Leone, unless they had ‘good passports’ with dual citizenship with the United States or UK and had made special arrangements with their foreign office, were unlikely to receive medical evacuation for highly specialised treatment (McLean 2017; Hirsch 2021). It had been widely hoped that Willoughby would have had access to convalescent serum therapy (CST), as he had been involved in activities to secure the equipment and necessary clearances to administer the treatment in Sierra Leone (Thomas 2014).

Sierra Leone Action (SLA), an organisation formed by Sierra Leonean physicians and other professionals living mostly in North America, was formed in August 2014 with a vision ‘to tackle Sierra Leone’s Ebola epidemic’ through the use of CST. CST involves the transfusion of plasma from Ebola survivors to Ebola patients in order to help their immune systems stave off infection. Although this treatment was used during the first known Ebola outbreaks in 1976 and during later outbreaks in Central Africa, knowledge about its efficacy was limited (Munung et al. 2019). Nevertheless, CST was listed in the WHO treatment guidelines as a low-cost, potentially effective experimental therapy.

Nearly all US and UK Ebola patients – mostly American and British clinicians who got sick while working in West Africa – received CST treatment, and all survived. In fact, upon recovery in a London hospital, in September 2014, British nurse Will Pooley flew to Atlanta to donate his plasma to an American clinician he had worked with in Sierra Leone; similarly, Dr Kent Brantly flew from Texas to Nebraska to donate his plasma to Dr Richard Sacra (CBS News Texas and Associated Press 2014; Reuters 2014).

Within weeks of the organisation’s founding, SLA secured the necessary approvals to use CST in Sierra Leone, and a US medical device company, Fresenius Kabi, donated nine autopheresis machines worth one million dollars, with enough supplies to operate the machines for six months (Kuhn 2014). The organisation also raised funds to pay for training, additional equipment and customs fees at the port of Freetown. The machines arrived in Sierra Leone by November 2014. While SLA wanted to immediately enrol dozens of patients in a clinical trial to rapidly demonstrate CST's efficacy – or at least, they did on paper (O'Carroll 2014) – it appears that from the time of the machines' arrival, the organisation was instead focused on securing approvals for the clinical trial, which did not get underway until Ebola cases in Sierra Leone had already declined (Van Griensven et al. 2016). Very few Sierra Leonean patients, besides the handful enrolled in the trial, were ever able to access CST (Chikezie 2015; Van Griensven et al. 2016).

Coda

In late September 2018, I was invited to Freetown to serve as one of many keynote speakers at the *4th African Conference on Emerging Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity*. The Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium hosts and sponsors the yearly conference, which brings together African scholars and public health practitioners from around the continent. While the conference theme itself was the milquetoast 'managing the spectrum of data generated during disease outbreaks and biosecurity threats', it became clear that the health scientists and practitioners present were specifically concerned about the intellectual theft, and epistemic injustices, that had been rife during the emergency. Many scientific papers had been published on the backs of their labour that had excluded them from authorship. Thousands of blood samples had been processed in district labs set up and managed by foreign governments and their scientists. More than 80 per cent of those samples disappeared – along with the clinical and patient data linked to those samples – when these governments withdrew their personnel and resources (Freudenthal 2019).

In Sierra Leone, the 18 district laboratories were operated by 8 different countries; these labs provided advanced diagnostic capabilities, allowing for rapid detection and treatment for people with Ebola. The laws governing who owns the biological, clinical and other data derived from patient diagnostics and care only became clear with protocols passed well into the pandemic. When the effectiveness of CST became a testable hypothesis, Ebola survivors' blood and other biological samples became the source material for research, rather than the property of patients, their communities or the state.

After I gave my keynote speech (Benton 2018), I was encouraged to sit on a panel with Yusuf Kabba, the president of the Sierra Leone Association of Ebola Survivors. The moderator of the panel, Dr Abayomi, a distinguished senior scientist and scholar from Nigeria, discussed the ethics of scientific experimentation and research and the problem of informed consent during health emergencies. He then asked me, much to my surprise, 'So, are we owed reparations?' He described the eagerness with which Ebola survivors donated their blood during the CST clinical trials, with the expectation that their donations would be immediately used to improve the quality of care for their fellow countrymen and women who had fallen ill. Turning to Kabba, he asked, 'Why did you donate your blood?', to which Kabba responded, 'We were told it would help others who were really sick, that it could be a useful treatment for our brothers and sisters'. 'And what ultimately happened to your blood?', Dr Abayomi asked. Kabba replied, 'It was ultimately used for research. I don't think it was used for therapy at all.' 'Would you have donated your blood if you had known?' Shaking his head furiously, Kabba responded, 'No. Absolutely not.'

As S. M. Reid-Henry put it, 'Humanitarianism is itself part of a wider global economic "revanchism" … for the way that its practices allow liberal politics to pursue an international politics that insists all are equally valued while largely avoiding the costs of such a position' (Reid-Henry 2014, 427). What if these practices (such as the provision and distribution of aid and education from diaspora to home) and these retroactive refusals (like those expressed by Yusuf Kabba and other survivors) bring into relief the inhumanity, the cracks in the liberal façade of humanitarianism? Even when diasporans characterise their work as humanitarian, and even when they administer programming as humanitarians, 'humanity' neither motivates action nor does it organise governance or any associated logics or practices. Rather, they often operate in response to *inhumanity* in humanitarian aid – the human Other, the as-if-human that constitutes and undergirds the industry and its ethics.

Many diasporan organisations and volunteers, like those I encountered in Rhode Island on Kick Out Ebola Day, foregrounded instead a range of organising concepts that motivated their work during the Ebola crisis: obligation, solidarity, citizenship and mutuality, mediated through geospatial arrangements and political imaginaries that operate transversely to those of the humanitarian.

Notes

1 Not to be confused with Americo-Liberian.

2 Rhode Island is notable for having the second-largest population of Liberians in the United States; some Liberians jokingly refer to the state as Liberia's sixteenth county.

3 Public health activities included educating the public about Ebola transmission, identifying active cases and their contacts, isolating active cases, mobilising ambulatory care and transit for patients, providing comprehensive medical care to the sick, offering aid and assistance in quarantined areas and, ultimately, reintegrating survivors into their communities.

4 This is not to say that the group is insincere in its charter, but rather that this aid category has become common sense to the point of being unremarkable.

5 Brada, an anthropologist studying a US–Botswana global health partnership, notes that the 'humanitarianism' label is selectively applied in order to morally, epistemologically, and racially distinguish groups according to these binaries. She shows that when the term circulates outside the bounds of emergency governance, as in big-H Humanitarianism, it does so not as 'a stable concept and easily recognizable phenomenon', but as a phenomenon that 'only becomes apparent in relation to other categories'.

6 Furthermore, as Polly Pallister-Wilkins argues, drawing on Benton 2016a, 'Humanitarianism is animated and made possible by white supremacy, defined as "a logic of social organisation that produces regimented, institutionalised, and militarised conceptions of hierarchised 'human' difference"'.

7 This is reminiscent of Donini's statement about humanitarian reproduction: 'As humanitarians, we address those vulnerabilities that we recognise and that fit our schemas, we speak to the likeminded and reproduce our institutions, we impose our mental models for assessment and response, we tend to shape reality in our image rather than trying to see it from the ground up' (Donini 2010, S227).

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2

Martial citizenship: military voluntarism and the transformation of the Ukrainian nation-state

Taras Fedirko

Since the beginning of the war in Donbas[1] in 2014, Ukrainian crowdfunding[2] networks have been central to both the organisation of warfare and the humanitarian response to it. Following the Maidan revolution in the winter of 2013–14 and the Russian annexation of Crimea, regular forces and militias were deployed to the ‘anti-terror operation’ in the eastern Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Pro-Maidan activists, many of whom had just stood down after months of protests, mobilised their connections and their social media followers to make up for deficient military logistics with crowdfunded food and technical gear as well as drones, vehicles, ammunition and light weapons. Along with adjacent networks, they also provided lodging, clothes and food to people displaced from Crimea and from territories in eastern Ukraine that had been engulfed by conflict with Russian-backed separatists (Stepaniuk 2021; Uehling 2023). Those who had participated in the revolution were joined by those for whom compassion and new security concerns may have outweighed allegiance to the cause of the Maidan protests (Channell-Justice 2023; Stepaniuk 2022). Military activists emerged as key mediators between front-line units and donors, supporters and civilians in the rear, and between internally displaced people and the state and host communities. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some of these networks reoriented towards aiding patients and medics. When Russia invaded Ukraine in February of 2022, those with experience in aiding refugees and the military mobilised again, imparting organisational know-how to tens of thousands of people who were drawn into civic chains of logistics, funding and care for the first time. Thus a social movement was born whose members, in the subsequent years of war, would go on to provide military and humanitarian aid, organise commercial production of weapons and take up government offices, participating in the state-led project of regulating the war economy both from above and from below.[3]

Scholars have described *volonterstvo* – as the activity of providing aid 'from below' is often called in Ukraine – as a creative, democratic rival of centralised aid, welfare and military bureaucracies. Some have characterised volonterstvo as bottom-up self-organisation in the absence of the state (Channell-Justice 2022; Zarembo 2017), while others see in it an example of a flexible 'distributed humanitarianism' that 'disrupts' the international aid industry through person-to-person aid chains, which result in 'faster, more cost-efficient, and resilient' humanitarian aid (Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023, 19). Such accounts echo the volunteers' own perceptions of their mission and methods, and they capture something essential about volunteers' approach to organising aid and their often antagonistic relationships with the state and with international humanitarianism. Volunteers project their anti-statist identity by claiming autonomy from institutionalised actors and greater impact than centralised bureaucracies, and this identity enables them to raise resources and coordinate aid in a society where the middle class harbours deep distrust of the state. Likewise, their technologies of organisation – from decentralised cooperation to innovations in fundraising – provide viable alternatives to bureaucratic allocation of resources, even if these alternatives may be more limited than sympathetic observers have claimed (International Crisis Group 2022). As these technologies are adopted by the central government, municipal officials and political parties, volunteers' organisational blueprints contribute to transforming social relations beyond their immediate contexts.

At the same time, the operations and ideologies of Ukraine's crowdfunding movement are far more intertwined with state institutions, markets and international aid bureaucracies than some crowdfunders would like to acknowledge. Volunteers depend on existing digital platforms, commercial markets and loopholes in government regulations for their continued operation. The social infrastructures on which their autonomy and resilience depend are in fact regulated and owned by corporations and states. And, despite the anti-statism that many aid brokers profess, crowdfunding contributes to and extends the state-coordinated provision of resources both to the front line and to civilians (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). Voluntarism articulates private action with the provision of public goods, extending the state's resource-allocating power and coproducing its capacity to 'govern through society', a process which Michael Mann termed 'infrastructural power'

(Mann 1986; Tarrow 2018). This gives the Ukrainian state its distinct wartime 'centaur' character of public–private partnership (Vonnak et al. 2025), or, to borrow from another context, of an 'associational state' (Balogh 2015, 1–22).

Because the wartime governing arrangements in Ukraine rely on mass mobilisation of recruits and resources, including through civic networks, they are vulnerable to withdrawal of citizen consent, for instance through draft evasion or political critique (Tarrow 2018; Clemens 2020, 5). Military crowdfunders often act not only as brokers of aid but also as brokers of ideas about political solidarity. This coproduction of national defence hinges on volunteers' coordination with state officials through personal acquaintance and alignment of interest, but also on a shared imagination of the collective horizon of the nation within which citizens are enjoined to work out what they owe one another and their polity (Lomnitz 2001, xiv–xv).

This chapter examines military crowdfunding networks in Ukraine as a site of nation-building and state-making.[4] Wartime voluntarism provides citizens with interactional frames for their contributions to national defence, and it creates new cultural material – symbols, identities, social ties, durable modes of organising – that transform the repertoire of the Ukrainian nation. Exploring how voluntary aid to the military articulates interpersonal ties of solidarity with collective templates of nationalism (compare Clemens 2020, 65), I argue that crowdfunding, and the broader people's economy of war, have become a relational terrain on which new hierarchies of civic worth are elaborated and new boundaries of the nation are drawn, with consequences for how the state can govern the war effort. As the Ukrainian government struggled to mobilise military recruits in 2023 and 2024, and turned to increasingly coercive methods of conscription which undermined the legitimacy of the war effort (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025), volunteers helped legitimate this coercion by the state by making the contribution of military service or donations to defence a new criterion for full membership in the nation. By channelling resources to the front line and contributing to the transformation of wartime visions of citizenship, they have shaped the trajectory of the Ukrainian nation-state.

As scholars increasingly recognise, humanitarianism, philanthropy and other forms of benevolence can be motivated by, and in turn become vehicles for, national identities and nationalist sociality (for instance, Clemens 2020; Dromi 2016; Widger 2023; Zakariás and Feischmidt 2020). One core area of interest here is how moral and political ties, and collective imaginaries constructed through acts of aid, become articulated with greater collective horizons, for instance humanity or the nation. By constructing a functional comparison between Ukrainian military volonterstvo and humanitarian work, and by contrasting the politics of the nation with the politics of humanity, I examine these terms as distinct, coexisting forms of collective organisation for enacting social solidarity.[5] The war in Ukraine demonstrates that the same organisational arrangements that elsewhere are put in service of situated universalisms or political kinship (Dunn and Kaliszewska 2023; Dzenovska 2022), here become vehicles for imagining and performing the nation as a collective horizon of social rights and obligations.

After first setting the scene by describing the people's economy of war in Ukraine, I then examine how military crowdfunders harness both compassion for fellow nationals in need and hostility to enemies towards a practice of solidarity that affirms the national community and its boundaries. Unlike international humanitarianism, which gestures to a universal humanity that supposedly transcends most forms of enmity, war voluntarism in Ukraine is oriented to a less general community: a polity threatened by an enemy, in which appeals to mutual aid, enmity and even humanity can define national belonging. This paves the way for a discussion, in the chapter's two concluding sections, of how membership in communities of solidarity becomes hierarchised through the unequal recognition of human needs, as in international humanitarianism (Fassin 2010, 254), or through the ranking of contributions to national defence, as in military crowdfunding. While in humanitarianism these emergent hierarchies privilege some people as more fully human than others (Feldman and Ticktin 2010), in Ukrainian volonterstvo they define the military who sacrifice for the nation as leading citizens, and they place their supporters just below them on the ladder of civic worth (Strelnyk and Phillips 2025; compare Clemens 2020, 6). By co-constructing these hierarchies, even volunteers who otherwise oppose the state and its centralised bureaucracies participate in enabling new forms of the political coercion that the state relies upon at war.

A people's economy of war

When I began my research in October of 2021, the volunteers I met joked that I was five years too late. Amidst a protracted economic crisis and the incorporation of militias into the regular armed forces, Ukraine's volunteer movement had subsided after 2015. Although many volunteers may have seen themselves as working in opposition to an absent, dysfunctional state, some cultivated ties with state institutions, joined executive bodies or were elected into local authorities or the national parliament. The cooperation that had characterised the early years of the war in Donbas institutionalised a new genre of relating to the needs of fellow citizens.[6] It introduced thousands of people to organisational repertoires of bottom-up organising for the public good and popularised an understanding of self-reliant 'active citizenship' amongst the middle class in Ukraine. It also created densely interconnected civic networks linking veterans' groups with political parties, Western-funded NGOs and state institutions.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 galvanised these networks and radically expanded the circle of people and organisations involved in voluntarism. It pushed many peer groups, workplace networks and political organisations previously uninvolved in volunteer work to reorient towards it, and it led local officials and public employees like teachers and museum workers to start using their premises and connections to raise and deliver aid (Vonnak et al. 2025). The size of the defence forces tripled to over a million, the front line was extended and the fighting intensified, and more than 10 million people were displaced in the immediate aftermath of the invasion (UNHCR 2022). As a result, more people and organisations than ever before became involved in aid networks, while the number, density and size of these networks increased, and more money and supplies than ever before flowed through them.

In 2022 and 2023, Ukraine's three largest military crowdfunding organisations – the state-run United24, and two independent groups, Come Back Alive and the Serhii Prytula Foundation – raised over 53 billion hryvnia (almost 1.7 billion US dollars) in monetary donations. Thousands of smaller organisations, for which there are no centralised statistics, likely channelled as much or more, not even counting the worth of donated goods and labour. Between the beginning of the invasion and the end of 2023, the number of registered charitable organisations in Ukraine increased by 74 per cent, while the number of nonprofits overall grew by only 1 per cent (Opendatabot 2023b). Much of the giving has remained informal. Some is not monetised, and monetary measures privilege middle-class activists over the less well-off. That being said, one way to visualise the extent of civic involvement in crowdfunding is to track the uptake of a banking instrument frequently used in volunteering. By early summer of 2023, nearly 40,000 people had created 'saving jars' – virtual accounts open for public contributions – through

Monobank, which is just one of the Ukrainian banks providing this service (Opendatabot 2023a). According to Monobank's chief executive, the bank's saving jars received 11 billion hryvnia (about 300 million US dollars) for the Ukrainian military in 2022 (Kravets 2023). By summer of 2023, there was roughly one Monobank saving jar for every 20 individuals serving in Ukraine's defence forces, each drawing contributions from an average of 70 different bank accounts. The frequency of these transactions has surged by a factor of 20 since the invasion, reaching 3.1 million contributions per month in 2023. Banks offering this service adapted it for the needs of crowdfunders, which in turn enabled new ways of organising fundraisers. All of this indicates a considerable level of direct involvement in funding the war effort, bypassing state-coordinated instruments such as taxation and domestic borrowing (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025).

The invasion was a profound economic shock to the Ukrainian government, making it increasingly dependent – economically and politically – on Western aid, and forcing it to intensify efforts to mobilise domestic revenue in order to make up for the shortfalls and irregularity of Western aid, grants and loans (see Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). By the end of 2023, Ukraine's GDP was 30 per cent lower than before the invasion, while the government was spending 11 times more on defence than in 2021 – the equivalent of 68 billion US dollars, or 38 per cent of the GDP (Myronenko and Repko 2024, 5). Yet even this dramatic increase in spending could not address the vast military and civilian needs, so military and humanitarian networks continued to rely on direct deliveries of crowdfunded aid. The Ukrainian state took notice and expanded a pre-existing scheme for voluntary donations to the government into a branded crowdfunding initiative, United24, which by the end of 2023 emerged as the leader in donations received amongst similar organisations. Led by state officials, the initiative draws on the ideological and organisational repertoires of volonterstvo, and it operates as a platform for procuring strike drones, sponsoring development of new military technology, and paying for school and hospital reconstruction and de-mining.

All this points to an important aspect of the wartime mobilisation of Ukrainian society: namely, while the state mobilised troops for the violent labour of war, civilian networks rallied to produce the conditions necessary for this front-line labour. With this, a kind of people's economy of war emerged, complementing the state's effort to fund the war under profound military and financial dependence on the West (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). The concept of war economy draws attention to how political economies are reorganised to provide and pay for war (De Waal 2024). Arguing that the US should organise a war economy to respond to the challenges introduced by the 9/11 attacks, James K. Galbraith (2001, 5) wrote that 'in war economy, the public obligation is to do *what is necessary*: to support the military effort, to protect and defend the home territory, and especially to maintain the physical wellbeing, solidarity, and morale of the people.' Galbraith's articulation of the imperial raison d'état reveals the general role of morality in the construction of war economies (Geyer and Tooze 2015, 417). Moral considerations inform how political obligations and the public good are understood; how images of war as just or unjust are constructed; how violence is construed and limited; and how circumstances of legitimate killing and categories of people who can be killed, or should be protected, are designated (Di Cosmo et al. 2021, 6, based on Fassin 2021, 31–2).

Central to these considerations is the question of who should be contributing to the war effort and how, and how the economic, political and moral worth of such contributions should be reckoned and compared. As military crowdfunders took part in the bottom-up construction of Ukraine's war economy, they institutionalised the practice of volunteering and expanded it conceptually. The relational protocol of donations and aid brokerage became widely available to Ukrainians, and it became a new way of establishing and understanding social relations that traverses various domains. It has affected how people in the orbit of war cooperate, how they understand public accountability and what they think they can gain from being seen as helping. The spread of crowdfunding in Ukraine has thus enabled new ways of conducting politics, making a living, pursuing public goods, acquiring social recognition and pursuing moral regard, which as such may have little to do with humanitarianism or supporting the military. It has also created new forms of civic exclusion, and has given citizens tools with which to establish and contest hierarchies of civic worth. As a result, the people's economy of war has become a site of state-making and nation-building.

The logic of compassion

In October of 2021, against the backdrop of Russia massing its forces on Ukraine's borders, I arrived in Kyiv to study the networks that had been the backbone of military crowdfunding in the war in Donbas. I pulled some strings amongst journalists I knew, and soon found myself sitting in front of a robustly built man, some years my senior, dressed in the unmistakable 'casual style' of a veteran football ultra: a branded hoodie, puffer vest, jeans. Pavlo[7] was renowned amongst Kyiv's civil society, as well as amongst street activists across the political spectrum.

Earlier that year, he had been one of a group orchestrating a violent protest in Kyiv demanding that President Volodymyr Zelenskyi release Serhii Sternenko from detention. Sternenko, a right-wing activist from Odesa, was on trial for abducting and torturing a pro-Russian politician, and separately for homicide in an alleged case of self-defence. During the protest, the large doors of the Presidential Office Building were set ablaze. Sternenko was later released.

But when not mobilising street 'actions', or touring Europe to follow the national football team's games, Pavlo had a modestly successful career in digital marketing. It was with his business partners, he told me, that in the spring of 2014 he began helping troops from Crimea who had fled to Kyiv after refusing to defect to Russia, as most of those stationed on the peninsula had done. The group 'helped them, rented them apartments, bought food'.

Soon, the protests in Donbas against the post-Maidan regime change paved the way for a separatist revolt, and many of Pavlo's acquaintances from football hooligan circles were drafted into the military or joined up voluntarily. 'They began saying', Pavlo recalled, 'that they needed boots, uniforms, and so we put money together [*skyduvalys'*] amongst acquaintances.' Hostilities intensified. Ukrainian and separatist forces became entrenched. The needs that Pavlo was compelled to meet grew steadily. 'We could buy one night-vision device – that's 2,000 dollars – out of our own pocket; but then there wasn't much money left.' He posted a call for donations on his Facebook page and began reporting what exactly he had bought and who he had given it to. This way, his Facebook audience – increasingly not just his acquaintances, but anonymous followers – could partake in aiding the military. In mid-May 2014, Pavlo travelled east to the area of the 'anti-terror operation', as the Ukrainian government called it, for the first time:

> It was a sorry picture. The training, morale, supplies – all of it was poor. They [the military] looked like a ragtag bunch, like some Makhno-style group,[8] a gathering of homeless people. It was scary. By mid-June, I realised my apartment had turned into a sort of military storage, with uniforms, tactical vests, boots – just everything. I thought, 'I need to connect with someone, maybe organise a warehouse or something.'

Over the next year and a half, before he stepped away from volunteering, Pavlo would go on to collect some 1.5 million dollars in donations into his private bank account, not counting cash donations. He joined a newly formed aid group, People's Supplies, led by an entrepreneur from an older generation, where he quickly assumed one of the leading roles. This made Pavlo one of the most prominent volunteers in Kyiv.

The trajectory that brought him to People's Supplies, and the way he described his actions, reflected broader patterns. Similarly to many other successful volunteers, Pavlo's education, middle-class background, business skills and broad circle of connections gave him an advantage, which was further solidified through his expanding network of acquaintances within the post-Revolutionary state. Self-organised crowdfunding networks were spreading through all levels of society, but they were often coordinated by entrepreneurs and people of professional standing with resources, time and connections (Stepaniuk 2022, 4–7). Like many of those whom the political scientist Natalia Stepaniuk interviewed in the late 2010s, or those whom my own research group interviewed in 2023 and 2024, Pavlo first got started by helping his friends and acquaintances. Solidarity and compassion initially went towards pre-existing sympathy and relations, but quickly extended to a broader circle of recipients. The logic of personalised compassion for individual acquaintances in the military was gradually supplanted with a more general sense of helping the nation: giving in return for soldiers' sacrifices.

Pavlo's emphasis on the troops' sheer lack of supplies echoed a sentiment that had been common throughout early military volonterstvo in 2014, which arose again after February 2022. In dozens of interviews about aiding the military, both at the start of the war in Donbas, and again after Russia's full-scale invasion, my interlocutors repeated essentially identical accounts of feeling compelled to help upon witnessing the privation of fellow citizens who had taken up arms in the act of national defence.[9] These accounts described the dire conditions in which the Ukrainian Armed Forces found themselves at the beginning of the war, after more than two decades of post-Cold War cuts. In 1991, newly independent Ukraine had been one of the most militarised countries in Europe. It had inherited a stockpile of Soviet nuclear weapons, around 40 per cent of the Soviet Armed Forces and approximately 30 per cent of the Soviet defence industry. But between 1990 and 1999, Ukraine's GDP fell by some 60 per cent. The state could no longer afford a military of this size. Army personnel were dismissed; military assets were gradually decommissioned, mothballed or sold off to former Soviet Union allies in the Global South. Military expenditure, which had declined steadily since 1991, reached its nadir in 2013. When Ukraine gained independence, 750,000 soldiers were stationed on Ukrainian territory; by 2014 the Ukrainian Armed Forces were reduced to '157,456 military personnel, including 119,166 soldiers' (Stepaniuk 2021, 132); according to the Ministry of Defence's own data, only 4 per cent of them 'had life-saving items, like helmets and bulletproof jackets' (134).

This military decline closely mirrored the overall trajectory of the dismantling of state capacity and the privatisation of public assets in Ukraine, which fuelled profound distrust of the state and its predatory elites (Gorbach 2024, 19–64). This set the stage for a dramatic surge in volunteer aid, and enabled the simple act of contributing money, goods or time to reshape the idea of citizenship in Ukraine in the years to come.

What place did the glaring, humiliating lack of supplies – a synecdoche for Ukraine's limited sovereignty – occupy in stories about military aid? The trope of 'naked and barefoot' [*holi-bosi*] troops, despite its exaggeration of soldiers' needs, suggests the answer. A middle-aged volunteer recalled the first month after the 2022 invasion, when he had first begun delivering aid. One day he visited a National Guard unit at a checkpoint on the outskirts of Kharkiv, a few kilometres from where Russian forces were positioned:

> They had nothing. They were sitting there, naked and in some kind of ditch they'd dug themselves, while their commander sat in a bunker [far away]. He was giving orders over the phone. I arrived and asked, 'What do you need?' – 'Bring us some food …' I asked, 'What, they don't feed you?' And they said, 'Feed us? A truck comes once every three days, maybe, or might not come at all.' … I asked, 'And what about your rations?' They said, 'The commander locked them up, said, "Get lost, the rations aren't for you."'[10]

The reader might be forgiven for imagining that Ukrainian soldiers faced their enemy barehanded and stark naked, which is far from the truth.[11] Comments like these problematise specific experiences of shortage, generalising them into a critique of the inefficiencies of military bureaucracies. Speaking in January of 2023, a recently mobilised soldier from Zakarpattia recalled his first deployment as a medic in a field hospital: 'We were naked and barefoot there, had no special stuff [only the basics]. They [a large charity] sent us six medical backpacks and boxes with supplies. Really expensive stuff, deficit stuff [that had been in short supply]. So that kept us going for a while.'[12]

In November 2021, Pavlo introduced me to Tetiana, a middle-aged woman who had been in charge of medical aid for People's Supplies. In summer of 2014, Tetiana, by her own account, left the comforts and certainties of Kyiv's upper-middle-class society to 'work day and night' in the organisation's warehouses, sorting medicines, bandages and blood coagulants into tactical aid kits, and helping to train Ukrainian military and militias to use them. Tetiana described how, once she had gotten involved in volunteering, it became difficult to tolerate the indifference or hostility to the military amongst her earlier social circles. She was in awe of those 'who had abandoned absolutely everything to defend this country and us', who for her were 'saints/sacred' (*sviati*) and 'absolute angels'. As state supplies improved and front-line needs were no longer so crude and basic, and as People's Supplies were forced to ration aid because of dwindling donations, Tetiana became more discerning, seeing that front-line society 'reflected the general population', meaning fewer saints and angels than she had originally assumed. She eventually came to agree with a friend of hers who, upon returning from the front line, once told her and her colleagues:

> Girls, imagine, guys [soldiers] sitting near the front, drinking moonshine. They are in their flip-flops. And here you come, you women volunteers [*volontershy*]. And they hide everything they have and run to you: 'Ah, we are naked! Ah!' And the girls immediately go: 'Oh, have you got no shoes? Are you naked and barefoot again?'

Tetiana impersonated her friend's mocking tone: 'Oh, our kittens, our little bunnies are hungry again!'[13] Her words recalled those of an infantryman mobilised at the start of Russia's invasion. The soldier described the effects of the 2022 reform of military salaries that increased soldiers' pay: 'It's not like everyone gets 3,000 euros … but neither is it that' – he continued in a mock feminine voice – 'like, our soldiers, our little sons, are starving, naked and barefoot.'[14]

This pithy, profoundly gendered satire of volunteer's care work pokes fun at the image of 'naked and barefoot' troops in need of assistance and care. But it also hints at the dominant role that compassion for fellow citizens plays in mediating national solidarity in times of war.[15] The 'naked and barefoot' trope constructs soldiers as suffering subjects in a manner reminiscent of humanitarianism's nineteenth-century origins in medical relief for the wounded on Europe's battlefields. I linger on this perception of dire need that is so common in volonterstvo because it helps to specify the tension in Ukraine between international humanitarianism and military aid from below. This 'spectacle of suffering', which Luc Boltanski (1999, 7–9) dissected in order to critique the politics of modern humanitarianism, raises the question: How does a witness to suffering respond to it? Working with Hannah Arendt's (2006) distinction between pity and solidarity, Boltanski develops the notion of the 'politics of pity'. He argues that humanitarianism is based on a particular response to this spectacle, one in which the benevolent observer, unrelated to and removed from the anonymous, distant sufferer, feels pity that compels a moral response to assist. This pity is not compassion, nor is it solidarity; no prior bonds, other than the most general one of humanity unite the fortunate observer and the unfortunate sufferer. The sufferer could be anyone; it is, as Elfriede Jelinek's protagonist in her 2003 monodrama *Bambiland* puts it, 'that child … the child, the universal child' (Jelinek 2007). Pity becomes political insofar as it provides the basis for an organised response to suffering. In the decade between Boltanski's *Distant Suffering* and Jelinek's *Bambiland*, this response (at least amongst Western audiences) was mediated by images of anonymous sufferers: that sufferer, the sufferer, the universal sufferer.

Ukrainian military volunteers know no universal sufferers.[16] Acknowledging a moral responsibility to relieve the suffering they witness, they do not generalise this responsibility in the same way that the modern humanitarianism critiqued by Boltanski does. This is not to say that the responsibility of volonterstvo is necessarily particular, contained to the bond of kinship or friendship. Rather, its moral circle is not humanity, but a different kind of generality: the community of fellow citizens. The sufferer and the witness are not distant; their plight is shared, and what connects them is not pity, but solidarity. This circle is broader than that of friends and family, whose needs bring so many into volunteering, yet it does not encompass just *anyone's* suffering. As in the Mediterranean systems of honour and vengeance that Boltanski describes, the bonds of such shared belonging rank the obligation to assist 'according to the status of the unfortunate' because 'unfortunates are first and foremost divided into friends and enemies towards whom charity is far from obligatory. In this instance, when confronted with the spectacle of [the enemy's] suffering the moral attitude is not necessarily governed by the requirement to end it' (Boltanski 1999, 10–11).

The logic of enmity

Pavlo was proud to have helped Ukrainian troops fight their enemy in Donbas. Amongst the things he had regularly shuttled from Kyiv to the front line in eastern Ukraine during his time with People's Supplies were small consumer quadcopter drones, then still a novelty. By the time we spoke with him in 2021, militarised drones had become ubiquitous. They were being used for reconnaissance and artillery spotting, or as improvised bombers modified with 'dropping mechanisms' (*skydy*) – devices secured onto drone frames in order to carry and drop small munitions made from retrofitted hand or rifle grenades. Pavlo told me he had 'seen so many of these videos where separatists [*siepary*] are being blown to pieces!' He was amongst the relatively few privileged spectators of enemy suffering at a time when such imagery was not yet used in fundraising campaigns. This would change after February 2022, when small drones carrying explosives became ubiquitous along Ukraine's expanded front line. Pavlo bears some responsibility for this. When Russian forces entered his suburb of Kyiv, he joined a military charity to run its logistics operations, and personally delivered hundreds, if not thousands, of drones to the front line.

It was not long before videos of enemy soldiers zigzagging through barren, burnt-out fields, trying to shake off drones that relentlessly followed them before dropping their lethal charges, became a staple of military fundraising campaigns in Ukraine.[17] These close studies in war violence, at times set to cheerful music, demonstrated the brutal effectiveness of aid and invited audiences to imagine themselves as part of the war economy: 'Your plus [your donation] is their minus', said the slogan of one large Ukrainian drone fundraising campaign in December 2023 (Back and Alive 2023). Taking on a menacing aerial perspective and sometimes zooming in on the faces of their victims, capturing their confusion or frightened efforts to escape before they are hit, these videos objectify enemy bodies as targets, as if toying with the ability to dehumanise them for online audiences. Capable of evoking compassion and pity, this spectacle of suffering is nevertheless intended as a spectacle of vengeance.

After his release from custody, Serhii Sternenko, the right-wing blogger and activist whom Pavlo had supported in 2021, began to mobilise his online followers to raise funds for First Person View (FPV) drones – cheap and fast racing drones that Ukrainian troops had begun to turn into vehicles for kamikaze munitions. Sternenko branded his drone series '*Rusoriz*' ('Slayer of Russians'), and shared videos and images from the drones as proof of his donors' effective contributions. One social media post from 1 September 2024 read: '+300 different FPVs thanks to your help today! Very good! In total, [we have bought] 96,131 FPVs' (Sternenko 2024). Here, one is again reminded of Boltanski's (1999, 11) analysis of the possibility that a spectator of the enemy's suffering might feel something other than pity or compassion: 'The spectator may satisfy his legitimate desire for vengeance by gazing on the unfortunate's suffering and rejoicing in it, as when defeated enemies are tortured or simply put on show.'

Enmity in this war, as perhaps in all wars, suggests an unequal valuation of enemy lives, and a denial to them of most forms of social solidarity. On the battlefield, the life of the enemy combatant is not valued as *life*, as something that, from a peaceful humanist perspective, ought to be valuable in itself. Instead, enemy lives are refashioned into statistics demonstrating one's military success, or they are accumulated, if captured, for exchange. Speaking about Ukraine's incursion into the Kursk region of the Russian Federation in early August of 2024, President Zelenskyi said the Ukrainian forces 'ensure the replenishment of the exchange fund – they take the occupier prisoner and thus help to free our people from Russian captivity'(Zelenskyi 2024). These words rang through a Ukrainian military blogger's description of prisoner-of-war capture as 'a major humanitarian victory for Ukraine'(Tatarigami 2024).

It bears emphasising the obvious point that these de- and re-valuations of enemy lives are not absolute: like any social acts, they are context-specific. They draw strength from a discourse of dehumanisation in which Russians are 'orcs' and 'meat', but they also coexist with a discourse of humanity and humane treatment of prisoners of war. In either case, humanity emerges as a less politically capacious category than the nation. For one interlocutor, an artillery gunner, it was his own fear of death that made him sympathise with enemy soldiers who are 'humans [*liudy*] just like us'. Yet this realisation obviously did not lead to any realignment of his political solidarity; he continued to operate his howitzer. Another interlocutor bristled at the 'bloodthirsty' remarks of the war's online spectators, saying that they were little different from Russians. Other commentators, including officials, have made reference to Ukraine's adherence to international humanitarian law as an opportunity to distinguish itself from Russia (Tyshchenko 2024). Devoid of any aspirations to universality, these commentators did not need to make their enemies into the 'universal enemy' (Li 2020) or the 'outlaws of humanity' (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 12–13; compare Schmitt 2007). Instead, they grafted humanity onto nationhood, making an allegiance to humanity a vehicle of national distinction (Zakariás and Feischmidt 2020).

Enmity operates alongside compassion as a logic of aid and, like compassion, it enacts national solidarity. In contrast to volunteers who justified fundraising by the suffering of ‘naked and barefoot’ soldiers, Sternenko did so by referring to the need to destroy the enemy. The logic of compassion and the logic of enmity are entwined. Much of the humanitarian crowdsourced aid in Ukraine operates within a moral community of ‘us’ framed by a shifting friend-enemy distinction that has increasingly become the basis for redefinitions of the Ukrainian nation since 2014 (compare Stepaniuk 2021). It is this belonging to the national community, as Tetiana hinted in her remark on the ‘sacred’ status of soldiers, that frames the obligation to assist – both to alleviate soldiers’ suffering and save their lives, and to help them be better at their violent work. Even though notions of humanity do appear in volunteers’ descriptions of their aid or in their occasional expressions of pity at the plight of enemy soldiers, their charitable acts are committed not in the name of humanity, but in the name of a less transcendent, less universal generality: the community of the nation imagined in relation to the figure of the enemy. And volunteers’ gifts are not only limited to recipients who are *not* enemies. They are specifically targeted *against* the enemy, as for instance the plastic bomblet casings 3D-printed in a school workshop run by a teacher my colleagues interviewed. The tragedy of war – that for as long as violence goes on, some lives can only be saved by destroying others, perpetuating the violence – is rarely lost on these people.

Like wartime nationalism, humanitarianism, too, has its own constituent others as un-human figures: the animal, the technological, the inhumane (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 19–23). Alongside these, too, are the ‘enemies of humanity’: torturers, executors of genocides, jihadists imagined by proponents of the US-led Global War on Terror (Li 2020). Whether through the image of ‘totalitarians’ before 1991 or ‘terrorists’ after 9/11, American publics have imagined ‘enemies of freedom’ – enemies of the US-led liberal empire – as subjects without freedom. That is to say, as ‘human automata’ devoid of autonomy, brainwashed or otherwise incapable of the basic faculty that makes an American human: free thought and free choice (Selisker 2016). Defined through its various breaches, humanity is ‘less about a claim to global connection (though it is that also) and more about the identification of universal threats’ (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 5). More concretely, enmity on the battlefield is negatively constitutive of the politics of humanitarianism and humanitarian law. In Didier Fassin’s words, international humanitarian actors ‘presuppose the equivalence of lives against armies which attribute lesser value to others’ (2010, 255). For them, enmity can – must? – be transcended in the name of universal humanity.

Liberal humanitarianism may aspire to rising above the fray of hostilities and resolving particular differences into the unity of universal humanity. By contrast, for Ukrainian combatants and civilians swimming the affective wave of national solidarity, aid that saves some lives by helping to take others is an acceptable response in the face of an existential threat from the enemy. As two distinct forms of assistance to others in need, humanitarianism and wartime military volonterstvo differ in the universality of their solidarity, in their collective horizons, and in the figures of exclusion and enmity that constrain these horizons. And yet, as forms of aid that enact distinct patterns of collective solidarity, they evidently draw on similar organisational repertoires and innovations, and they exist in the same universe of moral and political possibilities.

Martial citizenship and hierarchies of belonging

Directed by the logics of compassion and enmity, volunteer aid creates ties of solidarity between the helpers and the helped, and it articulates these ties with the political community of the nation in arms. In this way, the acts of giving and receiving aid in the people’s economy of war also become a terrain on which the meanings of national solidarity are contested and transformed, and where new hierarchies of belonging emerge (compare Stepaniuk 2021; Strelnyk and Phillips 2025). This is most visible in the ways that aid donors, brokers and recipients compare different acts of giving. Ranking contributors to the war effort as relatively worthy citizens, they also create new figures of exclusion that, like the figure of the enemy, mark the boundaries of the wartime nation.

Rereading transcripts of interviews with volunteers, I was struck by how pervasive the tropes of togetherness were in their descriptions of their work. *Vlytys’*, *doluchytys’*, *pryiednatysia*, *obiednatysia*: flattened into the English ‘join in’, these were some of the verbs they used to describe joint action producing solidary unity. The verbs suggest streams flowing into a stronger current, elements joining a larger body or multiple parts uniting into one. The images of part and totality are echoed in descriptions of the act of donation. One volunteer said: ‘I donated to a mass crowdfunding campaign for sea strike drones; it was fun to see videos where something is exploding, and you can say, “Oh cool, we gave money [*donatyly*] for this!”’[18] Another volunteer described an auction in which a bottle of liquor (distilled by soldiers from sour cherries gathered in the village of Klishchiivka[19]) was bid off in exchange for donations to help the wounded. Like the videos showing the effects of one’s donation, tokens received in recognition of donations – the bottle of cherry liquor, painted artillery shell casings (Figure 2.1), personalised messages to the enemy inscribed on munitions, insignia and personal objects taken off Russian troops – instantiate donors’ authentic connection with the war. In one volunteer’s words, all of this makes it easier for donors to ‘feel part of something larger’.[20] In a basic sense, Ukrainian civilians’ donations of money, food, time and labour contribute to the reproduction of soldiers’ labour, sustaining their capacity to wield violence as well as helping them survive.

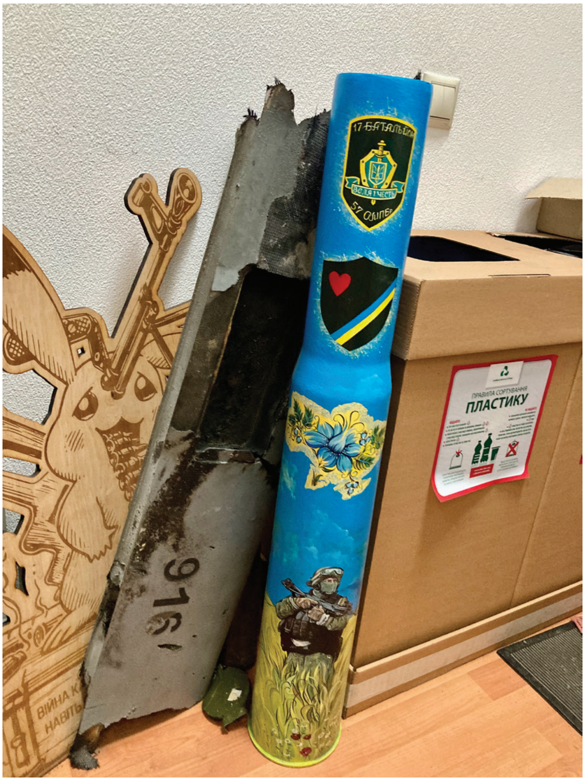

Figure 2.1 A painted artillery shell casing from the 17th Battalion of the 57th Separate Motorised Infantry Brigade of the Armed Forces of Ukraine, at the Come Back Alive office. *Source*: © Taras Fedirko 2022.

Whether motivated by compassion, enmity, or some other relational logic, voluntary giving thus enacts national solidarity, allowing participants in aid chains not only to imagine the nation, but also to perform it (Clemens 2020, 3–12) in ways that map onto other, more formal ways of articulating mutual obligations in wartime. Upon declaring a state of war, the Ukrainian government introduced mass mobilisation of male citizens. As in other states at war, the compulsory military draft radically increased the legal obligations of male citizens to the state. At the same time, in order to discourage resistance, the state began to limit the rights of conscriptable citizens (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025). Drawing on the symbolic repertoire of the war in Donbas, both state-led and bottom-up civic attempts to mobilise recruits sought to strike a balance between citizens' willingness to sacrifice and their resistance to it. Rebalancing sacrifice with rewards (Levy 2012, 7), the state offered extended material benefits and symbolic protection to combatants and veterans, while gradually limiting the rights of men between the ages of 18 and 60. As fewer people volunteered for service, in late 2023 and 2024 the government turned to coercive mobilisation, which may have contributed to delegitimising the war effort in the eyes of the public (see Artiukh and Fedirko 2025), and effectively established a substantive hierarchy of male citizenship, at the top of which were active duty soldiers and veterans who could enjoy symbolic full citizenship (Strelnyk and Phillips 2025).[21] Volunteers then joined the official efforts by articulating a martial hierarchy of civic worth that allowed them to continue to mobilise for the defence of the *nation* while also expressing some critiques of the *state*.

Mapping contributions to the people's economy of war onto ‘something larger’, volunteers we interviewed often insisted that not doing anything for national defence was impermissible because it was tantamount to denial of national solidarity. They emphasised the subordinate character of their own contributions in relation to military service and sacrifice. In this new ladder of civic worth, the epithet ‘sacred’ was strictly reserved for those recognised as giving up their lives so that their nation could live on: ‘No one must ever humiliate [*prynyzhuvaty*, with strong connotations of lowering in a hierarchy] veterans’, said Ukraine's Minister of the Interior, commenting on a private conflict in which a war veteran had been beaten up and forced to apologise to his assailants (Pogorilov 2024).

With their status as men and citizens increasingly defined by their martial obligation to the state, some male volunteers and donors offered unprompted justifications in our interviews for why they had not yet signed up, fending off their own suspicions that they could be seen as draft dodgers. Others acknowledged discomfort with not serving themselves, but said that they could be more useful in the rear. Artur, a volunteer and street activist famous in his city for publicised, spectacular violence against those who ‘offend’ the Ukrainian Armed Forces, weighed his uselessness as a combatant against his utility as a volunteer. He told us that a disability exempted him from military service, and that, had he enlisted, it would have made him a burden, someone in need of care and aid. As things stood, he could at least be useful by helping the front line in other ways – yet he could not completely dispel his doubts, acting out his place in the new hierarchy of citizenship during the interview. ‘I get depressive, I think it happens to everyone’, Artur confided to my colleague. ‘Like, [you feel] disappointment, a sense of inferiority [*menshvartosti*], deficiency [*nepovnotsinnosti*], that you’re not enough, or something like that … Well, probably, anyone with a sense of responsibility feels this.’[22] He knew that the cars and drones he brought for his friends could never be equivalent to his friends’ lives that were at stake.

Artur felt on himself the dejecting pull of symbolic devaluation that he sought to enforce on other noncombatants when he publicly humiliated those he found disrespectful to the armed forces. In turn, this performative lowering, and his claim to belong to an official category that deserves exemption from service, allowed him to justify why he was not on the front line – a lesser citizen, but alive.[23] He embodied and enforced the contradictions of the new wartime hierarchy of civic worth.

Initially elaborated only within the military and the volunteer movement, this hierarchy became a resource for the state in justifying coercive and extralegal draft measures. In his New Year’s address on 31 December 2023, President Zelenskyi (2023) said:

> I want to thank all our people, our strong nation (*narod*). Everyone who is *here* today. Everyone whom I want to tell: I am proud of all of you. Every Ukrainian citizen … Everyone who has put their lives on hold. Who postponed everything for after the victory. Everyone who says: ‘I am working, and this is not a feat, but a duty. I am donating, and this is not a feat, but a norm.’ Everyone who works and fights every day because they know that wars do not end by themselves – they are ended … And to this end [of victory], today we have to live by the rule: you either work or you fight … Because I know that one day I will have to ask myself: who am I? To make a choice about who I want to be. A victim or a winner? A refugee or a citizen?

Articulating this new norm of citizenship – fighting, donating and working – Zelenskyi stated that membership in the Ukrainian political nation was not only unequal, but also conditional on contributions to national defence. The figure of the draft evader, or of the refugee, could thus be summoned to mark the bottom of the new hierarchy of civic worth and belonging.

Echoed in numerous interviews we collected, Zelenskyi's reconfiguration of citizenship highlighted the performative and pragmatic basis of Ukraine's nationalism, in which, in a circular manner, the nation is enacted through its members' performed solidarity with the collective cause, which in turn justified their inclusion into the nation.[24] One infantryman voiced a widespread sentiment that exemplifies this new form of exclusion from the community of national solidarity:

> As a military serviceman who for two years had worked for the military for free [as a volunteer], and now works for the military in the military, I have no moral qualms, no empathy, if tomorrow the streets of Ukrainian cities become full of cars with draft officers who will hunt for men in the streets. If by the third year of the war these people have done nothing to start working for the war [*pratsiuvaty na viinu*], it is time to choose for them.[25]

The growing acceptance of *symbolic* exclusion from full citizenship of men who did not 'work for the war' ultimately supported official efforts to redefine *formal* access to rights for these men. In April 2024, a new mobilisation law increased state powers to punish draft evaders, limited the rights of male adult Ukrainians abroad, and extended officials' access to personal data. This was accompanied by an increase in extralegal coercion and human rights violations towards adult male Ukrainians by military draft officials (O'Flaherty 2025, 20–1), as well as the application of legal sanctions against draft evaders, which had previously been rarely used (Artiukh and Fedirko 2025).

Conclusions

By appealing to collective horizons – in some cases, humanity, in others, the nation – acts of aid to people in need articulate personal moral projects and interpersonal ties with broader social collectives, and they have the power to transform these collectives' symbolic boundaries and hierarchies. This chapter has explored how this happens in military crowdfunding networks in wartime Ukraine. I have demonstrated how, in the context of the provision of military aid ‘from below’ to Ukrainian troops, the exercise of care and compassion becomes a foil for the exercise of violence in the name of national sovereignty (Steinmüller 2022). By transforming the ways in which people understand, practise or deny national solidarity, wartime voluntarism has harnessed civic action from below in the service of a state-led project of obligatory, top-down military and economic mobilisation. This helps us understand how, despite claims of distributed self-organisation, Ukrainian military crowdfunders co-construct state power, both by supplementing its resources and by expanding the repertoires and hierarchies of Ukrainian nationalism that state officials draw on to legitimate state power.

Hannah Arendt (2006) argued that the French revolutionaries’ perversion of compassion to the poor, which turned sufferers into less than full citizens and corroded their humanity, was the root of the revolution’s descent into the Reign of Terror. For Arendt, deliberate solidarity with the downtrodden provided an alternative to pity. By contrast, Ukrainian crowdfunders’ military aid turns compassion into a vehicle of national solidarity because it articulates aid as a gift in return within a system of generalised national reciprocity (compare Clemens 2020, 14 and 271). But rather than creating hierarchies of worth in which the givers of aid are above its recipients, as Arendt describes in the case of French revolutionaries, this wartime voluntarism contributes to creating hierarchies in which the troops – the recipients of aid – are leading citizens because of their sacrifice for the nation, while volunteers – the givers of aid – are subordinate to them.

In this way, while pioneering forms of civic relatedness and solidarity, the volunteer movement has also helped create a new figure of civic exclusion functionally analogous to the figure of the enemy. If the enemy marks the external boundary of national solidarity, the men who ‘neither work nor fight’, those who do not ‘work for the war’, have come to symbolise the Ukrainian nation’s internal boundary. Seen as failing in their solidarity, these less-than-citizens have become the new constituent other against whom a nation of soldiers and volunteers can imagine themselves.[26]

Notes

1 Donbas is the name of a historical region in eastern Ukraine; in line with established practice, I use it here to refer to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions (*oblasti*). For an overview of the events in Donbas in spring and summer of 2014, see Arel and Driscoll (2023).

2 Recognising that each term has its distinct shades of meaning, I choose to employ crowdfunding, crowdsourcing, *volonterstvo*, volunteering and voluntarism as synonyms for the aid practices I describe. In English, volunteering has broader connotations than what it has come to mean in Ukraine over the last decade. It is telling that the broad notion of voluntary participation in civic activities should become so narrowly associated as to be primarily defined as aid to combatants and victims of Ukraine's conflicts.

3 Short sections here and below draw on Fedirko (2023).

4 Empirically, this chapter builds on my field research with former militia members and crowdfunding activists in Kyiv from October 2021 through February 2022. It also draws on an archive of some 180 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with combatants, volunteers, aid donors and state officials, which were conducted by members of a research group I led within the Mapping Actors and Networks in Ukraine project (MANU). The interviews were conducted online and in person, in relatively safe locations in Ukraine after December of 2022. All quotations from the archive are author's translation from the original Ukrainian or Russian. At the time of revising this chapter (March 2025), the project is still ongoing and, for security reasons, I do not identify the individuals involved. This reflects their own preferences.

5 Although it is not my aim in this chapter, in principle such an approach allows us to compare different ways of raising and channelling resources for the benefit of others – for instance, state welfare, tax breaks, corporate philanthropy, international humanitarianism, or religious charity – across various contexts. These can be explored in terms of the organisational forms they rely on, their interactive foundations and collective horizons of solidarity, or the divisions and exclusions that structure solidary communities.

6 It was new for Ukraine, but had contemporary and historical parallels elsewhere.

7 All names are pseudonyms. Unless noted otherwise, organisations have also been pseudonymised.

8 Nestor Makhno was a leader and field commander of anarchists in the Ukrainian Civil War of 1918–1921, operating in what is today southeastern Ukraine.

9 See Pozniak-Khomenko (2020) for a collection of officially sanctioned oral history accounts that include descriptions of soldiers' needs unmet by the state; and Stepaniuk (2021, 134–6) for a resonant scholarly analysis. Oushakine (2009, 134–5) describes similar accounts in Altai, Russia during the second Chechen War in the early 2000s.

10 MANU archive, interview MY26V.

11 Ukrainian troops are typically issued boots and uniforms, some medical supplies, and arms (typically a variant of the Kalashnikov assault rifle). Supply problems early in the war sometimes meant that uniforms and boots were ill-fitting, medical supplies outdated, and protective equipment missing. The situation had significantly improved by 2022, but then the tripling of the size of defence forces again necessitated civilian aid to make up for deficient supplies.

12 MANU archive, interview JV1M.

13 The cute diminutive pet names point to the register of sympathetic intimacy and care in which volunteers often speak of the soldiers whom they help.

14 MANU archive, interview MY29M.

15 See Clemens (2020, 49–72) for a comparable case in the United States Civil War.

16 The same cannot be said of international crowdfunding campaigns for aid to Ukrainian civilians and combatants, which present their aid recipients as universal subjects of freedom and resistance. Thus, the international campaigns led from within Ukraine, such as United24, make universal appeals to compassion. I am grateful to Till Mostowlansky for pointing this out.

17 Russian troops also began to modify drones, and similar videos circulate in Russian crowdfunding campaigns.

18 MANU archive, interview MY53S.

19 Klishchiivka is a village near Bakhmut in the Donetsk region, close to the front line.

20 MANU archive, interview OG21V.

21 The mobilisation and the war have also led to transformations in women's rights and notions of female citizenship; see Strelnyk and Phillips (2025).

22 MANU archive, interview MY55V.

23 Artur was shot dead in a targeted assassination in his city in early 2025 as I edited these sentences.

24 This was observed earlier by Zhuravlev and Ishchenko (2020) amongst pro-Maidan activists for whom Ukraine's post-2014 civic nation was rooted in its members' commitment to the event of the revolution.

25 MANU archive, interview MY86M.

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Part II

Shifting ground

3

Goat humanity: housing and Islamic aid in small-town Kyrgyzstan

Till Mostowlansky and Mukaram Toktogulova

The afternoon sun had heated the tin roof of the small mosque at the fringes of Gülchö, a town in the Alai mountains of southern Kyrgyzstan (see Figure 3.1). Even in the shade of the porch, the air felt hot and dry. Feeling drugged with fatigue, we listened to Akylbek, the mosque's imam, as he showed us pictures of a horse he had recently obtained which, according to him, perfectly fit the Prophet Muhammad's equine ideal. Then the imam began talking about 'good deeds with spiritual merits' (*soopchuluk*), pulling us out of our heat-induced sluggishness. He stated, 'When my [former] classmates mentioned that they wanted to build a house for those in need (*muktazhdar*) I said, "If you build a house, I will give you the land."' Then Akylbek told us how, every Friday in the mosque, he encourages young people to perform soopchuluk. As a result, he explained, they would all now 'compete in good deeds' (*zhakshylykta zharyshuu*).

What Akylbek described to us during this conversation in the summer of 2023 is one variant of the multiple 'moral economies' (Fassin 2009) that have mushroomed all over Kyrgyzstan over the course of the past two decades. These moral economies have arisen from the radical transformation of economic aspects of life in Kyrgyzstan, and from an ensuant reconfiguration of moral ideas (Fassin 2020). Rather than describing a fixed constellation of economic and moral interactions, the concept of moral economy points to the importance of looking at the exchange of goods and values simultaneously. From this perspective, economy is informed by ideas of the good, by remembered pasts and desired futures, while morality is subject to the availability of material, political and social resources.

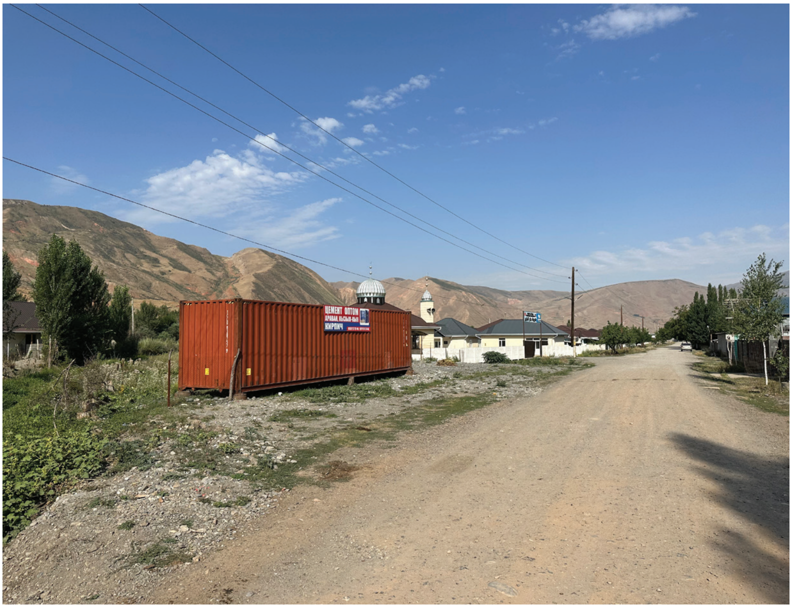

Figure 3.1 At the edge of Gülchö, Kyrgyzstan. *Source*: © Till Mostowlansky 2023.

Since Kyrgyzstan gained independence in the 1990s, a vast array of development and humanitarian organisations have installed themselves in the country. More recently, new forms of wealth and social organisation have reshuffled debates around aid, solidarity and the common good. These processes have been embedded in much broader debates over what constitutes a good person (*yimanduu kishi*), who is in need of help (*muktazh*), and what modes of solidarity (*ynytmak*) are appropriate in a given context. Having explored questions such as these in depth, anthropologists of humanitarianism have directed sophisticated critiques towards Western-led humanitarian institutions (for example, Fassin 2011; Feldman 2018; Ticktin 2011). These studies have revealed the complex genealogies of morality, colonial histories and contemporary modes of domination which Western-led organisations foster globally.

Meanwhile, an emerging strand of literature focusing on the Global South, formerly socialist societies, and migration from south to north has emphasised the importance of local, vernacular, everyday and solidarian forms of aid (for example, Brković 2015; Capotescu 2021; Richey 2018; Rozakou 2016; Spade 2020). These two different approaches – exploring, respectively, transnational and 'small-scale' (Brković 2023) humanitarian action – have largely worked with predefined scales of analysis. ‘Small’ has thereby denoted grassroots initiatives emerging from below, while ‘global’ Western-led humanitarian institutions appear to be working from above. In this implicit juxtaposition, the concept of scale is static and remains under-theorised.

Yet, as theoretical literature in the social sciences amply shows, scales are not prefabricated containers of analysis (see for example, Castells 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 2003; Herod 2011; Tsing 2000). In describing sizes, layers and hierarchies, scales are products of social interactions, emerging from encounters between interlocutors as well as between researchers and interlocutors. They are relational, and subject to different spatial framings of the world in various contexts (Mostowlansky 2019; Xiang 2013). Thus, in this chapter we pose the question of how to analyse humanitarian endeavours that are situated on multiple scales and that tap into multiple moral genealogies simultaneously. How do these organisations and initiatives alter the politics of aid when they inhabit the same social spaces? And when they compete over the same resources, what are the scales across which they operate – national, ethnic, kin-based, geographic, religious or otherwise?

In recent years, a growing body of literature on ‘doing good’ in Islam has brought forth a wealth of new insights into humanitarianism (for example, Barzegar 2019; Benthall 2016; Derbal 2022; Iqbal 2019; Mostowlansky 2020; Moufteh and Barzegar 2022). Some authors have highlighted Islamic forms of charity that work through explicitly ‘non-humanitarian’ ethics and with a focus on ‘giving to God’ (Mittermaier 2019; Schaeublin 2023). Others have explored the role of neoliberalism, management, entrepreneurial endeavours and the institution of the NGO in shaping contemporary Islamic giving (for example, Osella and Osella 2009; Mostowlansky 2022; Rudnyckyj 2010; Taylor 2018; Widger and Osella 2021). Many of these studies suggest, at least tangentially, that equating Islamic forms of humanitarianism with small-scale humanitarianism from below belies the vast amounts of money, people and geopolitical power relations involved. At the same time, little is yet known about contestations between Muslim humanitarian initiatives that span across various nation-states and regions, work with diverging notions of being Islamic and employ a broad range of identities and allegiances.

In this chapter, we set out to explore these multiple dimensions of aid, which are never just Islamic, local, transnational, vernacular, universal, Southern, from above or from below. Focusing on a ‘social town’ (*sotsgorodok*) in Kyrgyzstan that is supported by a Kuwaiti foundation as well as by generations of ‘classmates’ (*klastashtar*) with charitable ambitions, we argue that humanitarianism is often all of that at the same time.

The chapter is structured across four sections. In the first, we introduce Kyrgyzstan as a site for investment by Islamic aid organisations. Looking back on changes in development and humanitarianism in Kyrgyzstan over the past decade, we demonstrate that political conditions have become increasingly favourable for institutions from the Gulf States. As-Safa is one example of such an organisation, which we analyse in detail. Operating as the charitable arm of a Kuwaiti business group, the foundation collects donations from across the Gulf States and directs them to what its management perceives as poorer, underprivileged areas of the Islamic world.

Building on this analysis, in the second section, we focus on As-Safa's activities in Gülchö and the aforementioned social town, a new gated neighbourhood recently built on Gülchö's outskirts. This social town has led to critical discussions in Gülchö and beyond. It has also encouraged counter-initiatives highlighting alternative approaches to solidarity, aid and Islam.

Focusing on one such initiative, the third section analyses the emergence of equestrian sports as charitable events, organised by classmates in and from Gülchö. Fostering new kin relations around a game played on horseback called *ulak*, these classmates provide a salient critique of As-Safa.

In the final section, we explore this critique in depth and argue that, rather than representing a local form of humanitarianism, ulak in fact offers a moral alternative to As-Safa whose ambitions are no less transnational.

The emergence of Islamic aid in the 'global protectorate'

Kyrgyzstan has long been described as a place in which a variety of global influences meet, a 'protectorate' that serves as a laboratory for international actors (Petric 2005). In the aftermath of the Cold War, these influences consisted of neoliberal policies and concepts of 'good governance'. International economic and political institutions considered Kyrgyzstan a 'model country' (Petric 2015, 159) that was worthy of Western aid. However, over the past decade this scene has changed. Western donors and organisations such as the UN, the Red Cross and Save the Children now share this economic and political laboratory with Chinese state institutions and corporations, as well as actors from the Gulf States.

Importantly, Kyrgyz citizens, too, have begun to mobilise resources and organisations that span a vast array of local NGOs, religious movements and social networks. In this context, Islamic concepts of charity, welfare and aid have taken various forms, from religious dues (*zakat*), to collections in mosque communities, to increasing collaboration with financially powerful transnational actors. Institutions that once fell outside the scope of development and humanitarianism in Kyrgyzstan – endeavours that appeared exotic and coming from below – now compete with Western institutions.

In the summer of 2023, Mostowlansky met with a representative of As-Safa,[1] an NGO from Kuwait that exemplifies the shift amongst humanitarian actors in Kyrgyzstan. As they sat in a neotraditional chain teahouse in the capital city Bishkek, the young man, still in his twenties, described his career with As-Safa, which has been active in Kyrgyzstan since 2015. He had worked with the Kyrgyz branch for much of this time, after having completed Arabic studies in Bishkek and a degree in Islamic studies at Al-Azhar in Egypt. As they sipped tea and ate salads, the young man recounted the organisation's history in the country.

When the founder of As-Safa, Muhammad Al-Shaya, a wealthy entrepreneur from Kuwait, travelled to Xinjiang for business prior to 2015, he encountered Chinese Kyrgyz who prompted his interest in Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyzstan was a poor country and in need of humanitarian assistance, they said. In just a few years, As-Safa, part of the charitable section of the Al-Shaya family's business group, became active throughout most regions of Kyrgyzstan. It is known particularly for its support of medical facilities, as well as its 11 social towns, in which As-Safa provides housing for widows and their children, as well as for other people assessed as being in need. Projects are administered from Bishkek and overseen from As-Safa's headquarters in Kuwait. Donors in Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates finance projects across various sectors, including medicine, agriculture, water management, housing, education, entrepreneurship and social services.

The political environment in which it has become possible for institutions from the Gulf to assert their presence in Kyrgyzstan is a recent one. Almazbek Atambaev's 2011 to 2017 term as president of Kyrgyzstan led to close collaboration with the Arab Coordination Group, consisting of organisations from the Gulf States and other Arab countries as well as the Islamic Development Bank (Arab Fund 2023). Atambaev's successor, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, in power from 2017 to 2020, intensified this collaboration. For instance, in 2018, he suggested the establishment of an Islamic academy that was to be funded by the United Arab Emirates' Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahayan Charitable Foundation (Shambetov 2019). Over the past few years, As-Safa has benefited from this changing political environment. In 2021, current Kyrgyz president Sadyr Japarov issued a 'Certificate of Honour' to As-Safa, which he handed over personally to As-Safa's founder (FOR 2021); the president then awarded him the 'Danaker Order' in 2024 (Kabar 2024).[2]

In light of these developments, the label 'global protectorate', which Boris Petric (2005) applied to Kyrgyzstan to describe the country's relationship with international organisations and donors, remains accurate. However, what appeared to be a largely Western-dominated setting two decades ago seems to have drastically transformed, which also has implications for debates around humanitarianism from below. Previously, transnational Islamic charity and Arab influence in Central Asia would have precisely fit the image of Muslim actors pushing back against Western domination from a subaltern position. Particularly during the grim years of the Global War on Terror during the decade following 2001, political elites in Kyrgyzstan were extremely wary of engaging in this dynamic publicly (Benthall 2016). Now, as a result of the receding of the War on Terror as well as the Gulf States' increasing geopolitical influence, charities from the Gulf are accepted and recognised in the highest spheres of political rule in Kyrgyzstan. By comparison, Western-funded humanitarian and development projects have faded into the background.

For analyses of humanitarianism from below, this raises crucial questions around visibility and scale. We argue that, in order to understand the role of Islamic aid organisations in concrete social settings, it is necessary to study their presence in the largely rural communities that they seek to serve. In the following section, we focus on Gülchö, the small town that we mentioned in the opening. We show how As-Safa competes with other humanitarian actors in the town, how As-Safa's projects have changed the local social fabric, and the extent to which different forms of humanitarianism move flexibly along the scales *from below* and *from above*.

Building a social town

In the summer of 2023, we walked the quiet streets of Gülchö, the administrative centre of the Alai district in southern Kyrgyzstan, with a population of around 21,500. Toktogulova had already been here the year before, and in the following summer we conducted fieldwork in the town together. Gülchö largely consists of one-storey houses with lush gardens. There is ample space in the town, and many families have built new houses. Large parts of Gülchö invoke spatial associations with suburban environments elsewhere; navigating between new constructions, almost everyone travels short distances in cars, which are afforded by relative new wealth.

The funds for these construction projects largely derive from the flourishing transport business that trade with neighbouring China has brought in recent years. At the time of our research in 2023, Western sanctions against Russia in response to the war in Ukraine had led to an even greater spike in imports from China to Kyrgyzstan. Trade along transit routes that had been developed to circumvent sanctions was thriving and profitable. Remittances sent from migrants in Russia also continued to play an important role in the region.

At the northern end of town, where the roads are unpaved and cows roam the streets, there is a neighbourhood that stands out. It is located on a walled stretch of land on which there are dozens of identical buildings, crammed side by side and each individually fenced. The town's entrance is framed by an archway, over which a large sign emblazoned with the flags of Kyrgyzstan and Kuwait and As-Safa's logo proclaims *Dar al-Khair* (Place of the Good) in Kyrgyz and Arabic (see Figure 3.2).

As-Safa completed the construction of this social town in 2021. It is one of 11 across Kyrgyzstan, with many more planned or under construction. The planned nature of this 'town' within the town of Gülchö is reflected in its spatial organisation, but also in its distinct aesthetics. Dar al-Khair consists of houses that are each subdivided into four living units. Each of these units is individually fenced off and comes with a small garden for vegetables (see Figure 3.3). On each house there is a sign with the name of its sponsor in the Gulf.

The demographics of the social town are remarkable, too. As Elmira, a representative of As-Safa, told us, the population of the social town was selected from different categories of people that the foundation defined as needy (*muktazhdar*). Half of the inhabitants are young widows with children, Elmira stated. The other half are large families and disabled persons. Many inhabitants come from all over the Alai district and moved to Gülchö because they had been selected for a unit in the social town. From the initial 145 applicants, sponsors organised by As-Safa selected 84 families. Those applicants then had to go through a lengthy screening process, in which they were interviewed

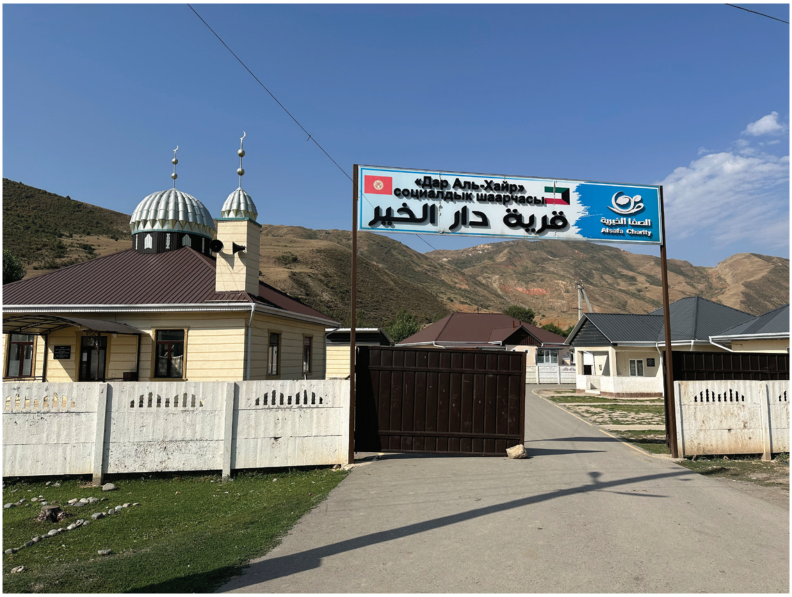
«Дар Аль-Хайр» социалдык шаарчасы
قرية دار الخير
الصفا الخيرية
Alsafa Charity

Figure 3.2 The entrance to As-Safa's social town in Gülchö. *Source*: © Till Mostowlansky 2023.

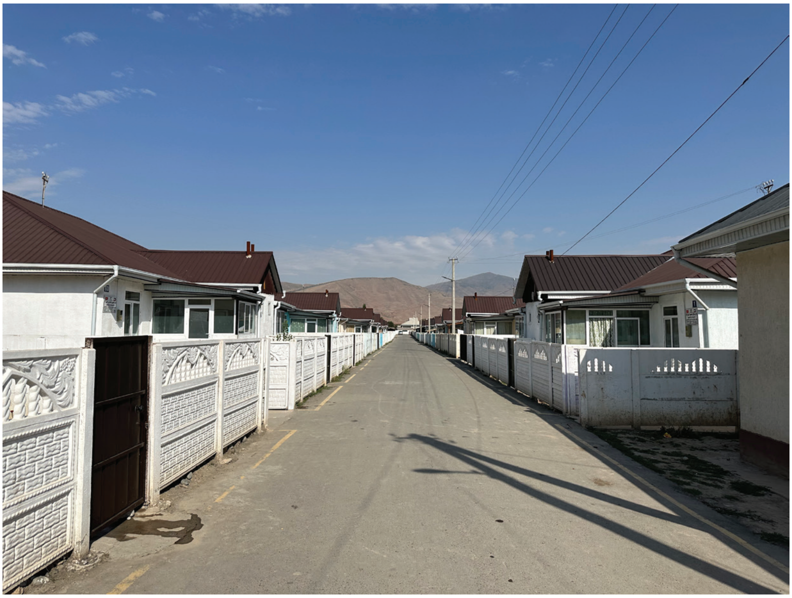

Figure 3.3 A residential alley in the social town. *Source*: © Till Mostowlansky 2023.

and had to compile official documents concerning their socioeconomic situation and marital status.

Standard housing in the social town consists of a two-bedroom unit with a living room, a kitchen, a bathroom and a fireplace. Families are also equipped with beds, a washing machine, a refrigerator, a stove and kitchen furniture. In addition to the houses, there is a medical centre, a grocery, a football field and a mosque. There is no school in Dar al-Khair. In other social towns built by As-Safa in Kyrgyzstan, children are provided with a school education, but here, pupils attend a state-run school further away in Gülchö, or they enrol in a private school for which orphans receive discounts on fees.

Beyond the provision of this basic infrastructure, inhabitants are encouraged to work to sustain their lives, for instance in a sewing workshop or a bakery that As-Safa built in the town. Yet, these enterprises did not seem to be particularly active during our visits, nor would they provide sufficient opportunities to employ the people of Dar al-Khair. As a result, many families, particularly those with children, are directly dependent on sponsors from the Gulf who cover their daily expenses through financial and material donations.

As-Safa's sponsoring system is explicitly hierarchical and patriarchal. Mostly male sponsors from the Gulf States select recipients for sponsorship, either directly on the foundation's website or brokered via personal relations. Sponsors and recipients in the social town are introduced to one another, and As-Safa mediates their relationship through regular communication. We met Damira, a woman in her late thirties, who arrived in Dar al-Khair with her three children a few years ago after her husband passed away. The move was made possible by her selection by As-Safa as an eligible widow. In return, she was required to maintain a relationship of gratitude with her sponsor in the Gulf. During our meeting with Damira, she received an audio message from a representative of the organisation:

> Generous mothers, soon your sponsors will visit. Therefore, as usual, record a video report and send it to me by the end of the week. The coordinator called me and said that the mothers in the social town should prepare for the arrival of the sponsors and send a report to their sponsors before that. You know how to do it. Dress yourself and your children appropriately, and record your words of gratitude on a video from a good-quality phone. You all received your *posobie* [financial support] recently. Tell them what you received and thank them. When you speak, don't rush and say

> each word clearly. Start your report with the following words: 'My Respected Sponsor, I've received the help you sent. Thank you for your support, we are doing well. My children are fine and they thank you too.' You and your children must be seen in the video, and the children can also say thank you. When you're done, send me the video via WhatsApp and I'll check, and if it's good I'll send it to the coordinator. If you have difficulties in preparing the video report, please contact me, I'll help you record the report.

The fact that Damira was in a position to claim housing and financial support from a sponsor was the result of a lengthy and complex selection process. Financial aspects were essential, such as proof of being in financial need, and lack of close relatives who could provide support. Yet in addition, As-Safa relies on state documentation on women's status as widows. While representatives of the organisation tend to highlight principles of Islamic charity and respect for related customs in our conversations, their reliance on Kyrgyzstan's secular state bureaucracy imbues the selection process with a set of contradictions.

In Kyrgyzstan, polygamous marriages have become widespread on the grounds of Islamic custom. Men can have multiple wives in the framework of religiously sanctioned marriage ceremonies (*nike*). Yet state institutions, following the tradition of Soviet secular statehood, continue to only recognise the first of these wives in legal terms. This means that if a husband passes away and several widows with children remain, only the first, legally married wife of the deceased receives the necessary paperwork to apply for the support of As-Safa.

On the one hand, as we talked to the inhabitants of Dar al-Khair, they positively highlighted the thoroughness and bureaucratic rigour of As-Safa's vetting process. This is perhaps not surprising, as they were the ones who successfully completed their applications and received support. On the other hand, other members of society in Gülchö described the process more critically and called it unjust – even if they themselves had not personally engaged with As-Safa – because the discrepancy between Islamic practice and state law appears unfair and difficult to comprehend in the context of an explicitly Islamic charitable foundation.

People also expressed to us broader concerns about As-Safa readily aligning with unreliable state structures and positions of power. And, despite trying to connect to people in Gülchö via shared visions of Islam, As-Safa has been unable to shed its status as a foreign entity, one which draws on some shared religious concepts, but which eventually represents wealth, top-down practices, and unfamiliar 'Arabs' (*arabdar*).

In the following section, we discuss how the people of Gülchö position themselves amidst this ambivalence, and we explore how they establish alternative, more locally acceptable, initiatives.

Kin and the goat

As we conducted research in Gülchö between 2022 and 2023, many of our interlocutors drew a connection between *soopchuluk* (good deeds with spiritual merits) and an event that they call *ulak* – literally 'the goat'. The term is a shorthand that refers to *ulak tartysh*, a sport with a long history, but it also refers to the sociality that this game involves – the physical gathering, as well as the symbolic and financial transactions. Also known as *kök börü* in other parts of Kyrgyzstan, ulak is a game in which players on horseback attempt to place a beheaded and prepared goat carcass into a goal (see Figure 3.4).

Even though variations of the game have been popular across different parts of Eurasia for centuries, from the Caspian Sea to China, relatively little research has been conducted on its historical and ethnographic aspects. In the existing literature on ulak, much emphasis has been placed on the role of the game in 'traditional' politics in Afghanistan, locally called *buzkashi* (Azoy 1982). These depictions have largely reflected exoticising views of ulak as an expression of deeply violent and chaotic political and social relations, of the human as predator, and of masculine competition.

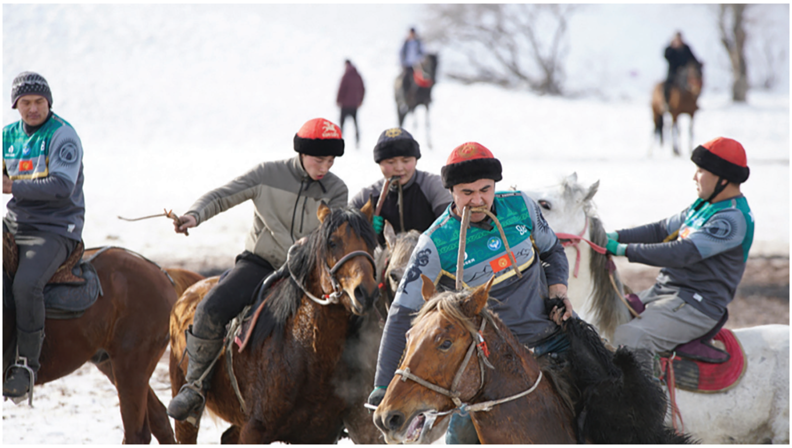

Figure 3.4 Playing ulak in Gülchö. *Source*: © Kanat Sharipbekov 2024.

The way in which people in Gülchö view ulak differs radically from these existing anthropological depictions. They perceive ulak as a communal gathering – one that showcases not only love for horses and outdoor sports, but also social solidarity, meaningful interpersonal relations and public displays of charity.

As a social institution, ulak has been subject to continuous historical change. It has been around for a very long time, and ulak-as-sport or ulak-as-sociopolitical-event have meant very different things at different stages. In the Soviet period, ulak was a marginalised 'traditional' team sport with little public visibility (see for example, Anarkulov 1981; Asankanov 2003; Kerimov 2016). In Gülchö, we encountered an increasingly popular form of ulak that is associated with charity, as well as with new-found wealth derived from recent business profits and, to some extent, labour migration. This new form began to develop in 2011, when a wealthy transport entrepreneur and politician by the name of Ulan Primov began to sponsor ulak tournaments to gain support for his election campaign. However, soon ulak became more than just a prestigious sporting event.

As we talked to people in Gülchö about charitable institutions and aid, we came across generations of male classmates who identify together according to their years of birth and their involvement in ulak. As Kairat, a man born in 1984, told us, initially under the auspices of Primov, classmates would organise alumni reunions that revolved around ulak tournaments. Usually 10 to 20 years after graduating from school, classmates would take it upon themselves to organise an ulak that offered handsome prizes for the winning teams, and also raised money for other issues. As Kairat told us, fuelled by rising wealth, every year the prizes at ulak would increase. People would win horses and cars, and the classmates spent fortunes on eating and drinking in lavish restaurants.

Kairat, along with over a dozen classmates we talked to in the course of our research, mentioned that their enjoyment of these events wore off quickly. People in Gülchö began to point out the meaningless 'waste of resources' (*ysyrapchylyk*) and the blatant inequalities between the celebrating classmates and the people in the town who lacked basic provisions. Kairat described this as a moral reckoning for his generation of classmates. He stated that, '[In Gülchö] there are many people sitting at home without sugar or meat. Others organise very expensive weddings. But it's wrong for us to eat in cafés when many poor families don't have enough food to feed their children.'

Starting with Kairat's generation, ulak in Gülchö began in 2020 to transform drastically, and it became closely tied to the pursuit of soopchuluk – good deeds that eventually accrue to spiritual merits in an Islamic framework. The category of *soop* (*sawab* in other Muslim contexts) is often linked to 'giving to God' (Mittermaier 2019). Yet, the specific interpretation that emerges from ulak in Gülchö is rather linked to the formation of kinship amongst people, and the rejection of injustice emerging from economic inequality.

For the generation of classmates born in 1984, this endeavour was relatively ad hoc and unstructured. Instead of financing lavish feasts, they used their ulak to raise funds and organise collaboration to fix a long-forgotten footbridge. The bridge, which leads over a river to several villages, had remained neglected because it was not essential for people who lived in the centre of town. However, the bridge is indispensable to children from villages across the river attending school in Gülchö, who would otherwise have to take the long way around along a busy transport route. Using the funds generated from ulak, Kairat's generation of classmates thus rebuilt the bridge as part of their soopchuluk (see Figure 3.5).

The classmates have forged lasting interrelations through a 'mutuality of being' (Sahlins 2013, 2) that is mediated through ulak. It was literally through fiercely tugging and pulling at the goat that this

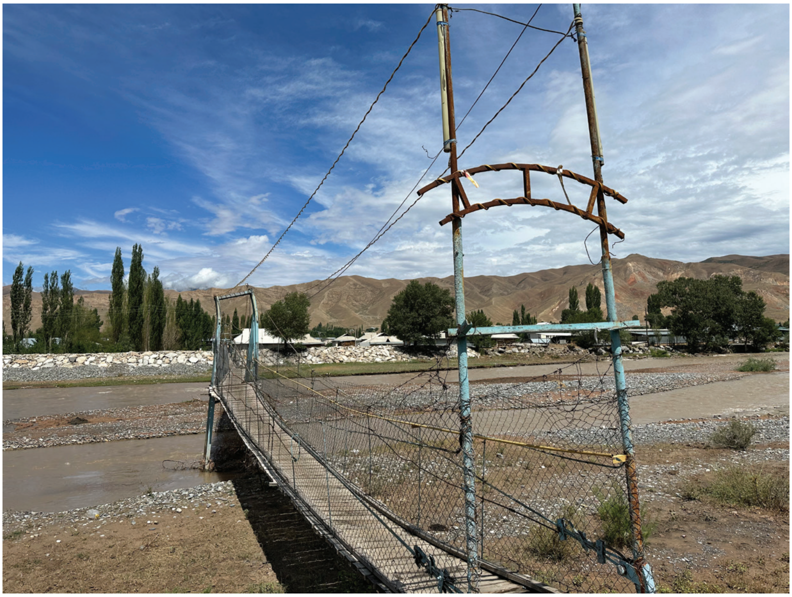

Figure 3.5 A bridge funded by Gülchö classmates. *Source*: © Till Mostowlansky 2023.

sociality, gift exchange and solidarity emerged between the classmates. While some classmates already had close familial relationships – Gülchö is a small town – ulak forged new classmate-based kin relationships. The classmates became intrinsic to one another's lives and, together, they've embodied values and aspirations central to society in Gülchö: as youth (*jashtar*) they were expected to be actively in pursuit of 'unity and solidarity' (*yntymak*), and as they told us on several occasions, older generations explicitly expected their actions to contribute to the achievement of the 'rightful share' (*aky*) of certain groups, for instance orphans.

At first glance, ulak and the classmates fit seamlessly into the notion of humanitarianism from below as happening on a local scale and through communal ties in a grassroots environment. However, this is only one part of the story. In the following section we discuss how the moral economy of ulak is in fact based on an ambivalent process, in which expressions of local solidarity and critique of foreign intervention coincide with displays of political and economic power that transcend locality.

Humanity's carcass

Ulak and the classmates' engagement with charity builds on a moral repertoire that is profoundly shaped by, but not limited to, Islamic ideas of 'the good'. Indeed, in the present, ulak draws on a language and sense of legitimacy that is closely aligned with Islamic idioms and concepts. At the same time, in our conversations with the classmates we encountered a wealth of conceptual and historical thinking that explicitly addressed the moral limitations of As-Safa.

The classmates' communal charity is an expression of universal notions of how to live an ethical life and be a good person. In this context, references to the welfare system of the Soviet state are not uncommon. For instance, when we met Kalys, a member of the class born in 1985 which organised an ulak event in 2021, he told us that good deeds emerge from human beings 'coming together in solidarity' (*yntymak bolso*). He went on to say:

> We don't forget about those in need. We continue to visit them, take food to them, ask how they're doing. That is, we keep in touch with them. In Soviet times, the state helped those in need, paid their benefits and gave clothes to orphans. But now this system doesn't work well, now the local youth is active. Organisations like As-Safa

> operate according to their own rules. And we are local and have to help our own. We have the means and we set an example for the next generation.

As an institution challenging the status quo, ulak draws on several simultaneous points of critique. As our conversation with Kalys underlines, juxtapositions between past and present as well as between local and foreign are fundamental in this regard. A number of scholars exploring post-Soviet frameworks of morality in Central Asia have pointed to the significance of the Soviet social cohesion of the past in order to make sense of a deficient present (for example, McBrien 2017; Mostowlansky 2017; Rasanayagam 2011). The role of Islam in remedying this deficiency is central, but not all-encompassing. Kalys's mention of As-Safa as being concerned with 'their own rules' is telling, as it downplays the foundation's dominant interest in Islamic humanitarian work. Rather, as Kalys told us, it is ulak that is inspired by the true tenets of Islamic charity.

The fact that the number of people with Islamic expert knowledge in Kyrgyzstan has steadily increased since the 1990s provides important context; ulak classmates have entered diverse professions after graduation, including that of the imam. Akylbek, the imam mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, is one of those classmates who inspired the people of Gülchö to pursue spiritual merits through good deeds. He encouraged charity through his words as well as through his own concrete donations. Kalys elaborated:

> Among us was the local imam. He said, 'If you are going to build a house, I'll give you land.' His father was one of the honorary *aksakals* [elders] and had a large plot of land, and he gave the land for free. About 1.5 million som were collected [about 17,000 US dollars]. We built a modern house for two families in need. Now the whole Alai [district] knows about us. When I say that I'm from 1985, people say, 'You're from the generation that built a house for the needy.'

As an endeavour of communal solidarity based on Islamic principles of charity, and in the pursuit of specific notions of justice, ulak is not simply a local, small-scale phenomenon. It is a social institution that responds to widespread concerns about narrow, particularistic interests, corruption and unfair bureaucratic processes. The classmates' critique of As-Safa with regard to these concerns is that this 'foreign' organisation, though it promotes Islamic values, remains oddly dependent on the static structures of state bureaucracy.

Kalys described the advantage of ulak over As-Safa on two different levels. First, ulak feeds into long-standing notions of ‘support through collective work’ (*ashar*). The collective in this sense is structured along gender and age. If a house gets built in a village, men help with the construction, women prepare food on-site, and the children play together nearby. Sharing work, food and play creates social cohesion.

And second, the classmates recognise that the choice of whom to help is a complex one that requires thoroughness and attention, but bureaucratic procedures alone will not lead to fair decisions. To illustrate his point, Kalys explained to us why and how he and his classmates chose to build a house for a widow who had previously been rejected by As-Safa:

> [The sick woman] was in a hopeless situation. She didn’t have documents confirming the death of her husband. So, she couldn't get a house [from As-Safa]. The entire bazaar knew her, but she had no documents proving that she was a widow. She was married in Chüi [close to the capital Bishkek]. Then after her husband’s death she returned to her native village in Alai and lived in Gülchö, working in a café as a cook, raising her daughters alone. Her relatives themselves were ill and in need, too. When we saw her living conditions, we took this into consideration with a heavy heart. My classmates and I built a house on the south side, so that there would always be light and warmth at her home. Now the woman has recovered, she has become better, she already walks a little, makes handicrafts at home and sells her products.

During our research in Gülchö, Toktogulova visited and interviewed Tolkun, the woman who received this support from the classmates. Tolkun described the situation in similar terms as Kalys had done, mentioning the lack of state-approved documentation on the death of her husband (*kara kagaz*). With As-Safa drawing exclusively on this type of evidence to grant housing and other forms of support to widows, Tolkun described her situation prior to the initiative of the classmates as desperate:

> One day these guys, born in 1985, came to me and left some food. They didn’t say anything. [Later] they called and asked if I was at home. Then they came to me and said, ‘You’ve got a house.’ And they brought me here. Thank God, they’re good people, they’re my compatriots, my brothers. I pray for and bless these young people

> every time I perform my prayers. Nothing will come back [to them] from me, but it will definitely come back from God [*Alladan kaitat*].

With its notions of kin, community and collective labour, ulak may appear at first to be merely local. Ulak's critique of and competition with the universalist Islamic humanitarian framework of As-Safa complicates that perception. Ulak's charitable ambition both derives from and leads to piety and concern about the afterlife. Ulak is about social relations in the here, while at the same time, spiritual merits accrue for the thereafter (see Figure 3.6). Charitable giving in Gülchö is reciprocated through people's sense of belonging together, but it is regarded as also reciprocated via God, in what Amira Mittermaier (2019) calls a 'triadic' relationship. Thus, giving at ulak is giving to God, but it also connects humans.

The classmates often criticise As-Safa for following the tenets of state bureaucracy in a rigid, inhumane way that works against the marital and charitable principles of Islam. This does not, however, mean that ulak is entirely uninvolved with the state. In fact, the annual ulak tournaments involve grand displays of wealth and power, where representatives of the district government are guests of honour amongst entrepreneurs, elders and other dignitaries. For the classmates, the involvement of political and financial prowess is essential. Ulak is

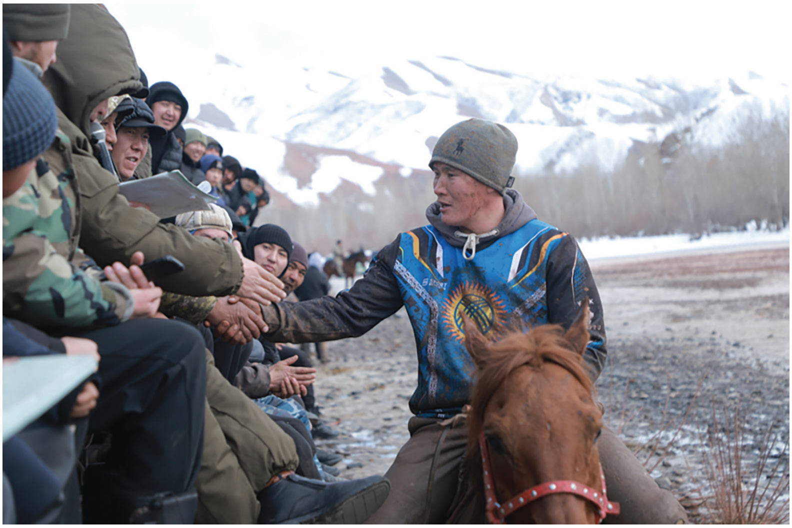

Figure 3.6 An ulak player greeting the audience. *Source*: © Kanat Sharipbekov 2024.

not just a grassroots critique. It is a call to employ wealth, politics and bureaucracy wisely, and to not let them dictate charity's moral economy.

We argue that ulak transcends superficial notions of a local initiative operating from below because it draws strongly on transnational and national principles. This foundation across different scales has been pivotal in the transformation of ulak – from a public display of success to a humanitarian endeavour. As several classmates told us, this transformation began in the chaos of the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2020 and 2021, Kyrgyzstan suffered terrible surges of infection, and most medical facilities were overburdened and under-equipped. In response, classmates made ready use of their transnational business and migrant networks. With severe shortages of medical equipment and supplies across Central Asia, migrant labourers from the Alai who were based in Russia were able to source respirators and protective gear, while their sick elders were cared for by people in Gülchö. It is this distribution of labour in the face of catastrophe that imbues the goat's carcass with a humanitarian spirit. Ulak as an event and as a social form continues to morph and expand beyond the boundaries of the Alai.

Conclusion

The contrast between As-Safa and ulak which we have analysed in this chapter is situated in one common place and time: the town of Gülchö in the early 2020s. Despite this similarity, there are considerable differences in how these two humanitarian endeavours position and organise themselves across various scales.

As-Safa operates via Gulf State business networks and through various intermediaries and mobile technologies. In many ways, the organisation embodies the familiar trope of the 'distant stranger' which so much literature on humanitarianism depicts (Fechter 2023, 81). Ultimately, As-Safa draws on the vast economic inequalities and perceived imbalances between lifestyles in Kyrgyzstan and in the Gulf to create a town within a town. This miniature town – the segregated Dar al-Khair neighbourhood on the outskirts of Gülchö – stands as a moral project and as a symbol of Islamic solidarity. To some it reflects virtue; to others, foreignness and a bureaucratic, ill-informed misadventure.

Ulak, meanwhile, is organised around notions of physical and social proximity. While the game of the goat strongly demonstrates an

Islamic moral economy, it also creates a sense of kinship. Even though the classmates involved in ulak are critical of As-Safa, they do not suggest curing the social town's ills by simply establishing a 'local' alternative. Instead, ulak draws on a different framework of transnational connectivity, moral economy, charitable practices, redistribution and Islam.

This framework is based on the diverse business and migrant networks that people in Gülchö have built over the past decades, enriched by various forms of expertise amongst the classmates and their families. The presence of religious specialists is as important as that of sport enthusiasts, entrepreneurs, construction workers, politicians and migrants. Thus, Gülchö's diversity offers a tacit counterpoint to As-Safa's explicit display of class difference and economic dependency between giver and receiver.

On a fundamental level, As-Safa and ulak represent two spatially coincident yet opposing ways of defining who is afforded social protection, and who is not. Both approaches thus invoke much broader discussions on the moral and strategic employment of concepts of humanity (Fassin 2011, 247). For As-Safa, streamlined language referring to concern for humanity at large, as expressed in their particular form of Islamic charity, is pervasive. Ulak, however, develops this discussion from a position of critique, and through a wide range of social and cultural repertoires. While the ambition to 'do good' and to be a 'good person' might appear small-scale and local, it in fact reaches across multiple scales and, ultimately, makes universal claims.[3]

Notes

1 The spelling of the organisation's name causes perpetual confusion. The name is Al-Safa in Arabic and As-Safa in Kyrgyz. This difference is based on the fact that *al* is pronounced differently in Arabic depending on its surrounding sounds. The correct pronunciation is As-Safa. The Kyrgyz spelling therefore refers to the way in which the name is pronounced in Arabic.

2 News reports also suggest that As-Safa has, alongside other foreign actors in Kyrgyzstan, donated millions of US dollars to charitable funds close to Kyrgyzstan's political elite (RFE/RL 2023).

3 We would like to express our deep gratitude to the people of Gülchö for their hospitality and openness. We also thank the representatives of As-Safa in southern Kyrgyzstan and Bishkek for sharing their insights with us. Almagül Aisarieva has been an outstanding and resilient research assistant. We would like to thank her, as well as the various colleagues who have provided constructive feedback on this chapter, including the authors of this volume, as well as Gulzhan Begeyeva, Pol Llopart and Zarina Urmanbetova. Our research was generously funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (grant no. PCEFP1_203319/1).

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4

Starving for humanity: Thai youth’s hunger strike resistance in the Buddhist kingdom

Giuseppe Bolotta

> *It does not matter if anyone says that we are only dust.*
> *Today, all of the dust is coming together to be the earth …*
> *Down with feudalism, long live the People.*
> Parit ‘Penguin’ Chiwarak (Parit 2021, 48–50)

> *Nature did not make anyone higher than anyone else …*
> *Every one of us, we are all humans whose blood flows the same red …*
> *Everyone has equal dignity and rights as a human.*
> *No one is higher than anyone else. No one.*
> Panusaya ‘Rung’ Sithijirawattanakul (Panusaya 2021, 24)

The word ‘human’ is etymologically connected to the Latin term *humus*: earth. In Buddhist Thailand, however, not everybody is made of ‘dust of the ground’. Notably, the king is not. As Dharmaraja – Bodhisattva of highest merit and unmatched virtues – the king reaches up into the higher spheres of the Thai hierarchical cosmos, among the celestial beings (see Tambiah 1977; Jory 2016). Not by chance, the monarch is referred to as ‘Lord of the sky’ (*jao fa*) and ‘Lord of lives’ (*jao chiwit*). In the special register of Thai speech used to speak to the king, common citizens refer to themselves as ‘beneath the dust under the soles of Your Majesty’s feet’ (Elinoff 2024, 358).

Parit ‘Penguin’ Chiwarak’s libertarian speech, ‘Down with feudalism, long live the People’, given at a pro-democracy protest in the northeast of Thailand on 20 August 2020, challenged Thailand’s cosmological hierarchy and the idea of citizens as dust under the sole of the monarch’s foot (Parit 2021). It did so by invoking ‘the People’ in a way that echoed European Enlightenment’s foundational revolutions. A week earlier in

Bangkok, Panusaya ‘Rung’ Sithijirawattanakul’s historic speech, ‘No one is born higher: Everyone stands on the same ground’, appealed directly to ‘humanity’, emphasising everybody’s ‘equal dignity and rights as humans’ (Panusaya 2021).

Yet, as Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin have observed, the meaning of humanity is not as clear as its widespread appearance in ethical discourse and transnational politics might suggest (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 2). While everyone agrees that, as human beings, we are all members of the same species, interpretations of humanity vary greatly. In the Judeo-Christian and Muslim traditions, which even secular humanitarianism has drawn upon (see, for instance, Fassin 2011; Benthall 2011), God provides the ontological basis for equality claims: ‘Humans are all equal in the eyes of God.’ However, in the Thai Buddhist cosmology, as it is conventionally understood by Thai royalists, notions of karma and merit lay the foundation for social hierarchy; it is true that human beings are equal in the sense that they are all subject to the law of karma, but the fundamental truth of dharma is that humanity is characterised by moral inequality.[1] Monks and laypeople, parents and children, teachers and students, rich and poor are bearers of unequal stores of merit, all under the guidance of the king, who – like a benevolent father – should love the holders of successively lower ranks equally (Reynolds and Reynolds 1982, 148; Bolotta 2024, 299).

Furthermore, humanity’s purported universality does not fully escape the logic of the nation. Thai pro-democracy activists invoke the concept of humanity with the precise aim of redefining ‘Thainess’, the Thai national identity, which is codified as resting on three pillars: Nation, Religion and Monarchy. Crafted by royals and right-wing intellectuals in the early twentieth century, the discourse surrounding Thainess establishes that being Thai means embracing the cosmologically grounded theory of politics in which Buddhist kingship is the nation’s guiding light. Moral order reigns when ‘small people’ (*phu noi*) know their place and behave accordingly, in obedience and grateful service to the higher-ranking ‘big people’ (*phu yai*) (Bolotta 2021, 23–6). It is in this context that Panusaya and Parit cried out for humanity, meant as a condition of universal equality that encompasses all human beings, *including the king*. Thainess, in their opinion, tramples human rights under the king’s foot. They are not alone in thinking this.

Panusaya and Parit were taking part as protest leaders in the nationwide youth-led rallies that saw hundreds of thousands of young Thais take to the streets in 2020. Their demands included the resignation from government of General Prayuth Chan-o-cha (who became prime minister after leading a coup d'état); the revocation of the military-drafted 2017 constitution; and, for the first time since Thailand became a constitutional monarchy in 1932, limits to the king's arbitrary exercise of power.

The call for monarchy reform aimed in particular to abolish Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code – the world's harshest lese-majesty law, which stipulates that: 'Whoever defames, insults, or threatens the king, queen, heir-apparent or regent shall be subject to imprisonment of three to fifteen years' (Streckfuss 2011). Since the protests began, nearly three hundred pro-democracy youth and child activists have been charged with lese-majesty offences and held in pre-trial detention for exercising their right to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly.[2] On many occasions, as observed by Pasit Wongngamdee (2020), these youths had asked the question 'Are you still human?' in public, urging royalists who vilify pro-democracy groups to reconsider if protecting Thainess can justify the sacrifice of basic human rights. A popular slogan among supporters, 'Decrease Thainess, Increase Humanness', summarises their argument well.

The imperative to protect human life across religious, social and national divides also defines the core of transnational humanitarianism, whose global reach was set forth by the United Nations' 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Thailand was amongst the first nations to sign it. Significantly, Thai monarchy reform activists' calls to uphold people's universal humanity have not gone unheard. What began in 2020 as a local rebellion against the Thai royal-military establishment gradually evolved into a field of international humanitarian concern – particularly after Parit and Panusaya began resorting to hunger strikes to protest the pre-trial imprisonment without bail of peaceful dissenters. Thai and international NGOs, such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, iLaw and Thai Lawyers for Human Rights took the stage, providing detained demonstrators with global visibility and crucial legal, economic and psychological support. In the process, Panusaya and Parit became iconic figures of Thailand's democracy movement: selfless young people, hungry for humanity, and willing to sacrifice their own lives to protect their fellow citizens from royalist military abuse. Parit was remanded on 9 February 2021 and released on 11 May, after a 57-day hunger strike. Panusaya, remanded on 8 March, was released on 6 May after a 39-day hunger strike. They were denied bail nine and five times, respectively. Both face lese-majesty charges and potential life sentences.

Over the past four years, other youths have followed Panusaya and Parit's example, initiating hunger strikes in support of one another's rights.[3] 'Free our friends' became their slogan (Bolotta 2024).

Their uncoordinated initiatives stand against the military government's judicial harassment of predominantly peaceful demonstrators. In doing so, these youths have embodied dramatic expressions of humanitarianism from below.

These hunger strikes are humanitarian acts not only because they are explicitly designed to help others – imprisoned friends and the Thai citizenry more broadly – but also because hunger-striking activists consciously and performatively instrumentalise their suffering bodies – the universal biological substratum of humanity – as a powerful catalyst for humanitarian responses (compassion, desire to help) from observers, both local and international. These responses, in turn, gain political significance when they pressure state authorities to make concessions. The term 'from below' denotes the spontaneous, people-driven inception of such initiatives. It also serves to distinguish individual forms of political solidarity from more conventional instantiations of humanitarianism, such as NGO work, religious charity or other institutional or financial endeavours that offer help to human beings in distress (Kloos 2020). However, as we shall see, these typological distinctions are often blurred by Thai youths' simultaneous engagement within multiple discourses and practices of humanity, both Thai and foreign.

In this chapter, I approach Panusaya and Parit as key figures of humanitarianism, from below and from above. I show how, across geographical, cultural and political scales, their gestures are perceived and typified as either distinctively local or paradigmatically universal symbols of moral commitment to humanity. Panusaya and Parit are *figures* because they are recognised by others, both within and outside Thailand, as 'standing out', prompting reflection on the sociohistorical world they inhabit (Barker et al. 2014, 2). They are concrete individuals, grounded in reality, and yet they also serve as symbolic anchors for local, national and transnational discourses and affects (see Figure 4.1).

They are figures *of humanitarianism* because their hunger strike activism encapsulates an imaginary of selfless devotion to the commons – an altruistic sacrifice undertaken on behalf of those unable to defend themselves. Importantly, as Barker, Harms and Lindquist argue, while figures are often overshadowed by powerful narratives, an anthropological approach demands contextual attention to 'the tensions that the figures themselves feel – or that we observe through their experience – as they struggle to define their own historical agency' (Barker et al. 2014, 3–4). Although Panusaya and Parit's human rights activism unfolded within the Thai Buddhist polity, they also engaged with NGOs, media and academics outside the country, provoking a rescaling of their

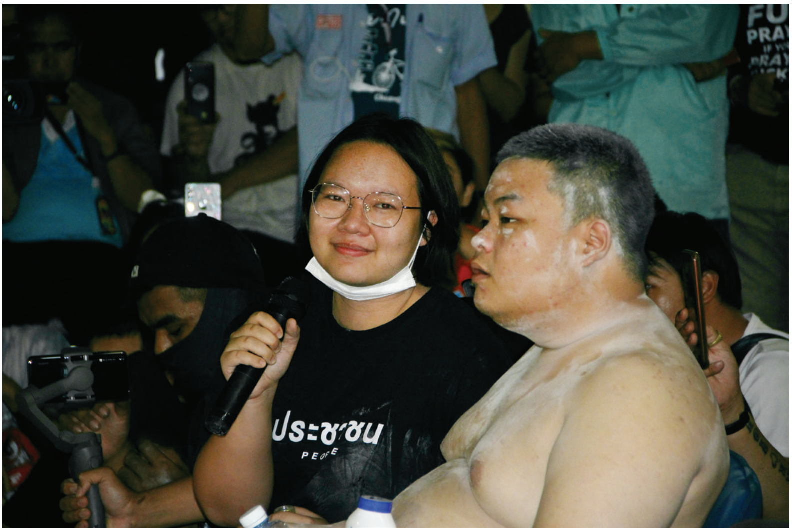

Figure 4.1 Panusaya and Parit in front of the prison at Prachachuen Police Station in Bangkok, 30 October 2020. *Source*: courtesy of iLaw (Internet Dialogue on Law Reform) 2020. CC BY-NC-SA 2.0.

humanitarian and political struggle – from below upwards, and from the inside out.

My take on humanitarianism is intentionally broad and inclusive, and it is receptive to recent scholarly attempts to both decentre and decolonise the normative understanding of the term. Humanitarianism may thus be loosely defined, to borrow Ticktin's words, as 'an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government', with the declared desire to help others at its core (Ticktin 2014, 274). As I shall show, Panusaya, Parit and their young Thai friends' hunger strikes demonstrate how this desire can articulate, in original ways, bonds of friendship, modern Western theories and older local conceptions of human universality, including Buddhist notions of hierarchy, giving and selflessness. Together, these elements can generate what Mostowlansky and Muratova describe in this volume as an 'alter-politics of humanity': an alternative ethos that both engages with and redefines the epistemic foundations of dominant political orders.

In the following section, I elaborate further on the theoretical underpinnings of my argument, focusing on the hunger strike's insufficiently scrutinised humanitarian dimensions. Subsequently, I analyse Panusaya and Parit's initiatives as distinct calls for humanity within the context of Buddhist Thailand's military royalism. I also explore the roles of media, NGOs and related financial flows – commonly recognised structures of humanitarianism from above – in supporting, amplifying and reshaping their activism. Throughout, I demonstrate how Parit and Panusaya draw on conflicting notions of humanity, both local and global, to advance their humanitarian and political concerns. Through these endeavours they are bridging cultural divides and contributing in innovative ways to infuse in Thailand a special awareness of humanity – even at the risk of their own lives.

Hunger strike as humanitarianism

Hunger striking – a deliberate refusal to consume food as a last resort for political protest or to express solidarity – punctuates global modern history, weaving through an enduring path of self-harming resistance. From early twentieth-century British suffragettes to 1970s Cuban dissidents, from Irish Republican Army combatants to heroes of the Indian independence movement, the hunger strike's cult of self-sacrifice has long served as a tool to draw attention to a vast array of causes, from fighting colonial regimes to opposing political violence and protesting prison conditions. Hunger strikers, incidentally, are very often held in custody themselves (see, for instance, Vernon 2007), and those in Thailand are no exception.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Democrat Party activist Chalad Worachat resorted to hunger strikes to protest Cold War-era military dictatorships. Similarly, Chamlong Srimuang, a Thai general turned right-wing Buddhist, went on a hunger strike as part of the 1992 Thai uprising known as Black May, which brought down Suchinda Kraphrayoon's military government after nearly a hundred civilians lost their lives (Maisrikrod 1993). However, these opposition leaders – mostly male, high-status public figures – never questioned the monarchy's sacred role in Thai society. While standing against dictatorship, they nevertheless regarded the king as both a bastion of democracy and a celestial arbiter of mundane disputes.

Today's hunger strikers, by contrast, are teenagers and young adults, common citizens and students who weaponise their bodies in explicit opposition to this monarchist outlook – a clear departure from the 1990s mantra of 'Thai royalist democracy' (Thongchai 2016). Unsurprisingly, several youth activists I spoke to were either unaware of their predecessors or actively distanced themselves from them.[4] All perceived this form of protest as an altruistic act of self-sacrifice (*kansiasala*), the last non-violent option that remains when conventional political means prove ineffective and life becomes unbearable. Unlike other 'offensive' or 'punitive' types of self-inflicted violence such as suicide terrorism, hunger strikes are enacted 'defensively' – hence their (debated) association with non-violent resistance (Bargu 2016, 15). As Karin M. Fierke put it, the power of political self-sacrifice 'does not lie in the ability to harm another … it rests on accepting harm to the self' (Fierke 2012, 84). This harm – expressed on the hunger striker's body as an 'organ of representation' for the whole polity's wounds (Bargu 2016, 17) – has prompted humanitarian debates as to its meaning, and, ultimately, on what it means to be human.

In Thailand, as mentioned, the meaning of humanity has shifted over the decades alongside the political and semantic fluctuations of Thainess.[5] The notion of being Thai publicly advanced by Parit and Panusaya transcends the archetypes of previous opposition movements – such as 'the proletariat', 'the farmer', or 'the urban poor' (Pasit 2020). It embraces contemporary humanitarianism's universalism while addressing Thai Buddhist cosmology's hierarchical implications: the monarch, as Parit and Panusaya's public statements imply, should be brought down to earth from the skies. But in what sense can a politically motivated hunger strike come across as a form of humanitarianism?

Contemporary hunger striking is deeply tied to the global circulation – via multipolar genealogies, ethical sentiments and transnational institutions – of a universalist idea of humanity, now enshrined in both national and international law: 'Everyone has the right to life', stipulates Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In practice, however, not everybody is granted equal access to humanity (and, in Thailand, some individuals are even placed above it as more-than-human demigods). Confronted with this inescapable evidence, hunger strikers intentionally reduce themselves to *zoe* or 'bare life' (Agamben 1998), for the humanitarian gaze is often seduced by the suffering body construed as a biological common denominator of being human (Feldman and Ticktin 2010, 11). As Panusaya herself underscored, 'We are all humans whose blood flows the same red.'[6]

Analytically, it is important to distinguish hunger strikes enacted as a personal claim from those that are explicitly undertaken to promote collective rights. We might be tempted to speak of humanitarianism only with regard to the latter category, as the self-referential quality of the former does not directly suggest an altruistic motive, though the boundaries between the two are not clear-cut. A consequent distinction – related instead to the differentiation between humanitarian efforts that develop either from below or from above – demarcates spontaneous decisions to abstain from food from externally orchestrated and institutionally supported hunger strike initiatives. These dividing lines, too, are commonly transgressed in practice. Ultimately, the potential success of a hunger strike lies in its capacity to garner humanitarian attention from public authorities, based on the state's theoretical obligation to protect the physical integrity of its citizens. Yet, there are constitutional differences worldwide regarding the balance between prisoners' rights to self-determination and the state's duty to preserve their lives at any cost – and this is where diverging interpretations of humanitarian law's supposed universality manifest themselves at the juridical level, as legal anthropology shows.

Technically, Thailand is a constitutional monarchy, that is, a democracy with the king as head of state, but the constitutional provisions for this framework are anything but clear. Many of these are cobbled together from European legal doctrines and Hindu-Buddhist theories of kingship that complicate modern distinctions between the religious and the secular (Mérieau 2021). The Thai words for 'constitution' (*rattathammanun*) and 'rule of law' (*nittitham*) are both built on the notion of dharma (*tham*), which is embodied by the king (3). As a result, it remains highly disputable whether the constitution derives its authority from the people or from the king, who is the dharma-giver.

As a part of the criminal code since 1956 that has been used increasingly over the past few years, the Thai lese-majesty law reflects these ambiguities well. Inherited from ancient Rome, and deployed extensively until the sunset of Europe's absolute monarchies, the crime of lese-majesty remains recognised in places like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, though sentences are quite rare. Thailand is a notable exception to this trend. While the United Nations Committee on Human Rights recommends abolishing it, Thai royalist lawyers have defended its legitimacy based on blasphemy laws in Muslim countries against the defamation of God (Mérieau 2019, 57). The implicit, if unspeakable, argument here is that the king, as Dharmaraja, is not just a head of state, but a Bodhisattva, a Buddha-to-be. Despite their fiercely secular public claims, Panusaya and Parit are forced to deal with these unresolved theopolitical ambiguities. Torn as they are between humanitarian and Buddhist rules of law, they navigate through multiple registers, both secular and religious – something hunger striking is intrinsically renowned for, after all.

A hunger striker's ambivalent suspension between non-violence and self-inflicted violence, between politics of life and politics of death, indeed subverts the supposedly rational fabric of modern politics

(Bargu 2016, 16). Its sacrificial nature raises ontological questions about the ultimate ends of the human condition, which surpass the secular formulation of the liberal human that Thai activists are advocating for (Bolotta et al. 2020). Indeed, questions of suffering, sacrifice and selfless giving all have long histories, as literature on religious fasting and martyrdom attests. Gandhi's *satyagraha* theory, rooted in Hindu principles of non-violence (*ahimsa*), is one well-known example. These religious constructions, in turn, continue to inform ostensibly secular practices of solidarity around the world. Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice was notably identified as the symbolic core of the modern West's 'humanitarian reason' (Fassin 2011). Regardless of its non-linear religious underpinnings (see, for instance, Mostowlansky 2020), the twentieth-century language of human rights constitutes a common, if abstract and contested, transnational reference for many self-sacrificial altruists around the world today, including Thai hunger strikers.

And yet, the decision to sacrifice oneself for others may not arise solely from adherence to abstract ethics, religious precepts or political ideology. It can also emerge spontaneously from an emotional impulse to alleviate the perceived suffering of kin, friends or partners, irrespective of rational motives (Amarasuriya et al. 2020). Erica Bornstein's (2012, 170) distinction between 'liberal altruism' and 'relational empathy' becomes pertinent in this context. While liberal altruism is embedded in the fundraising procedures and market-inspired mechanisms of international NGOs, relational empathy thrives in situations of proximity amongst kin. At the same time, kinship transcends personal bonds and extends to broader ties, such as with the nation or the human family (Herzfeld 2005).

By resorting to hunger-striking's inherent display of bodily frailty, Thai youth activists seek to awaken public empathy – a vital precondition for the humanitarian impulse to help. Their hunger strikes, however, are not only derivatively but also fundamentally humanitarian, as their decision to abstain from food is, in many cases, driven by a profound desire to support their imprisoned friends, whose suffering they find unbearable to witness without acting.

In the following sections, I show how Panusaya and Parit's hunger strike initiatives work as polysemic acts of humanitarianism from below, capable of attuning distinctively Buddhist sensitivities to universalist calls for humanity from above. Their alter-political endeavour is situated at the intersections of Buddhist hierarchy and human rights equality, of kinship and political ideology, of relational empathy and liberal altruism. As middle-class, tech-savvy and cosmopolitan youths, they are well-positioned to act as brokers and translators of local and international ethics, morals and affects, moving up and down various scales and cultural lexicons of humanity, according to time, place and audience.

Parit: hunger strike as *barami*

In November of 2023, I met Parit 'Penguin' Chiwarak at a coffee shop on the outskirts of Bangkok. The 25-year-old political science student, a budding intellectual despite his young age, had embraced Buddhist monkhood two months prior. Had I spoken with him in 2020, at the time of his 20 August speech, Thai kinship-based hierarchical etiquette would have required me to address him as *nong* (junior brother), since he is much younger than I am, but he is now considered a different man: he is a *phra* (monk) – hence a *run phi* (senior) to everyone he talks to, regardless of their relative age.

However, his unique status – that of a human rights and monarchy reform activist released on bail – means that he needs to leave the temple and report to court whenever the overseeing judge deems it necessary. We talked during one of these occasions, as Parit was about to return to the temple after a bitter and abrupt legal interruption of his monastic path. Away from the high stakes and intense lights of the political stage, Phra Parit tidied his saffron robes with an almost imperceptible yet nervous gesture and explained to me his decision to go on a hunger strike:

> Hunger strikes hold a distinctive religious significance in Asia. I had been contemplating embarking on a hunger strike since my first detention, but it was during my second detention that I decided to take this step – a decision I made alone. Undoubtedly, Mahatma Gandhi served as one of my inspirations, but fasting has a long-standing tradition in Thailand as well, predating the modern era when its political use emerged as hunger strike. Notably, Khruba Siwichai employed non-violence as a form of protest.

As a native of Northern Thailand (formerly the Kingdom of Lanna before its nineteenth-century incorporation under Siamese administrative control), Parit is deeply passionate about his region's premodern, largely separatist history. Significantly, he chose to enter the monkhood in Chiang Mai, Lanna's former capital and Thailand's second largest city, where the gestures of Buddhist monk Khruba Siwichai (1878–1938) endure in the hearts of the locals. Known as the Saint of the North for his ascetic virtues, Bodhisattva-like compassion for others and believed supernatural powers, Siwichai clashed with the newly established national Sangha (the Thai Buddhist church), presided over by the king in Bangkok and regimented into the service of a wider nation-building process. The royally unified Buddhist hierarchy was unwilling to recognise Siwichai's ecclesiastical titles, thereby undermining his authority to ordain new monks.[7] Faced with persecution and multiple incarcerations, the Saint of the North responded with non-violent resistance (*santhi withi*), earning recognition as a millenarian holy man (*tonbun*) and a charismatic saviour who is endowed with merit (see Bowie 2014; Keyes 1982).

The fact that Parit discussed his activism with me in the guise of a monk lent greater credibility to his words about the Buddhist significance of his hunger strike protest. However, amidst the Thai youth rebellion in 2020 and 2021, many observers, especially in the West, could hardly have guessed that one of the most vociferously secular amongst the youth movement's leaders harboured such deeply rooted vernacular sentiments. In fact, Parit himself did nothing to suggest this, at least judging by his public declarations before the international press, as when, standing in front of journalists outside the Bangkok court in August 2020, he raised three fingers to the sky and explained that the Thai youth movement's protest gesture symbolises its call for 'liberty, equality, fraternity'. Likewise, his frequent citations of the American revolutionary Thomas Paine, and his references to the British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst's famous speech 'Freedom or death', only appeared to indicate that the new generation of Thai youths represented the vanguard of Enlightenment-era ideals of equality, human rights and liberal democracy in the Buddhist kingdom.

According to mainstream media and academic observations, these youths were digital natives accustomed to robust debates on social media, and they were fighting against the antiquated traditions of the monarchised gerontocracy that stands for Thainess (see, for instance, Tann 2020). Yet, this characterisation of Parit was mainly crafted by and for international audiences. Conversely, the cultural significance of his humanitarian ardour within Thai society, mostly inaccessible to external spectators, concerns Buddhist notions of moral hierarchy, giving and self-sacrifice as much as equality-inflected human rights discourse. But, let me rewind the tape to the beginnings of Parit's activism before exploring further the local meanings of his remarks.

Parit's criticism towards the Thai establishment and his engagement with liberal political theory began during his education at Bangkok's prestigious Triam Udom Suksa School, as a member of the high school group Education for the Liberation of Siam. At that time, Thailand was under the grip of a repressive military junta led by General Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the former army chief who toppled Yingluck Shinawatra's government in 2014, inaugurating a decade-long quasi-dictatorship. Described as a 'post-coup political entrepreneur' who fostered activist youth networks during the 2015–19 period (Akanit 2023), Parit organised protests opposing the junta and its use of public schooling as a tool of monarchist propaganda, and he demanded reform of the Thai education system and its seniority-driven structures, all in the name of democracy and human rights. These youth-led initiatives, during a period when political parties were effectively silenced, were amongst the few protests that attained public visibility in Thailand. But it wasn't until Parit enrolled at the progressive Thammasat University in Bangkok that the political influence of youth activists began to gain momentum – especially after the controversial March 2019 elections that gave coup leader General Prayuth a second term in office.

In June of 2020, Parit, along with Panusaya, led a Student Union of Thailand protest to commemorate the 88th anniversary of the 1932 overthrow of the absolute monarchy – a highly symbolic initiative. In July, as COVID-19 restrictions were eased, Parit contributed to the Free Youth anti-government rally at Bangkok's Democracy Monument, the biggest political gathering in the post-coup era, which was largely organised through Twitter (now X). Tens of thousands of protesters gathered, some as young as 14 years old, chanting 'Down with dictatorship, long live democracy'. This event was a prelude to the youth movement's most daring move in August 2020: publicly calling for the reform of the monarchy under the English-language slogan 'No God, no King, only Human'.

Other major monarchy reform gatherings followed, as did Parit's legal troubles. The young man was first arrested in August of 2020, and then released on bail. He was arrested again in February of 2021, but initially denied bail. In March, he started a hunger strike protest that caused him to be hospitalised on 30 April 2021. Ten days prior, Brad Adams, Asia Director at Human Rights Watch, had urged Thai authorities 'to stop this witch hunt against peaceful dissenters … The government should engage with United Nations experts and others about amending the lese majeste law to bring it into compliance with Thailand's international human rights law obligations' (Human Rights Watch 2021). Fuelled by humanitarian compassion for Parit's deteriorating health, multiple youth-led demonstrations called for his immediate release. Parit was finally granted temporary and conditional bail in May, after 57 days of no food. In August of 2023, he became Phra Parit, but this does not protect him from the risk of a life sentence. He is now facing 20 charges under Thailand's draconian Article 112.

Conversing with me, a Thai-speaking anthropologist considered capable of understanding the specificities of Thai society, he indulged in further reflections on the cultural distinctiveness of his humanitarian efforts:

> Don't get me wrong – when I refer to people like Emmeline Pankhurst and appeal to human rights, I mean it. Mahatma Gandhi's self-sacrifice was likewise aiming at the freedom of his people, after all. This is easily understandable by international observers and aligns with the principles of democratic countries. But for Thai people, the significance of an act like a hunger strike is also related to the moral qualities of a leader and to barami.

In the karma-shaped Thai social universe, *barami* – derived from the Pali term *parami* – designates moral perfection, and it is usually associated with kings. Because he follows the path of the Buddha and embodies his moral virtues, the king has barami, and thus occupies the highest position in the social hierarchy. The emphasis lies here in compassionate selflessness: instead of using his power to attend to his own wants, the righteous ruler feeds his subjects before turning to his own meal (see, for instance, Hanks 1962).[8] Yet, according to Parit, barami is not necessarily a royal prerogative, for it can be associated with particularly meritorious – that is to say, selfless – commoners outside the court as well, such as teachers, statesmen and monks. The aforementioned Khruba Siwichai is a historical case in point. As Parit explains:

> In the Buddhist scriptures, barami corresponds to a number of virtues. They can be ordered in three ascending levels, the highest and ultimate of which consists in sacrificing one own's life. Hence, a hunger strike enacted for the benefit of others can be perceived as a highly meritorious act in Thai society.

In the days following our meeting, Parit sent me an academic article to further substantiate this statement. It is a piece in Thai titled 'The thirty perfections in Theravada Buddhism', by Japanese scholar Karen Katsumoto (2018), which reviews discussions on barami in early Buddhist texts, and refers to the act of sacrificing one's life as *paramattha* *parami* – *paramattha* being a Pali term designating truth in the ultimate sense. This is a Buddhological analysis, typically beyond the grasp of non-specialists, yet it effectively captures a deep-rooted sensitivity amongst Thais towards self-sacrifice – of which hunger striking is a compelling instance – as a realm of merits. This shared sensitivity has led several observers I interviewed to notice the contrast between Parit's barami-infused sacrifice and the current monarch's apparent indifference towards his young subjects' suffering – a perceived lack of royal compassion interpreted as a deficiency in the new king's barami.

This perceived contrast, in turn, provided moral legitimacy to the youths' demand for monarchy reform. To be sure, while he affirms the equality of all human beings, Parit does not appear to reject the ontological validity of Thai Buddhist hierarchy. Rather, his words imply that insufficiently meritorious leaders should be replaced by those who truly embody barami.

Not coincidentally, Parit's decision to end his hunger strike was propelled by the controversial public intervention of a prominent progressive monk – a development exclusively covered by Thai media. Phra Payom Kanlayano, the abbot of Wat Suan Kaeo, publicly implored Parit and Panusaya to resume sustenance and preserve their lives. Employing a Buddhist expression, *bintabat chiwit* (receiving life as an offering), the monk expressed the desire 'to be donated the intact lives of Parit and Panusaya as a form of alms' (Thai Rath 2021). In Theravada Buddhist Thailand, *bintabat*, derived from the Pali term *pinda pata* (literally, falling of rice balls), signifies the virtuous act of providing alms to Buddhist monks on their daily morning collection of offerings. The popular monk thus underscored the Buddhist relevance of the youths' hunger strikes, igniting public humanitarian sympathy and causing significant embarrassment to state authorities. Consequently, both Parit and Panusaya were finally released on bail.

Parit's hunger strike protest is thus associated with a seemingly Janus-faced representation. Externally, if one sticks to international media and NGO narratives, his protest embodies humanist principles rooted in predominantly Western icons of democracy, equality and liberal political theory. Internally, these universalist formulations blend with a redefined understanding of Thai humanity, as led by a selfless citizenry. Thai media accounts of the young activist's hunger strike reveal, as do Parit's own words on the matter, the persisting influence of Buddhist moral hierarchy and the subversive reinterpretation of Thai royal cosmology's humanitarian foundations in shaping the youth movement's attempt to humanise Thainess.

Panusaya: hunger strike as an act of friendship

A few days later, as we were sharing a meal in Bangkok, I posed a question to Panusaya 'Rung' Sithijirawattanakul: 'Why did you choose a hunger strike as a form of protest?' The 23-year-old anthropology student and amateur violinist, her eyes moist with emotion, provided a simple response: 'When Penguin [Parit] started his hunger strike, I felt I could not let my friend experience this torture in solitude. I just didn't want him to feel alone in this. He is my friend.'

Panusaya's motivation is, to me, as admirable as Parit's, but it sounds less imbued with abstract ideals or cumbersome references, revealing instead the affective role of a sense of kinship as an important basis for solidarity. Humanitarianism's double nature – as an all-encompassing ethical category and as an emotional response towards the suffering of others (Fassin 2009, 271) – seems to present itself here in the latter form, which is arguably a clear instance of humanitarianism from below. Yet, human rights theory is certainly not unknown to Panusaya.

Her political activism began at Thammasat University, but her engagement with universalist paradigms of humanity was far more precocious. During high school, through a number of volunteering experiences in Thailand and abroad, she developed a great sensitivity to suffering, along with the conviction that promoting human dignity in Thailand is essential for dismantling long-standing constructions of karmic hierarchy. These constructions, as she acutely articulated as a university student, provide legitimacy both to the monarchy's postulated sacredness and to the perceived naturalness of the kingdom's class, ethnic, gender and generational inequalities.

Despite Thailand's ratification of several UN conventions, Panusaya believes abstract discussions on human rights and democracy are only partially comprehensible within the context of Thai culture. Therefore, 'It is crucial to present concrete, contextual examples' illustrating how these concepts can be applied in social practice. Building on this premise, a particular principle has become the focal point of her activism: 'Everyone's right to freedom of opinion and expression'. In the context of Thailand's Buddhist royalism this signifies, above all, 'every citizen's right to inquire into the constitutional appropriateness of the monarch's political conduct' – the taboo of all taboos.

This pivotal recognition unfolded at a time marked by the palpable repression of this very principle. Panusaya's coming of age coincided with a series of significant events, including the 2014 military coup, the passing of Thailand's revered King Bhumibol in 2016, a tense interregnum, the controversial ascent of the king's son, Vajiralongkorn, to the throne, the contentious 2019 general elections, and the pandemic with its resulting lockdowns. Throughout this period, arbitrary arrests, lese-majesty charges and an intensification of royalist propaganda all featured in the military junta's concerted efforts to repress dissent and to preserve hierarchies.

In 2020, Panusaya responded to these tactics by calling for monarchy reform in the name of humanity. Like Parit, she was imprisoned for lese-majesty. During her detention, she was diagnosed with COVID-19, and she went on a 39-day hunger strike before finally being released. Like her friend, she is now facing several charges and, if found guilty, could be sentenced to life in prison. Interestingly, however, Panusaya's dedication to freedom of expression represents ideas somewhat divergent from those upheld by Parit, despite sharing the same political goals:

> My activism has nothing to do with Buddhism. Unlike Penguin, I do not believe in religion. As I mentioned, when my friend decided to initiate a hunger strike, I felt compelled to do something because he had nobody to stand up for him. I wanted to make him feel that he was not alone in this.

Panusaya's actions, in this sense, were explicitly driven by humanitarian concerns. As Amarasuriya et al. (2020, 7) observed: 'for would-be revolutionaries … the sentimental intimate, the promised warmth of comradeship, of brotherhood and sisterhood, offers the possibility of scaling up into bigger forms of solidarity.' Panusaya's decision to join Parit in a hunger strike stemmed from a perceived moral imperative towards an intimate friend, and from the empathetic acknowledgement of his suffering. Her own hunger strike then generated, as a result, expanding circles of affective solidarity, starting with her family. She confided in me, becoming emotional to the point of tears, that her elder sister – a free woman with a clean criminal record, not involved in any political activism – stopped eating food, too. 'She didn't make her hunger strike a public act as I did; she just wanted to go through my same experience so that I'd feel my family is ready to suffer with me. I am very lucky.'

This 'efficacious intimacy' (Mohan 2024) spread like wildfire through social media, producing a sort of emotional contagion that turned Panusaya's humanitarianism from below into her youthful supporters' altruism at a distance. It prompted thousands to feel as if Panusaya and Parit, even though they had never met them personally, were close kin who should be helped. Stronger than any political ideology, the emotional impulse to save 'our dear ones' motivated many sits-ins of young people rallying under the slogan 'Free our friends'.

This humanitarian impulse was propagated, nonetheless, through specific social forms. Although Panusaya publicly disavows Thailand's kinship-based hierarchy on the grounds of human rights theory, I often observed her relating to older Thai people with a notable degree of deference, adhering to the customs of Thai etiquette. Notable examples included her university professor, who acted as Panusaya's guarantor for the fulfilment of her bail conditions, and her elder sister, a steadfast pillar of emotional support. These individuals are perceived as elders who do not exploit their superior status, standing instead as advocates for her right to free speech, even in the face of criticism. Unlike those in government, they are *phu yai* (big people) who deserve her gratitude and humble respect. Parit might say, in other words, that they embody true barami.

Although Panusaya doesn't find Parit's cosmological language appealing, she knows that formal adherence to Thainess and its emotional frequencies can sometimes be required to bring about humanity in the kingdom. Panusaya's expressions of humanity, like those of her friend, can thus shift depending on expediency, sentiment, time and place. 'In order for Thai society to be emotionally triggered,' she explained bitterly, 'I have to act as a well-behaved young girl, making my mother proud. The fact that I come from a good family, and I am enrolled at one of Bangkok's most prestigious universities, is sadly important.' She was referring here to the normative Thai perceptions of Bangkok-based middle-class citizens as *khon di* (good people), cultivated and protected by the state for the sake of the development of Thainess (Funahashi 2015). As she clarified:

> If the hunger striker was a poor boy, an ethnic minority citizen, or a Muslim southerner, their case would've probably never reached public visibility, for many Thai people don't feel pity for those who are considered lower-ranking. But I am supposed to be the future of the Thai nation – hence my hunger strike generated media buzz. It's horrible but it's how it works here.

As seen by the right audience, then, Panusaya embraced convincingly the role of a grateful daughter whose tribulations deeply distressed her parents (see Figure 4.2). During her hunger strike, the poignant depiction of her mother's tears in the press and on social media evoked

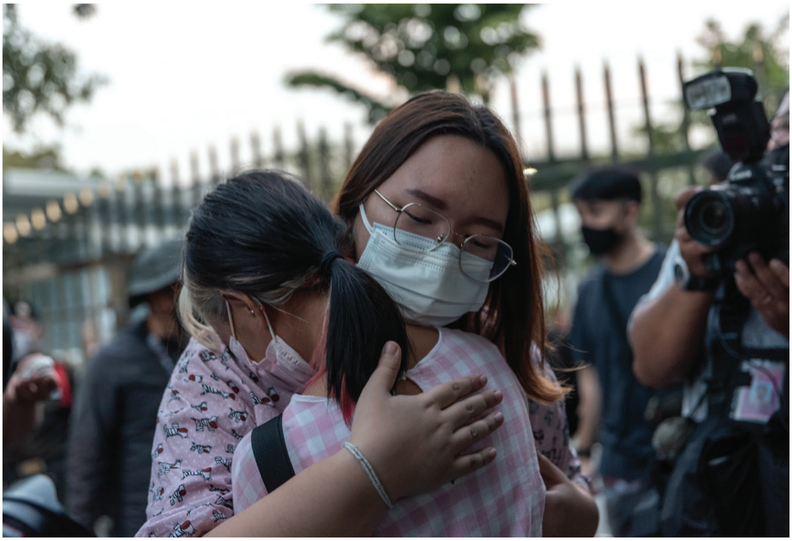

Figure 4.2 Panusaya hugs her relatives and supporters at the Central Women's Correctional Institute in Bangkok after being granted bail, 6 May 2021. *Source*: courtesy of Prachathai, Thikamporn Tamtiang 2021. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

empathetic responses, which carried significant political weight in a nation envisioned as a family. A royally endorsed state that induces a compassionate mother to cry by subjecting her dutiful daughter to lese-majesty-related torture fails to exemplify the parental love it is expected to embody.[9] In turn, the monarch can be perceived as falling short of the fatherly Buddhist virtues of selfless compassion that he is supposed to personify.

Panusaya proved capable of interpreting international humanitarianism's internal inconsistencies, acting as a cultural broker of seemingly incompatible moralities. Her genuinely spontaneous hunger strike generated a broad affective resonance not only within Thailand but also internationally: 'The image of a vulnerable girl's suffering is best at triggering emotional responses, also outside the country, though for different reasons. I thought that my hunger strike could sensitise international publics more powerfully than Parit's.' Through her experience in the NGO sector, Panusaya learned that humanitarianism's declared neutrality and equal treatment of all humans can produce contradictory hierarchies of deservingness between different categories of people (Fassin 2010). As symbols of innocence and moral purity, women and children can more easily collect the political dividends of humanitarian operations (Malkki 2010; Ticktin 2017). In fact, as Kerry Anne

Mackereth (2020, 24) underscored, even the universal level of human biology, as projected by the hunger striker's emaciated body, is already differentiated along gender, ethnic and age lines.

Perhaps also for this reason, renowned Western organisations took Panusaya's struggle to heart, framing her courageous endeavour as either a manifesto against human rights violations in Thailand or an emblem of young women's democratic activism in the Global South. The BBC listed Panusaya as one of the 100 most inspiring and influential women of 2020 (BBC 2020). During Panusaya's hunger strike, Amnesty International launched a global petition urging all charges against her to be dropped, and it had thousands of letters of support from young sympathisers around the world delivered to her (Amnesty International 2021). 'Reading them touched my heart; I felt I was not alone,' she recalled, deeply moved.

We thus observe a complex interplay in Panusaya's hunger strike initiative, wherein her self-harming solidarity both spontaneously emanates from and consciously surpasses her personal connection with a friend. This dynamic shifts the realm of relational empathy into a broader context of humanitarian emotions in order to foster public engagement and liberal altruism. Realising that these emotions are influenced by distinct motivations within and outside the domain of Thainess, Panusaya endeavoured to represent human rights equality and merit-based hierarchy, liberal and Buddhist compassion, all while navigating through local and international political articulations of what it means to be human. Like Parit, she selflessly put her own life at stake – for the benefit of her friends, and for the Thai people.

Conclusion: Thai humanity under question

A hunger strike's humanitarian effectiveness requires public attention. Parit, Panusaya, and their thousands of young allies thus had to continually find ways to remain in the spotlight. Amongst activists, hunger strikers in particular need their suffering bodies to be constantly visible as *zoe* (bare life), exposed to the concerned gaze of multiple publics, in order for their claims to humanity as *bios* (political existence) to be addressed (Agamben 1998). Human rights organisations and the media – worlds which Parit and Panusaya were already engaged with – contribute to keeping the spotlight on. A Thai NGO worker I spoke to provided a meaningful example of how this need to stage the hunger-striking body as a live political spectacle has been addressed:

> We tried to raise public awareness about the activists' hunger strike situation. A critical point in our efforts was the inability to photograph Parit. Normally, we could take photos when the detainees were brought from the prison vehicle to the courthouse basement, but after Parit started the hunger strike, there were attempts to block all photo opportunities, leaving the public unaware of his actual condition. We thus employed illustrators to enter the courtroom and create drawings to communicate Parit's condition to the public [see Figure 4.3].

While organisations like Amnesty International, the BBC and Human Rights Watch invited Western pity (and humanitarian donations) to enter Thai politics, thereby fortifying youth resistance via liberal altruism, Thai NGOs did much more. They not only provided essential aid to hunger-striking political prisoners in the form of psychological support and fundraising for payment of bail, but they were also pivotal in expanding the scope of the prisoners' sacrifices beyond that of the individual. Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, amongst others, ensured pro bono legal assistance to jailed youths, representing their interests in the courtroom, reporting on their condition to the public, and compelling the judicial system to comply with the

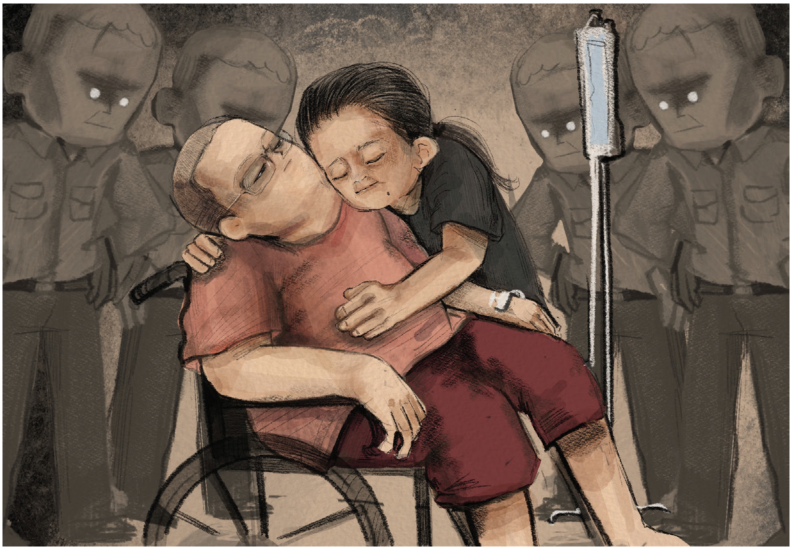

Figure 4.3 Parit, with a wheelchair and an intravenous drip after a prolonged hunger strike, is hugged by his mother as prison guards loom over them, 1 April 2021. *Source*: © iLaw (Internet Dialogue on Law Reform) 2021.

principle of presumption of innocence which is enshrined in the constitution. In their capacity as lawyers, members of the organisation also visited imprisoned activists regularly, sharing with them Thai society's polarised reactions to their arrests and word of other youths initiating hunger strikes in response, which helped to connect the activists' often disjointed relational empathy. Thai NGOs helped integrate grassroots sentiments and vernacular ethics – whether Buddhist selflessness, kinship-based hierarchy, or friendship bonds – into a broader, internationally effective humanitarian discourse. In the process, the particular Thai being faded into a universal human being, elevating Thai youth's polysemic humanitarianism to a global scale.

The May 2023 general elections proved that Parit and Panusaya's readiness to sacrifice had not been in vain. The youth-supported Move Forward Party, which promised the reform of Article 112 and full amnesty for all activists convicted of lese-majesty, won in a landslide. However, the junta-appointed senate blocked the party from forming a government. Startlingly obscure backstage machinations culminated in the second-ranked Pheu Thai Party's candidate, property tycoon Srettha Thavisin, becoming Prime Minister at the head of a coalition that includes his former opponents, the army-backed royalist parties who suffered a resounding defeat in the elections. Incidentally, hours before Srettha assumed the country's top job, Pheu Thai's shadow leader, convicted ex-prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra, made a historic return home after years spent abroad in self-imposed exile to avoid serving a six-year sentence. He was paroled soon after via a royal pardon – evidence, critics speculate, of a deal between the Pheu Thai Party and the military-royal establishment. To make matters worse, in April 2024, as I was finalising revisions to this chapter, the Thai Constitutional Court accepted a case seeking the dissolution of the Move Forward Party, now in opposition as the People's Party, on the basis of its electoral campaign to reform the lese-majesty law, which was deemed tantamount to overthrowing the system of government with the king as head of state.

As Tyrell Haberkorn (2024, 74) has pointedly wondered: 'If calling for reform and proposing a law are forbidden, it is unclear what democracy means.'

This is bleak news for political prisoners like Parit and Panusaya, figures of youth humanitarianism whose once-sparkling colours are now fading under the blows of old Thainess. Once again, the 'constitutional bricolage' of Buddhist kingship and parliamentary democracy (Mérieau 2021) is trapping the citizenry, however selfless it may be, in its ambiguities. As a result, Thai youths' calls for humanity can turn deadly. On 14 May 2024, one of Panusaya and Parit's followers, Netiporn 'Bung' Sanesangkhom, 28 years old, passed away in prison after a months-long hunger strike. She is the first non-violent, hunger-striking youth activist in Thailand to have died in jail while awaiting trial for lese-majesty.

The shocking news of Netiporn's death sparked public debate. Amnesty International immediately declared, 'This is a grim day for Thai society, highlighting the severe judicial harassment and the justice system's failure to recognise basic human rights' (Amnesty International Thailand 2024). Prominent Thai historian Thongchai Winichakul (2024), a survivor of the 1976 Thammasat University Massacre who knows the Thai jail system well, cited the degrading treatment of prisoners in the Buddhist kingdom. He described overcrowded cells, substandard food, poor health care, compulsory use of shackles and an environment defined by raw power as contributing factors to the young woman's death. As he noted, the Thai term for 'correctional system', *rachathan*, does not reflect its English equivalent's implications. *Rachathan*, literally 'royal punishment', rather retains its 'old meaning', according to which 'prisoners are less than humans, who deserve to be punished'. This is particularly so for those accused of lese-majesty, who, in the military government's royalist vision of humanity, were ineligible for Thainess, and thus no longer deserving of fair treatment (Farrelly 2016, 338). Ready to sacrifice themselves in order to humanise Thainess, youth activists risk being dehumanised for their alleged betrayal of it.

Panusaya, Parit and, tragically, Netiporn's commitment to creating distinctly plural ways of being human is something more than just dust. At the crossroads of past and present, local and global, ethical and affective, their hunger for humanity is a peripheral alter-politics that rearticulates Buddhist narratives of compassion and the warmth of kin-like solidarity in contemporary global discourse on human universality.

In a world torn apart by rampant warmongering, ethno-religious nationalism, rapacious capitalism, and old and new imperialisms, Thai youth activism represents a testimony of non-violent idealism that is highly meaningful, not only in Thailand but worldwide, including in the West, where the idea of the commonality of human beings ceased to warm hearts some time ago.[10]

Notes

1 The Thai word for ‘human’ (*manut*) derives from the Sanskrit *manuṣya* and from the Pali *manussa*, terms that, in various religious texts, designate the quality of human life in relation to the path to enlightenment (Davids and Stede 1999, 520). While the word is now predominantly used in secular contexts, its etymology suggests that it entered the Thai language through Buddhist scripture.

2 As accusations of lese-majesty progress from police investigation to indictment in the Criminal Court, activists have the constitutionally granted right to apply for bail. However, the Criminal Court has frequently denied bail for youths accused of breaching Article 112, based on unspecified national security concerns.

3 While not all of these jailed youths gained the same media visibility or belonged to the same group as Parit and Panusaya, many went on hunger strikes to advance the rights of political prisoners. According to Thai Lawyers for Human Rights (personal communication), between 2016 and 2023, 25 youth activists charged with lese-majesty, sedition, and related crimes went on hunger strikes while in detention.

4 Today’s youth activists instead trace their militant genealogy to the 2010 ‘Red Shirt’ United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship, 85 members of which were brutally killed by the Thai military in the centre of Bangkok; to the pro-democracy students who were massacred in 1976 by the army, police and royalist paramilitary forces at Thammasat University; and, especially, to the People’s Party (*khana ratsadon*), a coalition of military and civilian leaders who orchestrated Thailand’s transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy in 1932. Significantly, beginning in 2020, various youth groups have united as People’s Party 2020 (*khana ratsadon 2563*) – a reincarnation of sorts of the original People’s Party (Bolotta 2024, 320).

5 During the Cold War, US-supported Thai juntas emphasised that being Thai equated to being anti-communist and, in particular, not Vietnamese. By the 1990s, the core of Thainess was primarily defined by loyalty to the royal institution (Thongchai 2016).

6 This is not the first time that Thai pro-democracy forces have relied on blood as a medium to stress that their humanity is biologically equal to that of the powerful, as when, in 2010, Red Shirt protesters gathered at the Government House to symbolically spill their own blood in the name of returning to democracy (see Elinoff 2020).

7 Kruba Siwichai’s story is one significant example of various ‘holy men-led rebellions’ against the centralised religious and political structures of Bangkok’s royal elites. These rebellions were characteristic of separatist dissent in Siam-Thailand’s formerly semi-autonomous border regions, especially at the turn of the twentieth century (see, for instance, Wilson 1997).

8 In the *Vessantara Jataka* – the penultimate of Sakyamuni’s ten major incarnations before achieving Buddhahood, and the most popular Jataka in Thailand – Vessantara, an endlessly generous and charitable prince, acquires barami by giving away all of his possessions, including his own children and wife, to those in need (Jory 2016).

9 The political significance of motherly love, a referent for moral goodness (*khunatham*) in Buddhist Thailand (Keyes 1984, Bolotta 2017), was dramatically evident also in Parit’s case. On 30 April 2021, his mother, overcome with desperation, shocked onlookers by shaving her head in front of the Bangkok Criminal Court. As the bald mother demanded bail for her hunger-striking son, bystanders and journalists couldn’t hold back their tears (Khaosod 2021).

10 I am deeply grateful to Penguin and Rung for generously agreeing to share their experiences with me, and for the openness and willingness to engage that they brought to our conversations. I also wish to thank Boonlert Visetprecha for his invaluable assistance in arranging meetings and facilitating discussions with Thammasat University-based youth activists. My sincere thanks also go to Anna J. Barańczak for her excellent copyediting support. Finally, I am grateful to the editors of this volume for their insightful and constructive feedback on earlier versions of this chapter, which greatly improved its clarity and depth.

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5

Acting out the citizen: humanitarianism on unsteady ground

Alexander Ephrussi

Mullah Yaqub appeared in the doorway of his Quranic school. He smiled when he saw me, and shook my hand firmly. He looked tall in his long blue felted coat and black knitted cap, with a silver beard and piercing blue eyes behind heavy eyelids. We sat down in the little bare room that served as his office and he poured me a cup of tea. I told him that I had heard about an earthquake relief fundraising effort by Afghans in Istanbul, and that he was said to have organised it. He nodded and smiled, then stayed silent for a moment as if expecting another question. Finally he said: ‘In these moments, helping is not a choice, but indeed a moral duty.’ I nodded, but pointed out that not everyone can heed a moral duty when there are material restrictions.

ره نیک مردان آزاده گیر
چوایستاده دست افتاده گیر
Saadi Shirazi

‘*Take the path like virtuous men, and give a hand to the fallen as long as you are standing*’,[1] he said, smiling, and added, ‘Do you know the poet Saadi?’

When a devastating earthquake struck Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023, and people from all spheres of society scrambled to collect goods and money for the affected areas, politics had already deeply shaped both the meaning of ‘earthquake’ and of ‘migrants’. In the midst of the destruction and the race against time for rescue efforts, the themes of disaster mitigation and of migration met and intertwined in such a way that governmental action and discourse in regard to both became the locus of a struggle for legitimacy.

By focusing on humanitarian actions 'from below' in this chapter, I consider humanitarianism less as an array of practices in movement upon solid ground, but rather as a turbulent negotiation emerging from the highly contested positionalities of the various actors involved, all in motion themselves in a quest for legitimacy. Highlighting the political contention in which both the earthquake's destruction and the migrants' presence are embedded allows us to explore how power is produced, contested and reproduced, not simply in the material aspect of humanitarian work, but in the visibilisation of it. Discourse and visual display played a central role in the aftermath of the 2023 earthquake, which renders Judith Butler's (1993) concept of performativity particularly useful for understanding the humanitarian efforts that followed. By looking at actions both on the part of the state and on the part of migrants whose access to legalisation is barred by that same state, a focus on humanitarianism from below sheds light on negotiations between the state and migrants for power and legitimacy.

I define legitimacy here in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu (1991; also Wacquant 2009; Fassin 2013), that is, as an attribute of actions that afford power to the actor through the recognition that the actions receive from a variety of institutions. In the context of the earthquake, humanitarian aid – providing it, or failing to do so – emerged as an important vocabulary with which to question not only the legitimacy to rule, but also the legitimacy of certain groups to reside in Turkey. Focusing on these debates permits us to critically analyse the production of alterity in migration, and to consider seriously the moments in which belonging is questioned through performative actions. By enacting a form of alter-politics through humanitarianism, Afghans in Istanbul carried out a performative action that heeded a sincere moral call for compassion and solidarity, while also momentarily positioning themselves as non-migrants – as co-inhabitant citizens of a shared place and time.

This chapter begins with the earthquake and the debates that took place around the management of rescue efforts by the state, before turning to migration in Turkey – which, according to the UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, hosted more refugees than any other country at the time. The opening section aims to understand how debates around hosting migrants became central to how governance is criticised and contested. The following section turns to how these two topics merged into a single one in February of 2023. I then examine the visual grammar of the state in the public sphere in order to understand the performative power it holds for a government attempting to assert its legitimacy to rule. The subsequent section shows how, through this visual campaign, humanitarian effort was framed as a required action of the citizen, which I explore through humanitarian efforts by a group of Afghan migrants. Showing how this group collected and delivered funds for earthquake relief efforts demonstrates how this action permitted this group of people to momentarily challenge their positionality by heeding a call that was framed as a national one. Testing the material limits to the transformative power of this action then allows us to consider how participation can effect change, and the role of subjectivity therein.

This chapter thus investigates earthquake relief work and its mediatisation in the wake of the widespread destruction and loss of life that began with the first tremors on 6 February 2023, highlighting the political nature of humanitarian action as well as the ways in which these actions stand in dialogue with one another. It furthermore shows how an important way in which migrants negotiate their relationship to a state that refuses their legalisation hinges on participation in contextually dependent actions that are expected of the citizen.

Shaking ground

In the early hours of the morning of 6 February 2023, a devastating earthquake hit southern Turkey and northwestern Syria. Though the emergency response took an alarmingly long time to arrive in the vast affected areas, it rapidly became apparent that the destruction was on a scale beyond anything Turkey had seen in decades. Later that same day at 13:24, the earth shook again, toppling already damaged buildings and previously intact ones, burying thousands more under the rubble.

This was the most destructive earthquake in the history of the Turkish Republic. All told, the multiple tremors are estimated to have led to the loss of over 55,000 lives according to official numbers, and they left a further 1.5 million people homeless, practically wiping out entire cities. The destruction and loss defy the written word. In some places the tremors were so destructive that nothing was left – only the memory of neighbourhoods, and of the families that had once lived in them.

The entire nation entered a period of mourning that affected all spheres of public life. Schools and universities ceased their teaching, and the usual bustle in public spaces ground to a halt, as spaces of entertainment were shuttered and music went silent. The grief was not a quiet one however, if there ever was such a thing. This was not a case of a crowd looking back, shocked and bereaved at the loss in a tragic incident that stood in the past, wondering how to move forward. Death was not in the past but very much in the present. Tens of thousands remained under the rubble, and death came slowly, mostly through cold or hunger.

In the days that followed the earthquake, volunteers in the thousands, of varying degrees of professional qualification in rescue work, scrambled to reach the affected areas. Various organisations present on the ground set up campaigns for the collection of donations; others travelled to the area. Within days and weeks, government institutions began channelling the aid streaming in and organising the volunteers. Like millions of others, I spent days, and then weeks, riveted to the revolving televised images of often lifeless bodies extracted from the rubble and of cities left shapeless, with a feeling of utter powerlessness and desolation, finding but meagre solace in the collection of donations that I circulated and contributed to (see Figure 5.1).

The humanitarian situation that ensued bore a deeply political component since the very day the earthquake struck. After over 20 years

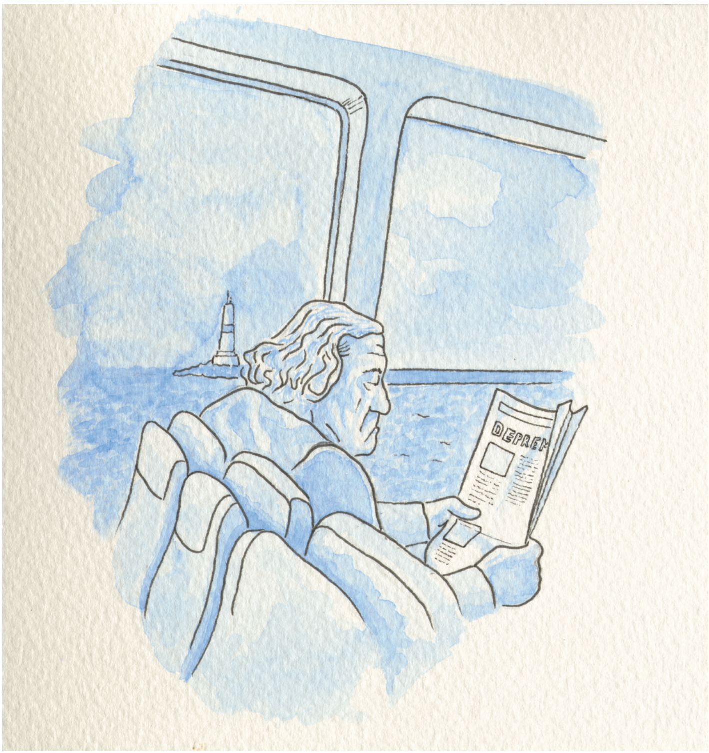

Figure 5.1 A man sitting in a ferry on the Bosphorus reads a newspaper reporting on the earthquake, early February 2023. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

of taxes dedicated explicitly to earthquake disaster prevention and of regulations concerning the construction of new buildings, the extent of the devastation and the belated state response rapidly came to be perceived by many as an utter failure on the part of the government. In the days following the quake, many different voices including the CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi, the Republican People's Party), the largest party in opposition to the ruling AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi, the Justice and Development Party), pointed to the latter's failure in enforcing construction regulations in place for the last 20 years, and deemed them in part accountable for the massive loss of life. This sparked extensive debate in the national media and on social media platforms, three months before the presidential election.

Migration contention

In parallel to earthquake management, the question of migration grew to become one of the most central points of debate in the run-up to the presidential election in May and June of 2023. Admittedly, this was not a new question in Turkish politics. In various forms, migration management has stood high on the political agenda since the early years of the republic, when migration played a key role in the nation-building process (Iğsız 2018). Migration has become an even more central topic in political debates since 2011, when Turkey began hosting a large number of Syrian refugees. When the earthquake struck, Turkey hosted the world's largest number of refugees – 3.7 million according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2024), from many different countries. With practically no way to legalise their stay in Turkey (Danış and Sert 2021) aside from occasional special decrees (Le Chêne 2019), Afghans such as my interlocutors represent perhaps the largest segment of Turkey's migrant population who are refused legal resident status (Karadağ and Sert 2023). Turkey's key role in the EU's migration policy has also not gone unnoticed by the Turkish electorate, in particular since the 2016 signing of the so-called 'EU-Turkey deal'. With an annual amount of six billion euros paid to Turkey by the EU in exchange for receiving people that the EU chooses to expel from its territory, and with the promise of heightened border surveillance, a large segment of the Turkish population has been dissatisfied with Turkey's instrumentalisation as part of the EU's border apparatus. While this arrangement has reduced the numbers of people crossing into Europe, it has not stopped them. Instead, it has rendered crossing all the more dangerous, increased the numbers of casualties at sea, and paved the way for border pushbacks, which violate international law and have cost the lives of thousands in recent years (Reliefweb 2022; Danış 2021).

The public and political discourse in Turkey around migration, which is framed as being 'out of control' and a foreign threat to the integrity of the republic, is clearly not unrelated to how this discourse has taken shape in western-European countries. The largest opposition party, the CHP, had been increasingly vocal about the issue over the last few years, arguing that the large number of migrants in the country was yet another aspect of the ruling AKP party's failure throughout their 20 years of rule. Campaigning in advance of the presidential election of 2023, the CHP promised to increase police control and 'repatriations' of migrants should the party come to power. Simultaneously, under the AKP, the police and the Göç İdaresi (the Presidency of Migration Management) ramped up their efforts to apprehend and deport undocumented migrants.

Sitting on a flowery carpet in his sitting room in Yeşilköy on the European side of Istanbul, Esmatullah, an Afghan acquaintance in his early thirties, laid out his view for me quite simply: 'The CHP spend their time speaking of how they will deport all foreigners, but do nothing, while the AKP say nothing but are continuously deporting us.' He shook his head, then brought his cup of green tea to his lips. '*Nāshokr hastand kol-e shān* [They are ungrateful, all of them]. If ten restaurants open, eight of them will be by foreigners, you can be sure of it. Who really works in this country?'

The intersection between the xenophobic discourse and the national economic interests of exploitative working conditions for illegalised migrants is not lost on my interlocutors, who, unlike most European and international media outlets, saw beyond the apparent binary of a migrant-friendly AKP versus a border-erecting CHP (Michaelson and Barış Narlı 2023; Kirby 2023). As Esmatullah highlights here, many migrants are aware of how the state benefits from the illegalised labour of migrant workers threatened by expulsion, and how the simultaneous theatrical displays of migrant deportations are a means of catering to a certain electorate. Debates around migration have become a vocabulary to express anxiety about a wider range of contested social topics that stretch far beyond the topic of migration itself – from tension between secularism and religion, to gender and gender-based violence, to name just a few.

It is against this backdrop of broader political anxieties that migration and earthquake response intersected in media representation and public discourse, only days into the search and rescue efforts following the 2023 earthquake.

Refugees in troubled times

The border region between Turkey and Syria, the area most devastated by the earthquake, hosted a substantial Syrian refugee population before the earthquake struck. The highly politically charged themes of earthquake (mis)management and of migration collided dramatically in the immediate aftermath, as accusations of Syrians plundering collapsed houses were widely circulated on social media and in news reports. Investigations by researchers from GAR (Göç Araştırmaları Derneği, Turkey's Association for Migration Research) found little evidence that the theft of basic necessities (blankets, jackets, shoes, etc.) could be attributed particularly to Syrians rather than being simply a widespread act amongst many people left homeless and at the mercy of freezing nighttime temperatures (Sert et al. 2023). It is also suspected that organised criminal bands drove into the earthquake-stricken area for theft on a bigger scale. Again, GAR's independent investigation revealed no evidence of this theft having been carried out by Syrian refugees, despite what widely circulated social media posts alleged. In severely damaged cities like Kahramanmaraş, the Syrian refugee population is known to have actively joined the rescue effort. Nonetheless, in the context of the earthquake, the term 'refugee' widely became associated with plunder and, more generally, perceived as an aggravating factor in an already highly strained environment.

These allegations were not confined to unofficial discussions on social media; they were also taken up by politicians. Two days after the earthquake, Ümit Özdağ, head of the ultra-nationalist Zafer Partisi (Victory Party), shared these allegations and declared that his party had been 'warning against this since the very beginning' ('*İlk andan beri uyarıyoruz*') (Özdağ 2023). Attached to his post was a video of a news presenter speaking with the head of the renowned football club from the devastated city of Antakya, who declared that a 'war has started: Syrians are plundering Turkish citizens'. The distressing images sharing the screen with this conversation, of rescue teams struggling to extract people from the rubble of collapsed buildings, played as if they directly illustrated the point at hand. With these widely shared images, the figure of the refugee became framed as a malignant presence in direct relation to the earthquake.

The power in disclosing: on visibilisation and performativity

The dissemination of these images had power over both the accused and the accuser. An article by Gregory Feldman (2005) borrows Butler's (1993) lens of performativity to investigate how, in its discursive and reiterative exclusion of certain populations from national belonging, a state manages to *create* the very national community that it claims to represent. He demonstrates how states construct legitimisation of their rule upon the performative creation of themselves (metonymically standing in for a national community) in opposition to an outsider community. The image of the 'outsider', Feldman argues, constitutes the state as the ultimate 'insider'; constructing this image and reiterating it discursively is what lends power – hence its 'performative' nature.

Feldman's arguments resonate strongly with the situation in Turkey. The founding of the republic, a new nation-state in the Ottoman Empire's stead, was premised on a demographic upheaval that included the expulsion of millions, most notably through population exchanges with Greece (Duruiz 2021; Ünlü 2023). Who may and who may not be considered within the national community, and thus legitimate, was drastically redefined in the early years of the republic, in a continuous process of what Aslı Iğsız (2018) has called 'biopolitical segregationism'. These definitions are perpetually renegotiated and redefined, both legally (Le Chêne 2019; Öztan 2020) and, more significantly for the case at hand, discursively through political rhetoric and visual media.

As mentioned earlier, this renegotiation of the legitimacy of the presence of certain populations resurged even more vigorously in the tense run-up to the presidential elections, and it materialised in statements like the main opposition party's slogan, '*Sınır namustur*' ('Border is honour'), which implicitly equates crossing borders with an unwanted and dishonourable penetration by a foreign body. Here however, the bounds to which this foreign group of intruders is circumscribed is kept malleable, and the right to redefine it is reserved for later. In other instances, the targeted population was named far more explicitly (Aksu 2023). These discursive practices bear a strong resemblance to what Butler (1993) describes as performative actions. Through repetition, actors not only establish norms that they claim to regulate (such as who should be allowed to reside where) but they end up defining the very bodies they speak of.

Images furthermore play an important role in this reiterative act of instating norms. Particularly in moments of political indeterminacy, such as immediately preceding or following elections, images displaying the apprehension and removal of migrants are deployed in national media almost theatrically (see Figures 5.2 and 5.3). These images allow the government in power to legitimise itself by weeding out those whose presence is shown as illegitimate. Leading up to the 2023 presidential elections, we see that it is not only the ruling party that can partake in this performative display of self-assertion. In fact, the CHP challenged the legitimacy of the party in power by asking whether they were even fit to govern since their rule had caused so many migrants to materialise; at the same time, the CHP asserted their own legitimacy by discursively visibilising that which had remained invisible. The party began claiming that there were in fact not just 4 million refugees in Turkey (which already placed Turkey as the country with the most refugees in the world) but in fact 10 million, more than half of whom had been concealed in a shroud of the AKP's rhetoric and treacherously hospitable politics (Anadolu Ajansı 2023). Images of arrests in the media, showing young men in shackles paraded dramatically through the streets of Istanbul, created a notion of the hidden illegal migrant – the invisible, dangerous, economically opportunistic, and thus undeserving migrant was created,

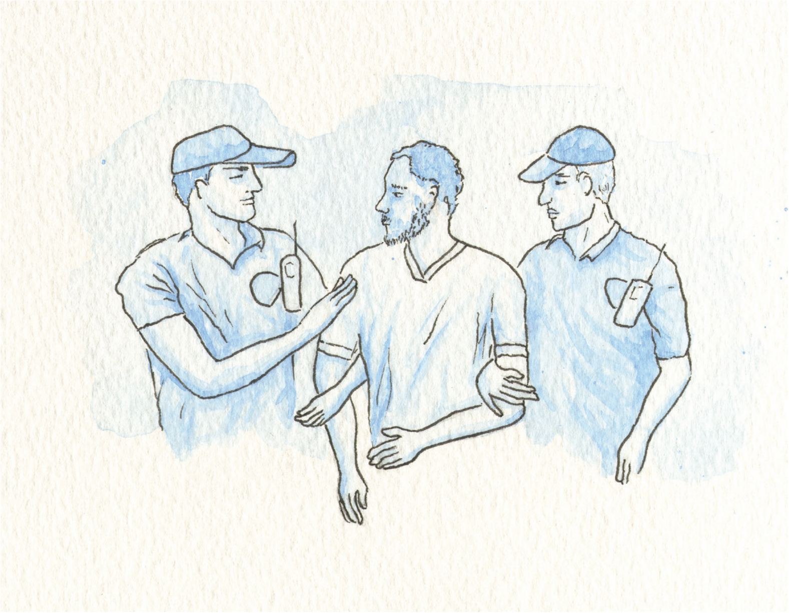

Figure 5.2 A man being arrested. Drawing after a photograph on the cover of *Hürriyet* newspaper, 13 July 2023. Headline: 'Over 3,500 illegal migrants caught in Istanbul in the last 6 days'. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

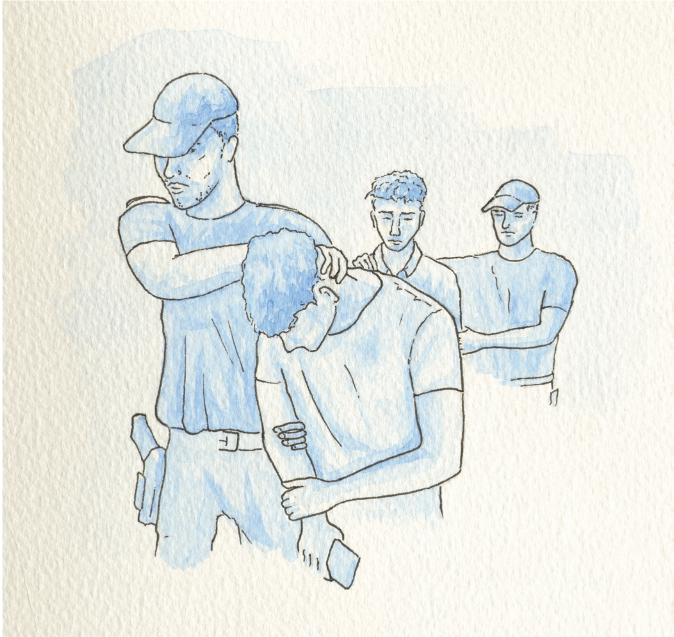

Figure 5.3 Two men being arrested. Drawing after a photograph on the cover of *Hürriyet* newspaper, 11 July 2023. Headline: 'Instanbul police detects over 500 more illegal migrants'. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

ironically, in the act of visibilising him (and it is indeed a *him*, not a her, for the dangerous migrant is a gendered threat). If, as Feldman (2005) claims, discerning and visibilising the 'outsider' is the very act that creates the 'insider', then one can consider that the opposition in Turkey was calling into question the legitimacy of the ruling party by uncovering the fact that they failed to convincingly draw this divide of insider-outsider themselves. The opposition performatively redefined the boundaries of the community of 'insiders' to cast doubt on the ruling party's belonging to that community.

We thus see how various actors of the Turkish state use images and discourse in a performative manner to create notional boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate within the territorial boundary, implicitly instating themselves as the legitimate defenders of national demographic cohesion. What emerges when we explore the earthquake and the humanitarian responses to it is that the performative acts of the state go beyond the theatrical unveiling of supposedly invisible intruders; they also define an orthopraxy – a right way of acting – in response to questions amongst the national community around the notion of ‘crisis’. In other words, the self-assertion of state power is not only reproduced oppositionally by revealing and defining that which is not legitimate; it also involves defining and displaying a response deemed appropriate to a national catastrophe like the earthquake of 2023.

In the weeks following the earthquake, public displays of grief appeared in all corners of the public space, and with growing intensity. Bridges were draped in black banners with messages such as ‘Condolences to our great Turkey’; most billboards across the city were rapidly converted for state institutions and individual politicians to display their messages of solidarity. The information screens in the metro and other means of public transport, normally filled with dazzlingly colourful advertisements and news items flashing past at dizzying speed, were now uniformly black, with plain white letters reading ‘Get well soon, Turkey’, or ‘God have mercy on those who lost their lives, and we wish a speedy recovery to the injured’ (see Figure 5.4). Most messages were signed by

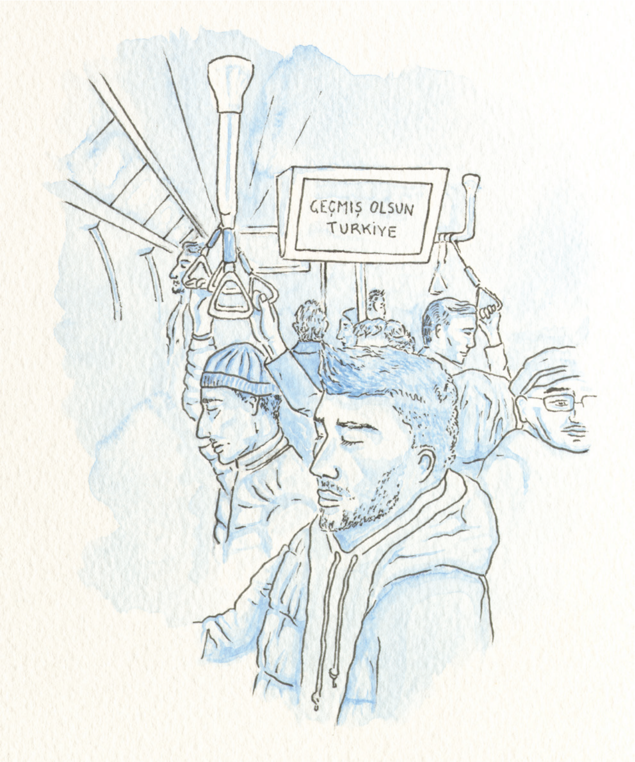

Figure 5.4 Public display of condolences in an Istanbul metro, mid-February 2023. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

agencies like the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, institutions that in this moment took on the colour of grief, attuning the state's affect with the national shock that had transformed public life so profoundly.

Bearing no practical information on how to contribute to the rescue efforts, many of these public displays simply showed a message of affliction linked to a state institution which thus displayed itself as clad in a manner fit for the bereaved. Two weeks after the earthquake, large electronic billboards began displaying lists of distributed humanitarian aid supplies: 161 mobile toilets, 3,400 tents, 46 mobile showers, and so on. These lists were generally signed by AFAD (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı, the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency), which had been founded in 2009 under the rule of President Erdoğan's AKP and, as such, is intimately linked to the ruling party.

Increasingly, the signs began displaying means of contacting or donating to AFAD in order to participate in the national relief effort in a government-sanctioned way, calling on the citizen to donate in a manner that would be channelled through appropriate government institutions. This became all the more noteworthy as several scandals ensued, in which government institutions were accused of skimming funds from donations and profiting from the desperation of local populations (Colella 2023). The management of funds and aid material became the basis of widespread discussions questioning the government's ability to rule the country, and promoting the expression of allegations of corruption.

It thus becomes apparent that, in this tense pre-election period, the role of images produced and circulated by the state can be understood through the lens of performativity, as an important manner in which power legitimises itself. By producing and circulating these images, the state creates and circumscribes what is legitimate. Images relating to controlling and mastering migration and 'other catastrophes' such as the earthquake become a mode of asserting control and reproducing power.

Humanitarian efforts from below: 'people do good, the good will be seen'

Despite government efforts to centralise the humanitarian response to the earthquake, a multitude of grassroots organisations of various sizes and degrees of expertise rapidly mobilised to coordinate volunteers and channel donations.

In the immediate aftermath of the earthquake, for Afghans in Turkey – as among other groups – conversations invariably revolved around the recent disaster. Five days after the quake, I was invited to the house of Esmatullah, a man of certain renown amongst Afghan circles in Istanbul. Accompanied by his nephew Atiq, I crossed the Bosphorus by ferry and we made our way up to Esmatullah's house on a quiet street of the Ataköy neighbourhood. He greeted us as we entered, hugged us both, brewed some green tea, as was his habit, and exchanged some news with Atiq in Uzbek before switching to Persian for my benefit. It is here that I first found out about Afghans fundraising for earthquake relief efforts.

He sat down with the thermos kettle and spoke of the earthquake. 'We raised a lot of money,' Esmatullah said, 'almost 200,000 lira' (over 10,000 US dollars). I asked him how they had gone about it, and he said that he and some others had set up a WhatsApp group and had sent messages around. 'Inside of the Afghan community?' I asked. 'Of course – all Afghans,' he said, sitting very straight in his seat.

He explained that they had contacted the Göç İdaresi, and had asked them what materials were needed in the areas worst hit by the earthquake. They received a list that included tents, tarps and blankets, which they bought, organised into vehicles, and then drove down to the affected areas. Esmatullah pulled out his phone and showed us a picture of a row of men standing before piled up bags (see Figure 5.5).

I returned to Esmatullah's house a week later, curious to find out more about the fundraising. He then explained the importance of raising this money, and underlining the special bond between Turkey and Afghanistan, a point I had heard him make on several previous occasions:

> At the time of the founding of the Turkish republic, the first country to recognise Turkey was Afghanistan! We were the first to recognise it as a country. At the time Afghanistan was so far ahead, people from Europe would come and admire its infrastructure. It is important that Afghans help today, at the time of the earthquake. *Mardom khubi kona, digrān khubi mibina, mardom badi kona, badi mibina* – People do good, the good will be seen, people do bad, the bad will be seen.

He explained, with an air of pride, how help from those with the fewest means was the most valuable:

> In Afghanistan, in the north where we are from, people lined up, bringing all they had. From Afghanistan, 270 people came to help the rescue efforts, too. And 36 doctors came, good doctors, freshly

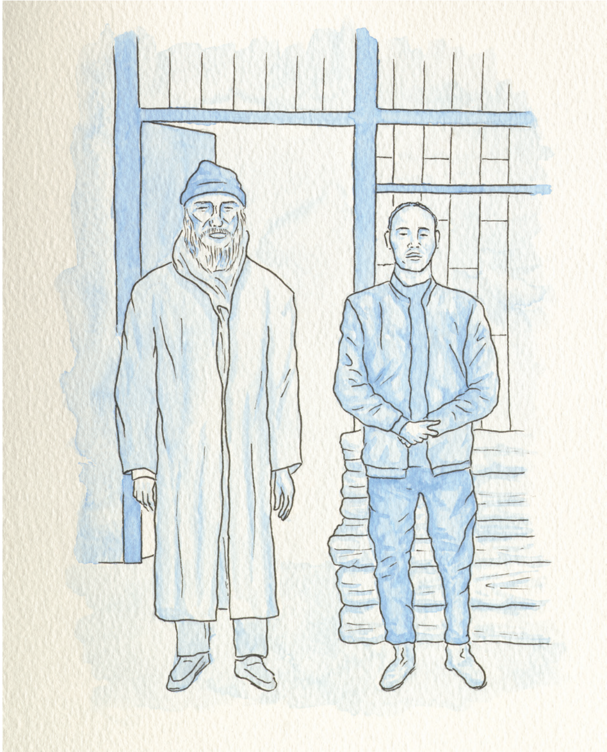

Figure 5.5 Mullah Yaqub and Esmatullah with piles of goods collected for earthquake victims, Istanbul, early February 2023. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

> trained. When they arrived, they had no means, I mean no SIM cards for instance. We, along with the *dernek* [civil society organisation], provided this for them.

Under the auspices of this dernek, Esmatullah and his colleagues, like many others in Turkey, raised a substantial amount of money within a short period of time. It is noteworthy however, that this particular community of people, who are not included as citizens in the national community, went to such extents to raise money for a region in which few of their compatriots reside. This is not to insinuate that humanitarian aid must necessarily be aimed at people of similar background for participation to gain traction. However, close attention to the character of the state's call for humanitarian support reveals a distinctly national discourse that is framed by the visual campaigns of grief and condolences conducted by state institutions. While the earthquake may have struck both Turkey and Syria, with high casualties in Syria as well, slogans such as the ubiquitous *Geçmiş olsun Türkiye* ('Get well soon, Turkey') both circumscribed the catastrophe within Turkish borders, and framed compassion as a uniformly national question. As described above, the large majority of the Afghan population in Turkey is refused access to this national community in legal terms, with generally no prospect of acquiring legal papers. While, on a discursive level, my Afghan interlocutors found ways to question the divide between Turk and non-Turk, and to stretch this boundary in a way that could occasionally accommodate their inclusion in a temporally or spatially constrained manner, this distinction between citizen and non-citizen is ubiquitous, and it is reflected in economic terms as well. There is a substantial discrepancy between the wages paid to illegalised migrant workers and wages paid to citizens, who often work in very different industries. Taking into consideration the national framing of the earthquake and the call for humanitarian action as a 'Turkish question', together with the legal exclusion and economic segregation of most Afghans in Turkey, renders this particular fundraising action amongst Afghans an unusual one.

In the charged pre-election atmosphere of contention around migration management and earthquake management, this fundraising action amongst illegalised Afghans held the momentary potential to inscribe those who have been refused from a national community into a sudden, unforeseeable, national humanitarian collective. At a moment when the state, through visual campaigns throughout the public space, called on the national community to raise funds and participate in actions suitable for this time of bereavement, this group of Afghans heeded the very same call to action, thereby questioning the divide drawn between them and others. In doing this, their humanitarian fundraising placed them in synchronicity with the wider Turkish public. This is significant because, by functioning within precisely the same temporality of crisis, my interlocutors were able to make their actions visible.

The term *hamāhang* in Persian is frequently used by my interlocutors to describe this attunement to their surroundings as a mode of negotiating their presence in a performative manner. The Persian prefix *ham-* indicates a commonality much like the Latin prefix *co-*, and *āhang* can be translated as *song* or *tune*. Hamāhang is thus used to describe being in harmony with others, in a coordinated or shared cadence of life. The synchronicity between the Afghans' fundraising and the fundraising that was widespread across Turkish society can be thought of in the sense of hamāhang. For my interlocutors, walking in pace with others means not just blending in, but also very much visibilising themselves, in a specific and timely manner, hamāhang with wider society.

This timeliness is all the more significant when one considers how Afghanistan, and consequently Afghans, are frequently regarded as remaining in an anterior world, on an imagined, racialised scale of social and political development. This racialised concept of lateness deeply influences the perception of Afghans as irredeemably stuck in the past and plagued by its distinctive problems, in a timeless and apolitical state of victimhood (Malkki 2005) that is irreconcilable with the modern world. My interlocutors were the first to point out to me in more or less direct ways this form of 'denial of coevalness' (Fabian 1983). This action of fundraising held the potential to bring its instigators into synchronicity with all of Turkish society, hamāhang not only in the here but also with the now.

This synchronicity was only momentary. The blurring of the division between citizen and non-citizen – while undoubtedly powerful symbolically, as I observed how moved Turkish citizens were to learn of these Afghans' contributions – does not sustainably overcome a very real and omnipresent economic and legal division. The danger of being arrested on the streets for lack of papers stands unabated, and it cannot be underestimated. Yet I do consider it important to recognise the Afghans' fundraising effort as one in a repertoire of performative actions that, through repetition, work to 'de-migranticise' those performing them, and that potentially hold significant material consequences.

The group of Afghans who led this action did so not as a migrant community rising up to help their host community and demand gratitude, but rather as members of an international community. In a manner reminiscent of Jan Grill's (2023) observations about vernacular humanitarianism in Colombia, Esmatullah attempts to mediate this tension between 'local' and 'other' by describing it as a link between national communities that highlights a historical solidarity – one more chapter in the narrative of a geopolitical bond. By discursively merging his organisation's fundraising with the aid sent by Afghanistan, and by showing his organisation's role in delivering this aid efficiently (providing SIM cards for the arriving doctors, and so forth), he is framing this fundraising effort as international solidarity amongst equals within a genealogy of mutual support, rather than as a group of migrants fighting for recognition.

Pursuing my inquiry into this fundraising effort amongst Afghans in Istanbul, and eager to speak to people who had actively participated in it, I asked Esmatullah for contacts in his dernek. He promptly put me in touch with a man named Hekmatullah, who had been the main fundraising organiser. A few days later, Hekmatullah and I sat down at a table with comfortably padded seats on the third floor of a small café with a view over the Bosphorus in the Üsküdar neighbourhood of Istanbul. I introduced myself, and told him about my research and my interests. He jotted something down on his phone. Finally I asked specifically about the earthquake relief effort, and how it all came about, to which he responded:

> We saw what had happened and knew that we had to do something. This earthquake is not a personal matter; it is a matter that affects everyone. There is a man called Mullah Yaqub, he has a *madrasa* [Quranic school] and heads a dernek. He called me on the third day after the earthquake and said '*Ustād* [teacher], we need to do something together, to help.' We made a list of contacts, and said that we were collecting money. Within 30 hours we had collected 132,000 lira [about 7,000 US dollars].

'Who were the people who donated?' I asked. He replied, 'People we knew, we just sent a message around to our contacts.' I said I guessed most of them did not have a *kimlik* (a Turkish ID card). He raised his eyebrows, '95 per cent of them don't. They have barely any money, and what they have, they send to their families in Afghanistan.' He continued:

> We went to the Göç İdaresi [the Presidency of Migration Management], and asked them what they needed. They said you can either donate this money to AFAD [the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency], or you can buy things yourself, and they said that they mainly needed blankets.

He explained how they collected supplies before bringing them to the Göç İdaresi, who then shipped them off to the affected areas, and then he concluded:

> It's a human duty, in the end. I don't know what their religion is, I did not ask you what your religion is, because it doesn't matter. They have a right to get help as much as anyone else, right?

Several points of interest arise from these discussions that merit highlighting. The manner in which Hekmatullah explains his impulse to help – 'This earthquake is not a personal matter; it is a matter that affects everyone' – is one which universalises this duty, seen as a moral or civic duty for all, not an act of generosity that merits gratitude. Describing it as a collective duty hints once again at bridging an otherwise firm social divide. This divide, for Afghans, materialises in innumerable contexts on a daily basis, from exploitative labour conditions to limited access to medical care, and even wheedles itself into interpersonal relations. Particularly in the context of the vociferous media reporting and social media commentary on the presence of migrants as an active hindrance to disaster relief, this act of fundraising seems to defy the crassly drawn borders between inside community and 'foreign body'.

Amira Mittermaier's (2014) work on Egypt highlights how humanitarian work is understood by its practitioners as taking place on several planes at ones: as action in the now, and as action for the next life, or simply for God. She points out that, while humanitarianism is generally conceived in Western contexts as a generous action guided by the desire to do good in this world, in other contexts it is rooted in a deeply religious ontology that transcends giver and receiver, and the affective bonds that may link them. Amongst her interlocutors, the 'desire' to do good is understood as a subjective human perception prone to error, while religious precepts are understood to be far more reliable. This insight raises the question of whether the fundraising effort amongst Afghans in Turkey was rooted in several scales simultaneously (Deeb 2006; Iqbal 2022) – visibilisation to a certain public, morality and religious ideals.

My interlocutors' statements unite several of these scales. Hekmatullah explicitly calls this a 'human duty', and emphasises that solidarity must transcend origin and sectarian boundaries, while Esmatullah frames the action as taking place between two nation-states. For Mullah Yaqub, whose verse by the thirteenth-century Persian poet Saadi Shirazi opened this chapter, an impetus might emerge from his understanding of religiously grounded morality. When asked why he helped organise this fundraising, he discursively grounds it in a line from Saadi's *Hikāyat* – instructive stories of moral virtue highlighting principles for righteous Muslims such as justice, modesty and gratitude. Saadi's work at once illustrates the universal absurdity of human nature and the value of all human life. It is perhaps an unsurprising source of inspiration for Mullah Yaqub, a man who, at each of our subsequent meetings, would contextualise his faith and Islamic practice in quotes and postulates from philosophers and scientists ranging from Plato and Aristotle, to Galileo and Newton. Himself a victim of zealous intolerance at the hands of the Taliban while fighting their insurgency in Afghanistan, arrested and tortured for educating his daughters to be engineers and for teaching English and computer science in his madrasa, Mullah Yaqub spent most of our meetings challenging dogmatism with a series of questions that recalled the Socratic method. While he and his family hold residency permits, many of his pupils (from 5 to 17 years of age), who come from various Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, do not. When the earthquake happened, Mullah Yaqub, like everyone else, saw the desperate situation and, as moral righteousness prescribed, he chose to 'give a hand to the fallen', as he himself might fall one day too (see Figure 5.6).

It seems evident that performing this humanitarian action held different meanings for different people in the same organisation (Mittermaier 2014; Grill 2023), and even held multiple meanings simultaneously for particular individuals – meanings that do not necessarily contradict one another. In this sense, Hekmatullah's principle of helping anyone regardless of their origin or religion, while expressed as a moral imperative, does not necessarily defy contextualisation within this Afghan community in Istanbul. In political terms, when equality is denied

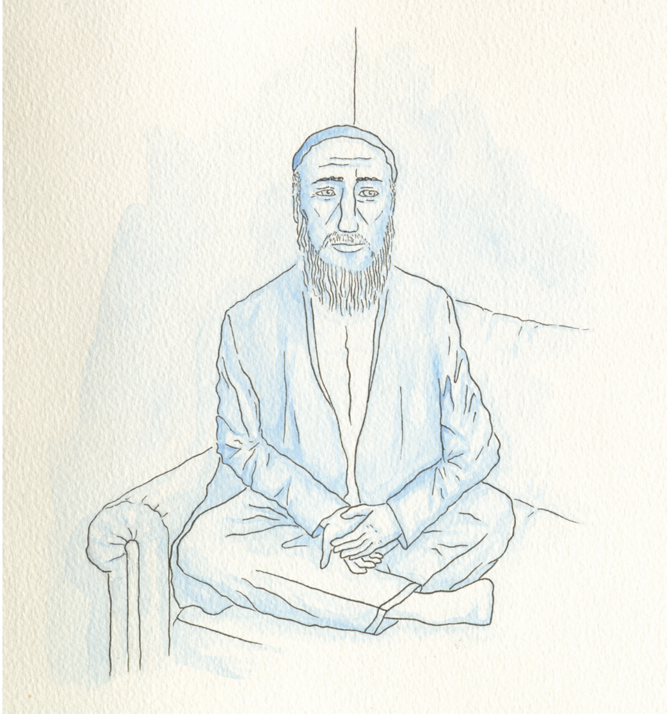

Figure 5.6 Mullah Yaqub in his office, Istanbul, late February 2023. *Source*: © Alexander Ephrussi 2023.

legally and economically, emphasising the universality of suffering and the irreducible moral imperative of alleviating it makes this fundraising effort seem all the more powerful. When arrest and deportation may descend swiftly and violently upon any person designated as illegitimate, the perceived effects of such an action on a divine and on a material scale are closely associated.

In this context, the choice to channel their financial support through the Göç İdaresi becomes all the more significant. It allowed this humanitarian initiative, and the funds it raised, to be carried across different scales, from the grassroots level of a small civil society organisation with fewer than a hundred official members, to the level of a state institution that, as we have seen, uses the visibilisation of its humanitarian efforts as a tool of legitimacy. Arguably the most obvious choice of institutions for which to collect funds would have been either the Turkish Red Crescent, or the country's Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency, who, as described above, publicised widely on billboards. Instead, the Afghan organisers decided to approach the Göç İdaresi, which, besides allocating residence permits and temporary asylum protection, is also in charge of detention facilities and the deportation of migrants – that is, it is not related to disaster management.

Afghans being one of the most frequently deported national groups, and nonetheless approaching the authority in charge of this very deportation strikes me as a meaningful and symbolic act. Far from insinuating a utilitarian motive for this action, I would argue that, in this moment, this community's understanding of the political nature of their presence in Turkey and of disaster relief work coalesces into a singular action. When the visibility or invisibility of the community can mean the difference between deportation and remaining in Turkey, choosing to act in this precise moment, and choosing to work with this particular institution, is a political and performative act – one which holds the potential to momentarily challenge the relationship between Afghan migrants and the wider Turkish society.

The point of approaching the Göç İdaresi resounds particularly in conjunction with Esmatullah's expression: 'People do good, the good will be seen, people do bad, the bad will be seen.' I am not arguing that the reason for collecting money for humanitarian aid was to be seen. Esmatullah does not state this, and one must not reduce this action to a practical one with no underlying moral impetus. On the contrary, in our conversations, the contributors to this initiative highlight a central moral grounding, but, as Esmatullah reminds us, that which is done will be seen. He does not specify by whom it will be seen – but as an organiser, he can rest assured that it will be seen by employees of the Göç İdaresi, and as a religious man he can assume that it will be seen by God. The action remained unpublished; it was not covered by any local newspaper, and was seen only by those Turkish neighbours who happened to peer out of their windows or pass on the street and ask questions as the men loaded the trucks with supplies. Only when I showed interest in the action and asked to write about it, did the various organisers seem keen on it being made public. They had rendered their mobilisation visible to the Göç İdaresi, though, and thus had asserted their presence to a significant organ of the state's exclusionary power as a helpful one in the midst of the crisis.

Crass and violent power discrepancies mark the relations between the Afghan organisers and the state, which stretch far beyond their own encounter, and into the geopolitical stakes of migrant presence in Turkey. As Lauren Carruth (2016) shows however, the existence of interests such as 'global health diplomacy' that extend beyond national borders does not mean that relationships aren't produced or challenged on the scale of the individual clinic, or the specific humanitarian initiative (Feldman 2007). The manner in which supplies are gathered and delivered, and how this is brought to the view of a certain public, plays an important role in negotiating these relationships.

The way this action was rendered public – what I call visibilisation – was not left up to chance. By moving across scales, from a local initiative within a personal network, to a national institution, the organisers aligned their action with a national effort, thereby shaping how their presence was perceived. Visibilisation here meant a deliberate and intentional mode of rendering an action visible without necessarily aiming to render it legible in a singular way. The organisers did not present their action to the Göç İdaresi with the expectation that it would be understood in one particular way, or with the intention to bring about any one particular result – the action's expected outcome was potential and multiple. The way it was visibilised, however, was not. It arose instead from the very real material and political conditions of disenfranchisement, and it was deliberate.

The act of fundraising in this particular context did not change the material or legal condition of those who participated, nor did it set out to do so. One may ask whether the performative character of this action was perhaps less oriented towards external onlookers – who in any case were few – and more towards the community itself. It challenged the boundary between migrants and non-migrants, and thereby how people may relate to the space they inhabit, a space in which legal means are used to make migrants feel temporary and expendable. This fundraising action was therefore not performative in the sense of parade or artifice, but rather, in Butler's sense of performativity, this action exerted power by using certain codes, reproducing them, and thereby shaping the subjects' relation to their surroundings. Ultimately the funds raised were intended for the material needs of a civilian population, not the state, so the organisers and donors of this action became providers, thus momentarily changing the sociopolitical situation they inhabited and their role within it. If categories of victimhood shape political subjectivities (Malkki 2005), so too does becoming a provider of aid confer a realignment of these subjectivities and modes of relating. It effects a careful positioning for this group within a fragile negotiation fraught with dramatic power relations. Yet this positioning can still, in an instant, prove powerless when legal status and racialised class position suddenly gain material reality through a police officer's intransigence, or through denouncement to the authorities by an ungrateful neighbour.

However deeply entrenched the political and legal inequalities may be for Afghan migrants in Turkey, they cannot be discounted or taken for granted in an analysis of this fundraising effort. A simple conversation can be the difference between arrest and freedom, and a new acquaintance can open doors to employment. This tentatively performative fundraising action therefore emerges out of the careful weighing of moral duty and practical restrictions, akin to the complex calculations that McNevin and Missbach (2018, 299) describe in their work on hospitality towards Rohingya refugees amongst Acehnese fishermen. Without questioning the sincerity of their interlocutors' hospitality, they demonstrate the complex deliberations on this community's duties and options, and they use the occasion to critically reflect on how the validity of a humanitarian action is assessed. Similarly, it appears that the fundraising effort by Afghan migrants in Turkey, while based on the imperative of helping in times of crisis, took shape after considering the benefits and disadvantages of visibilisation to Turkish authorities and society.

Conclusion

By examining the political context of pre-election Turkey in which the earthquake took place, and the manner in which humanitarianism and migration were framed in government and media discourse, it becomes apparent that the visibilisation of relief work played a deeply performative role in terms of power and legitimisation. Focusing on how visual displays of humanitarian aid rose across the urban landscape permits us to understand how actions as well as state discourse (by its very utterance, and ostentatiously pasted on billboards and display screens) contributed to conjuring a form of legitimacy at a tense moment of contention over government mismanagement. Understanding, then, how visual display became a tool in this context illuminates the performative power, on multiple scales, of the collection of donations for earthquake victims by Afghans in Turkey. This power can be viewed as operating in multiple directions – from donors to affected populations, but also from Afghans to other people of Istanbul, and from those excluded from citizenship to the state that excludes them.

Ultimately, the fundraising effort profoundly affected the Afghans' subjectivity, shaping how those collecting the funds could relate to their surroundings in that moment. This fundraising effort's performative aspect impressed upon Afghan migrants in Turkey what is expected from or associated with the citizen. Approaching the Presidency of Migration Management – at a time when arrest and incarceration, in detention camps operated by this very same institution, are common – can be understood as one way in which this group of people chose to visibilise themselves as a collective of socially aware individuals, with the potential that this visibilisation may be consequential not only for the victims of the earthquake, but for the donors as well. Emphasis must be put on 'potential' here, for in this case, as in that of many other discursive and embodied practices of this group of Afghans the outcome of these actions is not a given. The material discrepancies between citizen and non-citizen remain violently real despite performative actions. The importance of these actions is not negligible however, because in the tense situation I have depicted above, the *potential* outcome of such actions is transformative.

This action of humanitarianism from below thus provides an insight into how people understand their own inextricably political presence in a particular space and time, and how humanitarian action can be wielded to momentarily perturb the relative political positionalities of organisers, donors, receivers and onlookers. When legal means to stay in the country are almost entirely out of reach, other forms of assertion become all the more important, even as they remain in the domain of the speculative. This case of a group of young Afghan workers raising money for a national emergency is just one of a number of material, discursive and embodied practices through which the community negotiates its relationship to its social and political environment.

Note

1 This is a translation of the Persian text above, by the author's friend and colleague Dr Amir Massoumian. The poem is from the collection of poems by Saadi called *Hikāyat*, although it is mostly transmitted orally.

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Part III

Tactical universalism

6

Protecting Indigenous life: the Ne-Chee street patrol, liberatory politics and humanitarian tactics

Krista Maxwell

The early 1970s saw an average of five preventable Anishinaabe deaths each month on the streets of Kenora, Ontario. These deaths were the results of exposure, drowning and interpersonal violence, with alcohol abuse often a contributing factor. Indigenous and settler political actors offered a range of interpretations and responses for the disturbing number of deaths: calls for humanitarian interventions, anti-colonial critiques of Indigenous dispossession of territory and the direct action tactics of the Red Power movement. This chapter traces the emergence and early workings of one Anishinaabe response to these events, the Ne-Chee Street Patrol.[1] I analyse the Ne-Chee Street Patrol as an Indigenised humanitarian intervention that was influenced by the liberationist politics of the American Indian Movement and the Black Panther Party in the United States, and that was continuous with the longer history of Indigenous political actors' tactical engagements with imperial humanitarianism.

Anishinaabe volunteers established the Ne-Chee Street Patrol in 1975 to protect Indigenous lives in Kenora from preventable suffering, injury and death. The Anishinaabemowin term 'nijii' is translated as 'friend', but it connotes a culturally distinct helping relationship, one that enables mutual survival in a hostile environment. Kenora, a small pulp and paper city in Northwestern Ontario, Canada, is located in the northern part of traditional Anishinaabe territory and is surrounded by dozens of First Nations reserves – tracts of land to which Indigenous Peoples were confined as part of earlier settler humanitarian policies of protection, containment and civilisation, intended to enable settler control and capitalist exploitation of territory and natural resources. Anishinaabeg consider their relations with the Canadian settler state and society to be governed by Treaty #3,[2] which was signed by their ancestors and by representatives of the British Crown in 1873.

Despite very different historical trajectories, Indigenous and Black people were both subjects of nineteenth-century British imperial humanitarian policies, such as movements for abolition of the transatlantic slave trade and for the welfare of slaves in the Caribbean and, slightly later, organised efforts to address the welfare and protection of Indigenous people in Canada, Australia and other settler colonies (Lester and Dussart 2008). It's perhaps unsurprising, then, that Black and Indigenous political actors have historically made similar tactical use of humanitarian rhetoric, institutions and practices to advance their peoples' liberation. Street patrols responded to the distinct configurations of both Indigenous and Black lives in North America in the mid- to late twentieth century, a time when these lives were widely considered dispensable by many state and settler actors. During this period, Black and Indigenous people's shared disproportionate vulnerability to criminalisation and premature death compared to other groups was particularly acute – the combined effect of systemic poverty and racist discrimination, and impunity for everyday acts of white supremacist violence. This status was a sociopolitical continuity ensuant to the genocide and slavery that is foundational to Canadian and American settler states and societies (Gilmore 2002).[3] Anishinaabeg in Kenora endured necropolitical settler colonial conditions that were characteristic of northern and western Canadian cities and towns in the 1960s and 1970s: segregated public spaces, lack of transportation between urban centres and surrounding reserves, lack of temporary or permanent shelter to protect from extreme temperatures, police harassment and arrest and white supremacist settler violence.

The early street patrols initiated by Indigenous and Black grassroots organisers consisted of small groups of identifiable volunteers who patrolled public spaces on foot, prepared to respond to the needs of vulnerable community members who were in distress or at risk of harassment from racist police or white supremacist civilians. While street patrols in the United States were often armed, the Ne-Chee workers were not, since citizens are generally prohibited from carrying weapons in Canada. Still, this street patrol's origins in the 1974 armed occupation of Anishinaabe territory attest to its close connections to liberationist politics of the period. As I elaborate below, the liberationist underpinnings of the street patrol's lifesaving work are also discernible through the distinctly Anishinaabe approach to organising protection for Indigenous life, subverting older settler humanitarian interventions meant to undermine Indigenous collectives. Simultaneously, proponents of the street patrol marshalled humanitarian rhetoric that included universalist appeals to the sanctity of life and the Christian impulse to protect the vulnerable.

My analysis of how humanitarianism features in the anti-colonial struggles of the Red Power and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s builds on recent anthropological uses of the concept of 'tactics' to transcend the limitations of a dualistic 'resistance' and 'structure' framework (Kyriakides 2018a). My approach examines diverse methods employed in liberationist struggles, with due consideration to shifting contexts. Employing an ethnographic lens to consider social and political histories across various sites and scales enables attention to the pragmatism and possibility, the alliances and appropriations inherent to Indigenous and Black organising amidst ongoing settler colonialism, white supremacy and threat of lethal violence against racialised lives. This multiscalar historical analysis reveals that a series of Indigenous political actions localised in Anishinaabe Treaty #3 territory between the mid-1960s and the mid-1970s are connected to wide-reaching imperial trajectories and transnational anti-colonial struggles. These actions show both continuities and discontinuities with older modes of settler humanitarianism, which similarly travelled along global circuits and were tactically engaged by nineteenth-century Indigenous political actors.

The chapter centres on research conducted as part of a larger project on the politics and social history of Indigenous healing in Canada, particularly in the province of Ontario. This research included extensive time spent over more than a decade visiting with and learning from Treaty #3 Anishinaabeg, both urban and reserve residents (Maxwell 2025). My analysis references oral histories shared by Anishinaabe elders, unpublished reports from institutional and private archives, and historic media sources.

In the next section, I show how the concept of Indigenous 'protection' first developed in the contexts of Spanish imperialism and British humanitarian concern with the welfare of Black slaves in the Caribbean, and how it was foundational to settler humanitarianism (Maxwell 2017) yet also became an important and enduring substrate for Indigenous anti-colonial and sovereignty struggles. The subsequent section considers the intersecting social histories of Black and Indigenous street patrols in North America, as well as the circulation of politicised ideas and practices around self-defence and protection which were tactically implemented in response to local conditions at given historical conjunctures.

The early history of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol demonstrates that humanitarian tactics, while in some respects continuous with settler humanitarian ideas and interventions, were wielded by Anishinaabeg towards the re-membering of their own society, ethics and ways of knowing – a goal in direct opposition to that intended by imperial humanitarians. Anishinaabe commitments to collective care and to their Indigenous knowledge systems endured coevally with the long-standing national culture of settler humanitarianism that Anishinaabeg tactically co-opted. As Ghassan Hage (2015) suggests, the juxtaposition of such potentially incommensurable and distinct realities fuels the emergence of alter-politics that powerfully challenge the narratives claiming dominant ways of being as inevitable.

'Protection': settler humanitarianism and Indigenous tactics

Little anthropological attention has been devoted to humanitarianism as having been instrumental in the dispossession of Indigenous Peoples in settler colonies, or to the humanitarian tactics of anti-colonial and anti-racist movements. Indeed, Adia Benton (2016) has critiqued the anthropology of humanitarianism for neglecting race in general, despite the ubiquity of race as a precondition for humanitarian interventions. This neglect is puzzling, given that anthropologists commonly acknowledge that European humanitarianism originated in the movement for the abolition of slavery, in colonial welfare administration and in missionary medicine (Redfield 2005; Ticktin 2006; Good et al. 2014).

Historiography of imperial humanitarianism stands in contrast: this literature affords attention to how racialisation structures humanitarian interventions (Lester and Dussart 2008 and 2014; Edmonds and Johnston 2016) and it includes thoughtful attempts to centre the historical experiences of colonised political actors (Banivanua Mar 2013; Scalmer 2016). Analyses of nineteenth-century archival records demonstrate the overlap between British humanitarian concern for Indigenous welfare on the one hand, and, on the other, the determination to fundamentally remake Indigenous personhood in ways which entail the destruction of Indigenous societies.

Historians Alan Lester and Fae Dussart (2008 and 2014) trace the development and migration of humanitarian ideas and practices of 'protection' through dense British imperial networks, with origins dating back to the Spanish colonial practice of designating 'Protectors of Indians' (2008, 208). The concept was initially revived by British humanitarians in the wake of the abolition of the transatlantic trade in Black slaves, as part of a range of interventions geared towards the 'amelioration' of conditions for existing slaves in the Caribbean Crown Colonies. Subsequently, British imperial actors drew on their experiences of colonial governance spanning the Caribbean, Tasmania and the Cape Colony to produce the 1837 Report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines. The report gave impetus to a settler humanitarian paradigm that was shaped by both military and Christian missionary logics. Lester and Dussart's analysis makes clear that, while the ensuing interventions sometimes enabled Indigenous survival under murderous conditions, the conditions created by the protection paradigm were themselves profoundly coercive and geared towards proselytisation.

Other historians have pointed to how Indigenous political actors made tactical use of humanitarian institutions and discourses in order to further anti-colonial struggles, demonstrating what Tracey Banivanua Mar (2013) has characterised as 'imperial literacy'. Banivanua Mar analyses the use of protection discourse in correspondence from the Tahitian Queen Pomare, in which she appealed to the British Queen Victoria for aid against French missionary and military aggression from 1838 through the mid-1840s. She notes that the Tahitian queen's invocation of the humanitarian imperative of protection challenged the racialised hierarchy inherent in British imperialism, and was expressed 'from a position of strength, a demand arising from a broken and uninvited promise', rather than as 'a duty owed to an inferior peoples' (11). Banivanua Mar argues that this recourse to universalist principles of authority beyond the local, including appeals to the British Crown, European law and Christian principles, was intended to advance Indigenous political interests and assertions of inherent sovereignty.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, protection as a central plank of imperial humanitarian policy took on increasingly coercive meanings linked to containment, surveillance and control of Indigenous Peoples in the settler colonies.[4] Amanda Nettelbeck (2016) shows how Indigenous political actors in Australia and Canada continued nevertheless to employ the rhetoric of protection to advance political claims, invoking the British Crown's 'reciprocal responsibilities to the peoples it had dispossessed, and the compensatory rights it had promised'. Nettelbeck documents Indigenous persistence in attempts to revive 'values of sympathy, obligation, and justice' expressed through earlier imperial humanitarian discourse. These attempts included direct petitions to the Crown during royal visits, and citations of earlier discourses of humane governance from policy documents. These histories suggest that tactical appeals to the universal, as well as alliances with dominant actors and institutions that included those central to settler colonialism, may fall under the rubric of liberatory struggle.

The concept of 'tactics' is helpful for understanding how historical Indigenous political actors protected their people amidst constrained circumstances, through creative adaptations of rhetoric and practices from other liberation struggles, and through working alliances with settler humanitarians. In Michel de Certeau's (1984) analysis, 'tactics' describes limited, situational challenges to dominant relations of power, which are not truly autonomous and may not have sustainable effects, but which nevertheless represent a form of social and political agency with the potential to disrupt the established order. De Certeau distinguishes tactics from strategies, using the example of pedestrians who walk the city and choose their paths to suit their own needs, and whose actions (tactics) are not completely determined by the powerful, contrasted with the actions (strategies) of those who designed the city in a specific way to enable social control.

My analysis builds on previous ethnographic challenges to de Certeau's characterisation of tactics and strategy as dichotomous (Napolitano and Pratten 2007). Centring tactics is helpful for understanding Indigenous political agency, as well as the dynamic workings of settler colonialism and settler humanitarianism. As Theodoros Kyriakides argues, it challenges the limitations imposed by certain anthropological concepts (such as 'assemblage') which may limit attention to 'the creative potential of individuals and collectivities' (Kyriakides 2018a, 452). Using this anthropological understanding of tactics to theorise Indigenous political actions aligns with the assertion by Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2018) that, despite its many facets of violence and constraint, settler colonialism affords certain opportunities for Indigenous Peoples. 'Tactics' moves us beyond 'resistance' and 'structure', creating a wide-angle lens that is attentive to shifting historical and political contexts, and to the workings of anti-colonial politics at multiple scales. This approach suggests that methods should not be taken as definitive of political movements. Instead, critical analysts can acknowledge how apparently distinct methods, such as armed occupation compared with research and advocacy, may in fact be closely linked under the same political rubric, and may jointly support a coherent alter-political vision.

Nearly a decade prior to the establishment of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol, and prior to the more spectacular wave of armed occupations by the American Indian Movement (which would subsequently inspire similar actions in Kenora), an earlier Anishinaabe political mobilisation illustrates this understanding of tactics as careful navigation of a given political context. What came to be known as Canada's first civil rights march in November of 1965 consisted of hundreds of Anishinaabeg parading quietly through the streets of Kenora to present a brief asserting their rights to the town council. While the substance of the brief undoubtedly reflects authentic Anishinaabe grievances – many of which endure in the present day – the format and discourse of the protest are consistent with the resources available to Indigenous political actors in this historical moment: an ascendant paradigm of civil rights modelled on Black struggles south of the border, and appealing to an enduring settler humanitarianism.

Support for organising that generated momentum for the 1965 march in Kenora came from several liberal humanitarian and human rights organisations: the Kenora Presbyterian Church (which had collaborated with Anishinaabe community organisers in an earlier attempt to establish the city's first Friendship Centre against opposition from white residents); the Toronto-based Indian-Eskimo Association (a majority-settler group focused on the welfare of Indigenous people); and the newly established, Toronto-based Ontario Human Rights Committee (whose director, Daniel Hill, was a Black American).[5]

Indigenous leaders, media commentators and settler allies took up a discourse comparing anti-Indigenous racism and violence in Kenora to conditions in the American South at the height of the Black civil rights struggle.[6] In an implicit reference to the Ku Klux Klan, Anishinaabe spokesman Fred Kelly spoke of 'night riders' who regularly attacked Anishinaabeg walking between Kenora and Wauzhushk Onigum, the Rat Portage reserve (Anglin 1965). Historian Scott Rutherford (2017, 170) notes that Kelly appeared to embrace comparisons between his own leadership style and that of Martin Luther King Jr, the Black civil rights leader and Baptist minister. The organised white supremacist violence of the American South was similarly evoked in oral histories describing this period in Kenora. One older white resident shared with me the following account:[7]

> I worked at the gas station, 3.30 to 11.30 p.m. shift. I remember getting off work and walking along Matheson Street … It took me a while to figure out what I was seeing … There were white guys

> sitting in cars, one per car, three or four cars, waiting for Aboriginal people to come out of the bars, picking out the women to abuse them, taking very unfair advantage of Aboriginal women … Stories started coming out: [Anishinaabe] people were getting beaten up while walking back and forth to Rat Portage, sleeping on docks and [white] guys pushing them into the water. I was frightened. It could have been anyone I grew up with, young folks, older folks. It was definitely not people from outside. The First Nations knew who it was, but they wouldn't venture to name them.

These implicit and explicit comparisons reflect not only parallels between the systematic devaluation of Black and Indigenous lives in North American necropolitics but also the moral and rhetorical weight, and hence tactical value, of the Black civil rights struggle in humanist discourse of this period. In the twentieth-century liberal settler colonies of Canada and the United States, the social body was implicitly coterminous with white settler society, and Indigenous, Black and other racialised people were readily construed as enemies, or surplus, whose deaths could be legitimated for the greater good (Moreton-Robinson 2009 and 2015). Surplus populations are found where 'places (or their resources) are useful, but the people are not' (Li 2010, 69). Anishinaabeg were apparently perceived as a surplus population by many white settler Canadians in Kenora in the late twentieth century. Kenora's wealth derived from the pulp and paper industry's clearcutting of forests in traditional Anishinaabe territory, but the industry was reluctant to hire Anishinaabeg as workers.

And yet, there were also distinct differences between Black and Indigenous liberation movements and appeals to the universal. Indeed, some Indigenous commentators of the period articulated these differences precisely by contrasting Black appeals to universalism and equality that often mobilised Christian discourse, versus long-standing Indigenous claims to territory, spiritual and sociopolitical systems that were grounded in place (Deloria 2023). As summed up by Mary Crow Dog, Lakota writer and member of the American Indian Movement, 'They want *in*. We Indians want *out*!' (Rutherford 2017, 171).

But despite these contrasts, both settler Canadians and Indigenous people were very much aware of the Black civil rights movement in the United States, which attracted not only extensive media coverage but also many actions of solidarity north of the border, as Rutherford (2017) points out in his helpful analysis of the 1965 Anishinaabe march. In critically analysing media coverage surrounding the march, Rutherford observes that the coverage misrepresented Kenora as an 'exceptional' site of an eruption of American-style politics that was not representative of dominant Canadian history and values. This suggests what I would characterise as a settler-humanitarian presentism, by which I mean a wilful disavowal of both Canada's colonial history, and the continuity of Indigenous dispossession in the present.

A comparable dynamic is demonstrated by the depoliticising effects of postcolonial humanitarianism and its present rhetoric in response to the Biafran War of 1967–1970 in Nigeria (Heerten 2021). Humanitarian representations of Igbo suffering during this period align with early and mid-twentieth-century anthropological representations of the 'other' as outside of contemporary space and time, and therefore disconnected from recent histories of British and European imperialism. Canadian media, similarly, put a humanitarian spin on Anishinaabe organising against white supremacy, misrepresenting not only settler racism but also Indigenous protest as peculiarly American and therefore un-Canadian, and effectively effacing the culpability of the settler state and society. At the same time, as Lasse Heerten argues regarding representations of the Biafran War, humanitarian perspectives recognise the suffering of the colonised 'other' as distantly connected to 'our global present', in a manner which invites sympathy and perhaps intervention by former European colonisers. Representing humanitarian crises in the Global South as 'the global "there and now"' (Heerten 2021, 1483) works to minimise the historical and continuing culpability of the Global North in ongoing transnational structural violence; in much the same way, representing Kenora as exceptionally Americanised in the 1960s worked to obscure Canadian complicity in contemporary Indigenous experiences of racism and dispossession.

Taken together, the responses both to Igbo assertions of self-determination and to Anishinaabe challenges to racialised injustice all point to how white liberals of the Global North embraced a resurgent humanitarianism in order to relocate themselves in relation to racialised peoples and late twentieth-century global anti-colonial movements. In the decolonising former extractive colonies of the Global South, and in the settler colonies of the former British Empire, these manoeuvres by turns undermined and enabled liberationist politics.

As Heerten (2021) argues in his analysis of the humanitarianism inspired by the Biafran War, long-standing colonial actors, including Christian churches and the French state, employed humanitarian interventions to re-insert their authority into putatively postcolonial contexts. Widely circulating images from Biafra echoed older imperial humanitarian imagery, centring 'Christian white male saviors' holding Igbo children, thus displacing Igbo adults, especially men (1466–7). Even transnational expressions of solidarity with Biafra issued by Tanzania, Gabon and the Ivory Coast invoked 'humanitarian reasons and the duty of Christian charity' (1467). Gaullist actors manipulated state support for humanitarianism in order to re-assert French domination in former colonies, reframing Biafran self-determination as an instantiation of the globalisation of 'French values' (1469). Perceiving how humanitarian representations of their struggle for self-determination undermined their political agency, Biafran political actors subsequently shifted their rhetoric leftward, and they attempted to revive assertions of Black masculinity and sovereignty through invocations of Black Power, anti-colonial revolutionary ideology, and accusations of racism; however, they failed to recruit significant international support. By the late 1970s, Heerten argues, French leftists' solidarity with revolutionary anti-colonial movements had been displaced by 'the new humanitarian vision of the third world' (1480).

The Biafran experience illustrates that there are distinct risks attached to Indigenous mobilisations of humanitarian tactics. Nevertheless, as I elaborate in the remainder of this chapter, Anishinaabe appeals to the universal that borrowed from Black civil rights discourse did work to create Indigenous space and social programmes in Kenora. This enabled social and political developments which, in turn, supported community organising that was often oriented towards a liberatory politics – a politics not only opposed to the settler colonial status quo, but alter-political in its vision of a resurgence of distinct Indigenous societies. I argue that this effectiveness was, in part, due to the alignment of these universalist appeals, especially those emphasising Indigenous vulnerability, with the emergent liberal humanitarian impulses of the mid- to late twentieth century, as well as with the long-standing imperial commitment to Indigenous protection. That this tactic resonated with settler state actors and with liberal settlers is demonstrated by the single most tangible response to the 1965 Kenora marchers' demands: the establishment of the Waystation hostel and detoxification facility in Kenora in February of 1967.

Intended quite literally to save lives, the Waystation was supported by the Toronto-based Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) and the Kenora Mayor's Committee. It was conceived initially as a pilot project housed in a two-storey building in central Kenora 'which could serve as an alternative to jail'.[8] From the settler humanitarian perspective, then, the Waystation simultaneously protected vulnerable Indigenous people from marauding settlers and the elements, and it provided an opportunity for surveillance and rehabilitation that closely parallelled the work of the nineteenth-century protectorates (Lester and Dussart 2008).

In the late 1960s and 1970s, the dominant discourse about Indigenous alcohol consumption obscured past and ongoing territorial dispossession and social dismemberment. Instead, alcohol abuse was explained as a hazard of the treacherous but inevitable process of Indigenous assimilation into settler society, to be mitigated by 'habilitation'.[9] In a circular logic, therapeutic interventions geared towards making Indigenous people more like white settlers were held up as the best route to Anishinaabe sobriety. For instance, in an ARF report on research conducted in Kenora prior to the opening of the Waystation, anthropologist Carol Yawney identified a perceived excess of leisure time as driving Indigenous alcohol abuse. The report urged, 'The ARF must convince [the Indian] that steady employment and other improvements in his circumstances are necessary before he will be likely to moderate his drinking', and advised that ARF workers counter this alleged instinct towards slothfulness by inciting 'a measure of enterprise and capitalist "frenzy"'.[10]

Anishinaabe actors' tactical use of universalist civil rights rhetoric subverted settler state actors' humanitarian values and expectations. During its three years of operation, the Kenora Waystation did indeed provide significant protection for Indigenous lives, affording safety and shelter for about 70 people per day.[11] But beyond this basic humanitarian function, oral histories show that the Waystation also became an unprecedented urban Indigenised space where families from the reserves, visiting town to pick up cheques or purchase food and supplies, could socialise without fear of racist harassment (Maxwell 2025). Furthermore, it became a hub from which some Anishinaabeg innovated a sobriety movement by synthesising their own philosophical and healing traditions with the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous, with enduring social and political effects (Maxwell 2025).

After just three years as a lively Indigenous social space and refuge from settler hostility, the Waystation hostel was permanently closed in June 1970, when Kenora's town council bowed to pressure from settler business owners. This development is entirely unsurprising when viewed with a historical lens, as it is continuous with settler political actors' significant opposition to early nineteenth-century protection of Black and Indigenous lives by British humanitarians, whose efforts were similarly perceived as a threat to the unfettered pursuit of wealth (Lester and Dussart 2008). Social histories spanning 150 years illustrate the coexistence of seemingly irreconcilable ideologies amongst settler political actors: a universalised imperative to protect Indigenous life, alongside a racialised understanding of Indigenous life as expendable.[12]

The short-lived Waystation was the only urban infrastructure available to Anishinaabeg in Kenora in the late 1960s. In stark contrast, the American Black Power movement of the same time period emerged through social interactions in established, urban, Black institutions. These included a college and a community centre (funded as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's War on Poverty), which afforded important resources such as access to a law library, and a base from which to launch municipal advocacy initiatives (Nelson 2011).

Given the paucity of external resources available to advance Indigenous Peoples' sovereignty struggles, organisers turned to collaboration with sympathetic dominant actors including churches, health and social service professionals, and human rights organisations. In the years following the 1965 march, some Anishinaabe community leaders met informally with settler allies in local coffee shops to discuss shared concerns about relations between Anishinaabeg and settlers.[13] After settler business interests forced the closure of the Waystation, and the number of premature Anishinaabe deaths on the streets of Kenora increased, this group collaborated with researchers at the University of Manitoba and the Grand Council Treaty #3 to produce the 1973 report, 'While people sleep: Sudden deaths in Kenora area' (Kenora and District 1973). The authors of this report argue that the disturbing number of preventable deaths could be explained by the continuing denial of full citizenship rights to Indigenous people, that is, access to services and opportunities of a similar standard to those provided to white Canadians. Their analysis of structural factors contributing to Indigenous deaths in Kenora echoes the liberal civil rights framework presented during the 1965 march. The report also describes alcohol abuse as a significant factor, with evidence of its involvement in close to three-quarters of the over 200 deaths analysed. Amongst the report's proposals is a 'native foot patrol to work in close cooperation with police', conceived as a 'crisis service' (23).

A careful reading of the same report, however, also reveals a foreshadowing of the distinctly Indigenous liberationist perspective that would gain momentum in subsequent years. Buried in an appendix and unreferenced in the body of the report is an August 1973 brief presented to Kenora's town council by Peter Kelly on behalf of the Grand Council Treaty #3. The brief linked Indigenous homelessness in Kenora to the 1959 closure of Indian House in Anicinabe Park, and to recent relocations, some coerced, of surrounding reserve communities – a powerful illustration of how urban homelessness and state failure to provide services are interconnected with Indigenous people's dispossession of their land. Anicinabe Park, a 14-acre space on the shores of the Lake of the Woods and a long-standing Anishinaabe gathering place, had been purchased by the Department of Indian Affairs in 1929. It had been designated as a camping area for families visiting their children at the nearby Cecelia Jeffrey residential school. Within the park, Indian House had been a space where visitors from reserves could stay overnight while conducting business in Kenora, and where some people had lived permanently. In 1959, the department sold the park to the city of Kenora, whose administrators then closed Indian House so that the park could be opened to tourism. The closure was part of a larger pattern of white opposition to Anishinaabe space in the town that was ongoing throughout the early 1960s, when efforts by the Presbyterian Fellowship Centre to establish a hostel for Anishinaabeg were undermined by both the federal and municipal governments. This pattern arguably persists at the time of writing (Kenora Fellowship Centre 2015).

In 1973, the same year that the Grand Council Treaty #3 released the 'While people sleep' report, the newly formed Ojibway Warriors Society occupied the Kenora branch office of the Department of Indian Affairs for 36 hours.[14] Their demands included calls for 'an end to the overtly racist actions and physical brutality against First Nations in Kenora' (Rutherford 2010, 79). It was the subsequent direct action tactics of the Ojibway Warriors Society and their supporters, inspired by the US-based Black Panther Party via the American Indian Movement, which ultimately spurred the creation of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol.

Street patrols as liberationist humanitarian tactics

The importance of protection to the Black liberation struggle in the United States was made clear when Black veterans of World War II organised to provide civil rights marchers with weaponised defence against attacks by the Ku Klux Klan in the Jim Crow South.[15] Veterans were also significant leaders in the civil rights movement more generally. For instance, Robert F. Williams, a former private first class in the Marine Corps, was president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in North Carolina, as well as a leader of weaponised self-defence by community volunteers (Bloom and Martin 2016). As the

Black civil rights movement gained momentum in the 1960s, veterans in Louisiana formed the armed group Deacons for Defense and Justice (US National Archives 2024). The Deacons, established in 1964, continued to be active in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama through the late 1960s, and provided protection for the 1966 March Against Fear.

In Canada, Indigenous veterans also played leading roles in the development of street patrols, as well as in wider political organising. This parallel highlights how Black and Indigenous street patrols both emerged at the intersection of mid-twentieth-century humanist thought, which enabled and inspired Black and Indigenous participation in the militaries of settler states, with anti-imperial struggle, which intensified globally in the wake of World War II. Indigenous women and men were over-represented amongst those enlisting in both World Wars, despite racist, exclusionary recruitment policies and practices (Lackenbauer and Mantle 2007), and, in the interwar years, Indigenous veterans began to play leading roles in political organising (Kulchyski 1988).

Amongst the most well-known Black street patrols in the United States were those organised by the Black Panther Party, founded in 1966 in California by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton as the Black Panther Party of Self Defense. Unlike earlier instances of politicised Black self-defence in the South, oriented towards protection from the Ku Klux Klan, street patrols established on the West Coast were intended specifically as defence against racist police harassment and violence, and they took tactical advantage of state gun laws that allowed citizens to publicly carry loaded weapons (Bloom and Martin 2016).

Prior to the Black Panthers, other ‘citizen patrols’ in California had included one in Oakland organised by Mark Comfort, as well as the Community Alert Patrol, which was established in Black neighbourhoods in Watts to monitor police activities and prevent anti-Black police violence following the 1965 riots. The Black Panthers drew inspiration from these earlier patrols to develop their practice of organised, armed self-defence against the police. However, they went further than their predecessors in their elaboration of Black liberationist ideology, which was inspired by political analyses of Mao Zedong, Frantz Fanon, and Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara (Nelson 2011). It is therefore unsurprising that Black Panther rhetoric legitimating armed self-defence shows parallels with international anti-imperial struggles. For instance, they exceeded the earlier critiques of civil rights discourse by arguing that the US government was not only racist but illegitimate, and by characterising Black Americans as a ‘colony in the mother country’ and US police forces ‘as an occupying army’ (Bloom and Martin 2016, 2 and 12).

Crucially for the current argument, while these distinctions mark an important shift amidst widely shared frustrations with the slow pace of change, the work of the Black Panther Party was simultaneously continuous with the earlier civil rights movement in its core concern with universal human rights and needs, including the right to health and social care. Historian Alondra Nelson (2011) argues that such continuities have been neglected by scholars in favour of polarising accounts focused on celebrating or vilifying the Black Panthers. Nelson points out that social issues were always foundational to the work of the Black Panther Party, even while they were critical of liberal optimism about the prospects of civil rights legislation enabling genuine equity for poor Blacks. Her research reveals that even in the early years, the Black Panthers employed both 'a gun *and* a helping hand' to enact transformative change, and that by the end of the 1960s, the expansion of their healthcare and social programmes marked a 'shift from armed self-defense to social self-defense' (54, 64). Nelson's account of the Black Panther Party's extensive support for community health and social programmes reveals how, in the context of state institutions' extreme control and extreme neglect of Black Americans, providing care undergirded by an ethos of self-determination can constitute 'another tactic for revolution' (58). Put differently, biopolitical tactics aligned with liberationist aspirations may advance a more substantial and enduring alter-politics than a narrow preoccupation with opposing the established order can accomplish.

The first documented Indigenous street patrol in Canada was the Beothuk Patrol in Vancouver, named for an Indigenous People of the East Coast that was deliberately destroyed by settlers during the nineteenth century. Established by the Native Alliance for Red Power in 1967, the Beothuk Patrol was motivated by Indigenous organisers' outrage over the violent rape and murder of an Indigenous woman in Williams Lake by three settlers who were not convicted of these crimes. Founding member Ray Bobb (2012) has described how the group was significantly influenced by the early work of the Black Panther Party. Glen Coulthard (2019) notes that the Beothuk Patrol was created as a response to both civilian settler and police violence, thus melding elements of politicised self-defence practised by Black movements both in the American South and on the West Coast. But stricter gun control laws in Canada prevented the Beothuk Patrol from carrying weapons. This distinction may have shaped perceptions that the Beothuk Patrol's work was more aligned with missionary humanitarianism than liberation.[16]

A year after the Native Alliance for Red Power was established, in the summer of 1968, the American Indian Movement (AIM) was established in Minneapolis and Saint Paul by a group of young Indigenous people, mostly Chippewas from reservations north and west of the cities (Smith and Warrior 1996). Like the smaller town of Kenora, this was an urban centre in which Indigenous people 'had a presence' (128). One of AIM's first programmes was the AIM Patrol, inspired by the work of the Black Panthers in Oakland (Smith and Warrior 1996). Members of the AIM Patrol wore distinctive red jackets, used cameras and tape recorders to document police arrests and provided legal support for Indigenous people who were arrested.

By the summer of 1974, both AIM leaders and the theme of protection were prominent at the Ojibwe Unity Conference in Kenora. This event, organised by the Ojibway Warriors Society, morphed into an armed occupation of Anicinabe Park, the territory discussed in Peter Kelly's 1973 brief to Kenora's town council, which is claimed by the Treaty #3 Anishinaabeg. Approximately 500 people attended the weekend-long conference, including AIM members and Anishinaabeg as well as activists from elsewhere in Canada (Burke 1976). Delivering the keynote address, AIM director Dennis Banks emphasised collective self-defence and direct action against unjust laws; a subsequent demonstration of taekwondo continued the focus on interpersonal violence as protection (Rutherford 2010). Between 100 and 200 people then occupied the park for 39 days (Burke 1976). They received extensive support from local Anishinaabeg.

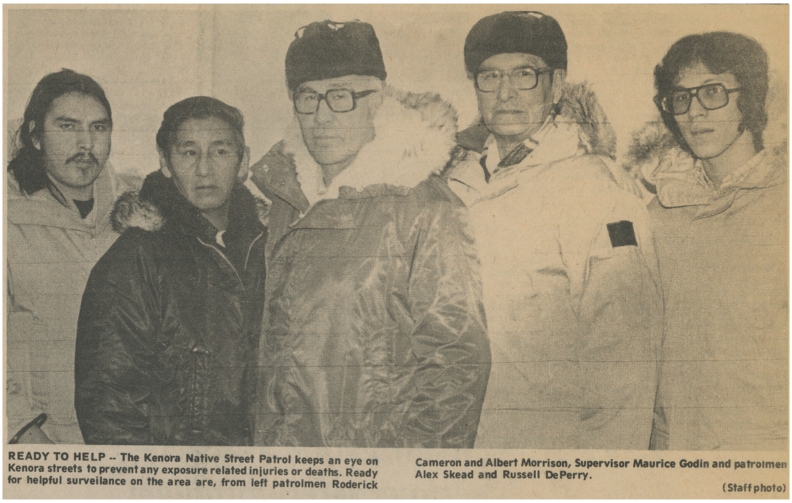
In dominant media outlets, the most widely circulated images from the Anicinabe Park occupation depicted Indigenous men holding guns: the Red Power activist as a reincarnation of 'the romantic warrior figure that had simultaneously fascinated and scared white people for centuries' (Rutherford 2010, 86). As critical scholars have noted, these images reflected both white stereotypes and some activists' preoccupation with a narrowly conceived revitalisation of Indigenous masculinity centred on a propensity for violence (McKegney 2012; Rutherford 2010). In Red Power discourse propagated by AIM members and some Ojibway Warrior Society spokespeople, 'protection' evoked the warrior as a rugged, typically masculine individual, ready to aggressively assert himself to ensure the safety of his people. At the same time, patriarchy and sexism were marginal issues in AIM (as in other liberationist movements of the time), and some male activists, including leaders, were themselves perpetrators of violence against women (Barker 2015; Mihesuah 2001).

Anishinaabe organisers in Kenora subsequently took a different approach to enacting protection as inherent to Indigenous liberation and anti-colonial struggle. This shift, I suggest, parallels the Black Panthers' tactical change in focus from armed self-defence to community service in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Nelson 2011). As Joseph Morrison (Bigwekinang), who participated in the occupation, and Charles Copenace, who supported it, explained to me in separate oral histories, their vision for change focused on Anishinaabe survival through self-organised shelter and mutual care, including a Friendship Centre and an (unarmed) street patrol.[17]

The idea of Friendship Centres as urban service centres to support Indigenous people in Canadian cities was initiated by liberal white Christians and civil rights advocates during the 1950s; it was embraced by federal policymakers who envisaged that short-term funding would enable the assimilation of Indigenous people into urban settler society, not anticipating that this urban infrastructure would provide important sites for a vibrant, distinctly Indigenous social life.

Together, the Ne-Chee Friendship Centre and the Street Patrol represent an Anishinaabe vision for safety, social life and collective wellbeing in the urban context. The founders of the Friendship Centre intended it to be a safe, welcoming social space in town where Anishinaabeg could come together, sit indoors and visit with one another between appointments, instead of sitting at the taxi station, as had become the practice after the Waystation closed.[18] The Ne-Chee Street Patrol, one of two original programmes delivered by the newly established Friendship Centre, was intended to extend the protection that had been afforded by the short-lived Waystation to their most vulnerable Anishinaabe relatives: children and youths, those incapacitated by alcohol and those sleeping in public spaces (see Figure 6.1). The initial pilot project was modestly funded by a nine-thousand-dollar grant from the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services that enabled organisers to establish a small office above the bus depot and to purchase equipment, including four winter jackets with 'Street Patrol' emblazoned on the backs.

Charles's and Joseph's families were amongst the small number of Anishinaabeg who had secured housing in Kenora amidst rampant anti-Indigenous discrimination; both families supported the establishment of the Ne-Chee Friendship Centre and the Ne-Chee Street Patrol. Charles recalled his family's concern about growing numbers of Anishinaabeg from the surrounding reserves drinking in town, having nowhere to go, encountering 'trouble' and getting beaten up. Each member of the Copenace family became centrally involved in the early days of the Friendship Centre and its programmes. Charles's father Sam, formerly employed as a counsellor at the Waystation, sat on the Friendship



READY TO HELP -- The Kenora Native Street Patrol keeps an eye on Kenora streets to prevent any exposure related injuries or deaths. Ready for helpful surveilance on the area are, from left patrolmen Roderick Cameron and Albert Morrison, Supervisor Maurice Godin and patrolmen Alex Skead and Russell DePerry.

(Staff photo)

Figure 6.1 The Ne-Chee Street Patrol appeared on the front page of the local newspaper, *The Kenora Miner and News*, on 10 January 1977. *Source*: © *Kenora Miner and News* 1977, with permission from Klein Media Group.

Centre's board of directors, his sister worked as secretary, and his brother worked with the youth programme.[19] Charles himself was the Street Patrol's first coordinator.

Joseph Morrison was both a founding member of the Ne-Chee Friendship Centre's board of directors, and one of the original Street Patrol workers. A military veteran himself, he was also the son of World War II veteran Giizhiiganang (Don Morrison). In November 2009, over breakfast with me and my son at a restaurant in Hamilton, southern Ontario, Joseph shared his recollections about the launch of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol in the winter of 1975–6:

> The demonstration project for the Street Patrol started about two years after the [1974 Anicinabe Park] occupation. [We] only worked during the evening, eh, at night, six o'clock to two o'clock in the morning, just to find out what was happening within the Town of Kenora with Native people. We didn't have any powers to arrest anybody … We were just two individuals that were working to patrol the streets … and ensure that people that were in need were escorted to a place of safety, or we'd inform the police of persons causing difficulties, youth intoxication, or come across children that were on the street, you know, without parental involvement. [Our experience] indicated that there was a need

> to expand the programme, eh … and there was a mixed reaction from the townspeople … Kenora was known to be a racist town at that time … Native people were told to 'go back home', you know [*laughing*]. I guess the 'home' would be on a reservation, eh, in the bush.

Joseph's account illustrates how Indigenous political actors used humanitarian tactics to sidestep and implicitly challenge the crude white supremacy and racist discrimination demonstrated by settlers in Kenora, and to assert the legitimacy of their own biopolitical project of protecting Indigenous life. He employs universalised representations of suffering in carefully neutral, even bureaucratic language ('people in need', 'persons causing difficulties') as tactics in a necropolitical setting where Indigenous people were racialised as backwards, uncivilised, and out of place in urban settings, their lives systematically devalued as worthless. This discourse is like that of the earlier 'While people sleep' report in its alignment with enduring settler humanitarianism. In Canada, late twentieth-century liberal concern for Indigenous suffering could be mobilised to legitimate access to basic services essential to survival, such as the earlier Waystation, even as the territorial dispossession of Indigenous Peoples continued.

Joseph's depersonalised discourse belies intensely personal motivations for this caring work. Oral histories reveal that early volunteers and, later, paid workers, typically people who had struggled with alcohol abuse themselves, felt both deeply personal and inherently political commitments to alleviate the suffering of other Anishinaabeg in the town. As a child, Joseph fled his home to escape the violence of his father, Don Morrison, when he was drinking. Don was a chronic alcoholic who lived on the streets of Kenora for many years before he sobered up. He eventually became a beloved community leader who supported many towards sobriety by fostering their relations with the Grandfather Drum (Maxwell 2025). Anthropologists have offered critical analyses of how Indigenous people's struggles with addiction, mental health and domestic violence are mobilised to urge humanitarian interventions, often with depoliticising effects (Garcia 2010; Samson 2009; Stevenson 2014). Less consideration has been given to how Indigenous actors themselves have tactically wielded humanitarian framings of their peoples' suffering.

Charles Copenace, too, described to me how his individual and family histories are intertwined with that of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol. For Charles, the job coordinating the Street Patrol was both an opportunity to do meaningful work, and an incentive to quit drinking.[20] He didn't anticipate that Street Patrol workers would one day help to save his own life. A couple of years earlier, he had angrily quit his previous job of two years as a forest technician with the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources, having been passed over for a permanent job that was given instead to a less-qualified white man. He was then driven to numb his pain through excessive alcohol consumption. Despite his enthusiasm for the work at Ne-Chee, Charles was unable to stay sober indefinitely; he struggled with ongoing personal and family problems and resumed drinking, finally leaving his position around 1976. He wouldn't sober up permanently until 1993. During his years of drinking in Kenora, Charles benefited more than once from the care and protection of the Street Patrol. He recalled, 'One time I passed out among the garbage bins behind the Northlands Hotel. The Street Patrol let me sleep but kept checking up on me until I got up and made my own way safely.' On another occasion, in the late 1980s, Charles was attacked in the streets while drunk, suffering severe damage to his eye. Street Patrol workers administered first aid, kept him safe, and facilitated emergency medical transportation to a hospital in Winnipeg, three hours away, where he received surgery that saved his vision.

In Charles's account we can glimpse both continuities and discontinuities with settler humanitarian reason. For instance, Charles's motivation for working with the Street Patrol partially aligned with one of the state funders' objectives: that the programme would enable 'vocational rehabilitation' of Native workers.[21] This type of rehabilitation was continuous with older interventions, ranging from residential schools to tuberculosis sanatoria, which encouraged low-status, usually unpaid labour as a mechanism for assimilation. But in other significant respects, the working conditions and the worker subjectivities cultivated in these interventions represent a radical rupture between settler humanitarianism and the humanitarianism from below practised by the early Street Patrol, demonstrating how humanitarian tactics may unexpectedly align with alter-politics.

Street Patrol workers were recruited based on personal experience of alcohol abuse, on their knowledge of the dangers faced by Indigenous people on the streets of Kenora, and on their ability to speak Anishinaabemowin.[22] These qualifications overlap with some of those required of early 'protectors' employed to administer the welfare and containment of Indigenous people in the settler colonies, such as language fluency and the capacity to establish sympathetic relations with Indigenous people (Lester and Dussart 2008). But for Anishinaabeg, the purpose of these qualifications is diametrically opposite: the Street Patrol was premised on workers supporting others, not pitiable ‘others’, but their own extended families and communities – even their past and future selves, as Charles Copenace’s personal history illustrates. This type of expertise also diverges from the elite, credentialled professional knowledge that is central to settler state biopolitics, and even to the Black Panthers’ alliances with sympathetic health professionals (Nelson 2011). It aligns instead with the practice at Alcoholics Anonymous (and at Kenora’s Waystation) of hiring former alcoholics as counsellors. This contrast underscores that Anishinaabe political actors adapted, appropriated and, at times, challenged dominant biopolitics in ways that aligned with their goal of re-membering their society and their polity (Maxwell 2025).

This relational approach to providing care is also continuous with long-standing practices of mutual aid amongst Anishinaabe men, best understood by considering the sociohistorical context in which nijii emerged as a distinct mode of friendship.[23] Over the course of the more than two centuries during which these First Nations’ lives were dominated by the colonial fur trade, the root word ‘nijii’ was adapted from the older term ‘nijiiwaagan’ (a longtime friend) to describe an emergent type of relationship. Anishinaabe men travelled widely outside of their home communities and were compelled to develop relationships with other Indigenous men – not close kin – in order to endure harsh environments. In Dorothy Cameron’s words, these were ‘working friendships’ – respectful, reciprocal relations of solidarity essential to survival. Historically, the role of a nijii was to share essentials of life: food, drink, access to a fire, and valuable information about the shared environment, such as potential threats and places to shelter. Importantly, the Anishinaabe values underpinning nijii relationships include respect for individual autonomy, offering help which is non-judgemental and non-manipulative, that is, ‘walking with someone’ rather than attempting to impose one’s own goals. It is a relationship signifying shared membership of a wider collective, while outside of immediate kinship networks. The nijii relationship therefore differs profoundly from the ‘othering’ inherent in dominant humanitarian practice, in which those being helped in the name of a universal humanity remain in some sense alien to the helpers by virtue of nationality, impoverishment, race or indigeneity (Barnett 2011). In the settler colonial context, where premature Indigenous death is normalised as expected and unremarkable, this inversion is a significant political act, and a radical alternative to Canadian necropolitics – a dual assertion of Anishinaabe life as valuable and worthy of protection, and of Anishinaabe capacity to protect and assist their own (see Figure 6.2).

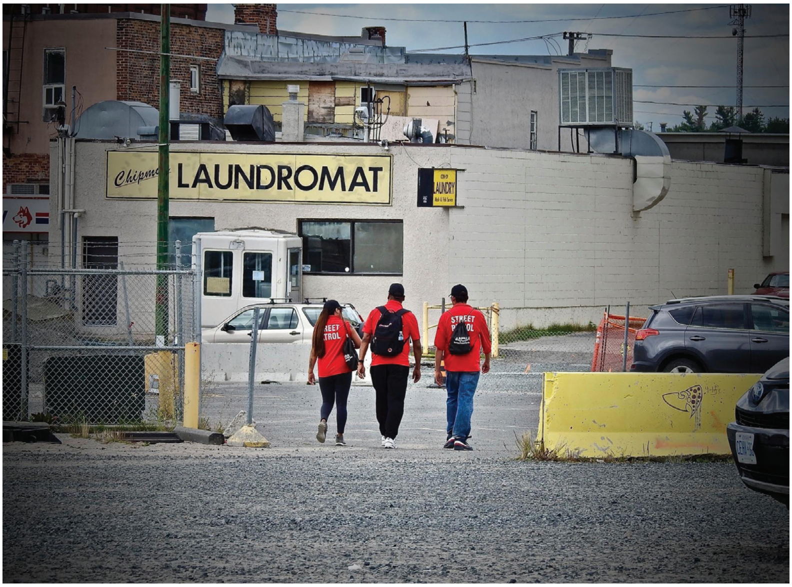


Figure 6.2 Ne-Chee Street Patrol at work in 2018. After more than forty years of operation it was disbanded in March 2019 due to funding cuts. *Source*: © Charles Copenace 2018.

Further evidence of worker subjectivities as consistent with a relational, collectivist Anishinaabe ethos can be found in employment conditions that subjectify Street Patrol workers as members simultaneously of Indigenous families, of communities, and of nations. The early Street Patrol eschewed the rigid bureaucracy typical of welfare state institutions, instead providing workers with an unusually flexible schedule. Although the Ministry of Community and Social Services' memorandum of agreement stipulated employment of four staff members, in practice the programme employed a total of 16 people – 7 who worked most shifts, and another 9 who worked fewer.[24] This allowed regular workers more time for family responsibilities, participation in ceremonies, and wild harvesting activities, while generating income for four times as many people as envisaged by ministry officials. In this sense, the programme could be considered to have maximised redistribution of wealth to Anishinaabeg via the settler welfare state. Reconfiguring employment infrastructure to enable ongoing participation in Indigenous social life and livelihoods ensured that these workers' subjectification as social service employees did not socially elevate them above the community they served.

This analysis shows how tactical alliances with the settler state enable Indigenous actors to change infrastructures to align with liberationist pursuits, consistent with Kyriakides's observation that 'remaining within the legal, political and social frame of the normative [enables one] to foster relations and draw power' (Kyriakides 2018b, 476–7). In this case, I want to emphasise how Anishinaabe actors fostered tactical relations with state actors to strengthen a different set of relations of the utmost importance: relations within their own Indigenous society. This understanding of relationality is inherently political and, as explained by Gina Starblanket and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (2018, 177), speaks to the transformative potential inherent in 'the proliferation of relationships of care and nurturance, in which we see ourselves having concrete roles and responsibilities'. By channelling state resources to establish roles of protection and care by and for Anishinaabeg in a context of acute, racialised threat to Indigenous life, and by simultaneously enabling workers to continue to enact their prior social, spiritual and ceremonial responsibilities, the Street Patrol supported such a proliferation. This creative restructuring of caring labour is, I suggest, a hallmark of an Indigenised, alter-political humanitarianism from below, and a challenge both to enduring settler humanitarianism and to capitalist culture.

An example from Australia during the same period further illustrates how Indigenous people across settler colonial settings navigate welfare state institutions and settler humanitarian sympathies as tactics towards an innovative, Indigenised politics of life. The Community Development and Employment Project, introduced in Australia's Northern Territory in 1977, offered wages for forms of work consistent with traditional Indigenous lifeways. It also offered flexible working conditions that enabled workers to fulfil family and community responsibilities, including participation in ceremony that is foundational to Indigenous sociocultural orders (Stringer 2007). Despite chronic underfunding, it was by many measures extremely successful for three decades, not least as the main employer of Indigenous people in a region of high unemployment. Such endeavours address pressing, collective material and social needs without compromising collective identities, thus asserting and enacting the endurance of distinct societies and polities (Maxwell 2025).

But the Community Development and Employment Project was abolished by the Australian government in the mid-2000s under legislation that enabled the infamous Northern Territory intervention (Altman 2007), a paradigmatic example of neoliberal settler humanitarianism (Maxwell 2017). Justifying this militarised intervention into Indigenous territory and families by reference to child abuse, Australian state actors invoked the humanitarian imperative of protection in a manner quite different from that enacted by Indigenous and Black street patrols. They selectively reapplied imperial humanitarian logic in order to posit alleged child abuse – within the only Indigenous territory with a federal Indigenous land rights regime – as a 'national emergency', reversing decades of hard-won Indigenous rights. This entailed recycling older settler humanitarian discourse that constructed Indigenous communities as backward and immoral, thereby legitimating settler interventions that progressively undermine contemporary Indigenous autonomy and social relations (Stringer 2007). The intervention was also a military-led operation, underscoring similarities with other global 'humanitarian wars' in the early twenty-first century (Watson 2010; Fassin and Pandolfi 2010). For Indigenous Peoples, this intervention was continuous with *both* the now-decried original violence of the settler colony *and* the imperial humanitarian interventions ostensibly curbing such violence (Watson 2010). The continuity, of course, lies in the illegitimate assertion of settler state control over Indigenous territories and lives, legitimated in the name of protection, and obscured for settler Australians by the mantle of humanitarianism (Watson 2010). As Irene Watson asks, what is being protected, and from what or whom?

Indeed, this is the crux of the distinction between settler humanitarianism and the protection of Indigenous life afforded by the Ne-Chee Street Patrol through humanitarianism from below. Indigenous acts of protection extend beyond individual lives to protect a collective and relational way of being, and they align with Indigenous sociopolitical and legal systems that remain under attack in the settler colony. Settler humanitarianism may or may not protect individual Indigenous lives, but it always strives to undermine Indigenous lifeways.

These two otherwise divergent enactments of Indigenous protection – the Australian government's Northern Territory intervention, and the Anishinaabe Ne-Chee Street Patrol – share common antecedents, namely, Indigenous dispossession and the late twentieth-century settler state's failure to ensure access to basic services. The Ne-Chee Street Patrol's efforts to care for and protect other Anishinaabeg was a necessary but insufficient attempt to compensate for the Canadian welfare state's failure to ensure Indigenous people's access to shelter, public safety and transportation. Besides the necropolitics of the settler colony, this state failure is also explained by the settler colonial imagination's commitment to the humanitarian habilitation of Indigenous people. This commitment is based on assumptions that reserves are places for containing and protecting unassimilated Indigenous people, and that Indigenous people in towns and cities are already assimilated and, thus, disconnected not only from reserve life but from their wider societies and polities – making persistent interconnectivity between urban and reserve life unthinkable. By contrast, Charles Copenace's historical account emphasises a web of Anishinaabe relatedness, interdependence and reciprocity extending between reserves and urban centres that was foundational to the Ne-Chee Street Patrol project, reflecting an alter-political vision of Indigenous renewal and resurgence.

Charles's family history also underscores the limitations of humanitarian tactics in the face of ongoing settler colonialism, necropolitics, and social dismemberment. The Street Patrol was unable to ensure the safety of Charles's father, Sam Copenace, one of the Ne-Chee founders and a board member, who drowned when he attempted to cross the frozen Lake of the Woods while drunk. Sam's decision to take that route may have been motivated by the ongoing threat of physical attack by white Kenorans (dubbed 'night riders' by Peter Kelly) along the infamously dangerous golf course road leading to Wauzhushk Onigum (Rat Portage). The divergent roles played by members of the Copenace family in this history of re-membering – by turns leader and victim, provider and recipient – illustrate the extent to which this Indigenised humanitarianism from below is a reaction against ongoing experiences of colonial social dismemberment and necropolitics, and yet remains intertwined with these systems.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I've argued that anthropological reconceptualisation of 'tactics' beyond de Certeau's paradigm are useful for taking seriously Indigenous political agency. This framework is helpful for thinking through Indigenous engagements with settler humanitarianism, which may, at first glance, appear contradictory or self-defeating. Making sense of how political actors act in a given context requires attention to multiple scales, and to the ways in which salient ideologies may be in tension with local imperatives at a given moment.

I've also shown that the roots of the Ne-Chee Street Patrol are traceable to Black organising for weaponised self-defence against the Ku Klux Klan and racist police forces. These origins demonstrate the significance for political organising of parallel experiences of necropolitics and premature death, as well as the appeal of humanitarian reason and interventions. In contrast to the Black American street patrols, however, limited external resources and a strong commitment to re-membering meant that Anishinaabeg operated the Ne-Chee project in ways that not only prioritised care for Indigenous lives, but simultaneously brought them closer to the settler state, albeit in new configurations.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, the protection and enhancement of Indigenous lives secured in the name of universality has proven vulnerable to reversal (Watson 2010), while neoliberal modes of settler humanitarianism have intensified interventions aimed at socially dismembering Indigenous families (Howard-Wagner et al. 2018; Samson 2009; Maxwell 2017 and 2025). And yet, given the significant circumstantial challenges presented by continuing settler colonialism, Indigenous engagements with humanitarian tactics continue.[25]

Notes

1 The currently accepted spelling of this Anishinaabemowin word is ‘nijii’ (Dorothy Taajii Cameron, personal communication via telephone, 13 February 2025).

2 For more information, see https://gct3.ca/our-nation/.

3 As Patrick Wolfe (2006) notes in his classic treatise on settler colonialism, in the post-emancipation period, and particularly at times when their labour is not in demand, the situation of Black Americans in the settler colonial political economy becomes more similar to that of Indigenous people.

4 The concept of ‘protection’ that was central to imperial humanitarianism in the settler colonies in the early nineteenth century, once expressed as the defence of the subjecthood of distinct peoples, eventually became redefined by policies of containment and intensified control in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. This shift was demonstrated particularly by the 1876 Indian Act, which increased confinement of Indigenous people to reserves in Canada, and by the establishment of Aborigines Protection Boards, which regulated legislated missions and reserves in the Australian colonies (Nettelbeck 2016).

5 For details of how the Indian–Eskimo Association provided specific support to Anishinaabe organising in Treaty #3 territory, see Rutherford (2017, 162–3).

6 Less commonly, anti-Indigenous racism in Kenora was also compared to South African apartheid (Rutherford 2017).

7 This contributor asked to remain anonymous, suggesting ongoing sensitivities about this history.

8 See archival sources (Scully 1974, 2).

9 See archival sources (Yawney 1967, 13).

10 See archival sources (Yawney 1967, 22, 26–7).

11 See archival sources (Scully 1974).

12 It is in this sense that I’ve argued that Indigenous health and wellbeing in the liberal settler colony is a paradox (Maxwell 2025).

13 Oral histories suggest that this group had fluid membership and a changing name, but iterations seem to have included the ‘Concerned Citizens Committee’ and the ‘Red and White Committee’.

14 The occupation was apparently inspired by the recent wave of direct action by the American Indian Movement and other youth-led groups who often coordinated actions across the Canada–United States border. Months before, the Oglala Sioux and members of the American Indian Movement had occupied Pine Ridge and attracted widespread support, including a convoy from Winnipeg just west of Treaty #3 territory (Smith and Warrior 1996). In Ottawa, the Native Youth Association had also organised a 24-hour occupation of the Indian Affairs building.

15 Jim Crow refers to legislation enforcing racial segregation of Black people in southern localities and states between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s.

16 For instance, in her autobiography *Bobbi Lee Indian Rebel*, the Stó:lō writer and lifelong activist Lee Maracle characterises the Native Alliance for Red Power street patrol as 'missionary oriented' (1990, 167).

17 Joseph Morrison, oral history shared with author, 28 November 2009, Hamilton, Ontario; Charles Copenace, oral history shared with author, 22 March 2017, Kenora, Ontario.

18 Charles Copenace, oral history.

19 Charles Copenace, oral history.

20 Charles Copenace, oral history.

21 See archival sources (Hamilton 1979).

22 See archival sources (Hamilton 1979).

23 Dorothy Taajii Cameron, personal communication via telephone, 13 February 2025.

24 See archival sources (Hamilton 1979).

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7

From alter-politics to humanitarianism: the evolution of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea

Elmira Muratova

In 2014 the Russian Federation began to destabilise and eventually occupy and annex Crimea, Ukraine's largest peninsula, in the Black Sea region. Russian laws, regulations and social norms were introduced in Crimea and began to influence the daily lives of its residents. This chapter shows how these events transformed Muslim solidarity and humanitarianism 'from below' (Kloos 2020) amongst the Crimean Tatars, blurring the boundaries between humanitarianism and other forms of 'doing good' (Ticktin 2014, 281). At the centre of this narrative is the transnational Muslim organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir, which, under repression by the Russian regime, has undergone an evolution in its discourse concerning the world caliphate and traditional forms of anti-Western protest behaviour. This evolution demonstrates, on the one hand, the flexibility and adaptability of a universalist organisation (Li 2020) in a changing security and political context. On the other hand, it reveals the artificiality of the boundaries between humanitarianism and human rights under an oppressive state (Redfield and Bornstein 2010, 12).

The chapter focuses on Crimean Tatars, a Muslim indigenous minority in Ukraine that spent several decades in exile following a 1944 mass deportation by Soviet authorities.[1] After repatriation to Crimea, much of which occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s, Crimean Tatars demanded rehabilitation, political representation in regional and local authorities, land for the construction of homes, and the return of historical toponyms.[2]

This struggle took place against the backdrop of a religious revival that had already begun in many regions of the former USSR, including Crimea. The Crimean Tatars traditionally practise Sunni Islam. Between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, Crimea was one of the centres of Islamic culture in Eastern Europe. During the Soviet period, under pressure towards forced secularisation, Crimean Tatar religiosity shifted to the family domain (Soboleva 2017, 53). As such, Islamic practice existed mainly in the form of rituals that accompanied life cycles: births, marriages, funerals. In the post-Soviet period, Crimean Tatars' interest in Islam grew along with a desire to understand the basics of religion and to learn how to read the Quran. Muslims from various Islamic countries appeared in Crimea, and began to help the Crimean Tatars to revive their religious life (Muratova 2009b). Representatives of various Islamic movements and transnational organisations quickly gained supporters amongst the Crimean Tatars and, since then, have become an integral part of the Crimean religious landscape.

Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami (the Party of Islamic Liberation) is one of the transnational Islamic organisations that gained particular popularity in this setting. It held numerous regional and local events of a political and educational nature, established control over several Muslim communities and mosques, set up media outlets and publicly challenged secular-oriented Crimean Tatar institutions and agendas. Despite being banned in many former Soviet Union countries, the party operated legally in Ukraine, though it frequently faced sharp criticism from officials and ethnically-oriented organisations within the Crimean Tatar community. Amongst the latter was the Mejlis, the Crimean Tatars' highest executive-representative body,[3] as well as the Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea (DUMK),[4] both of whom criticised the party for being alien to the religious traditions of the Crimean Tatars (Bogomolov et al. 2006; Muratova 2020). Despite the growing interest in Islam after the collapse of the USSR, the majority of Crimean Tatars remained secular Muslims, for whom Islam was only a part of their ethnic identity and culture (Muratova 2009a). As an indigenous linguistic and religious minority encompassing only around 250,000 people,[5] or 12 per cent of the Crimean population (State Statistics Committee of Ukraine 2001), their agenda was directed at preserving ethnic identity and achieving Crimean Tatar national and territorial autonomy within Ukraine (Kouts and Muratova 2014). This autonomy was seen by Crimean Tatars as a guarantee against ongoing assimilation, and as protection of their collective rights. To achieve this political goal, the Mejlis enlisted the support of democratic, pro-Western political forces in Ukraine as well as Western international organisations.

By contrast, the universalist ideology of Hizb ut-Tahrir, aimed at building a society on the Islamic foundation of a world caliphate, was against nationalism, and considered the nation-state system to be incompatible with Islam. Its members criticised the idea of national autonomy for Crimean Tatars, arguing that the only way to preserve their identity was to return to Islam as the regulator of their way of life. Such a position was dissonant with the ideals of secular Crimean Tatars, who blamed the party for contributing to assimilation and disunity. Thus, until 2014, the party was the object of harsh criticism, and it occupied a rather marginal position in the spectrum of Crimean Tatar institutions and organisations.

The 2014 occupation and annexation of Crimea changed the status quo amongst Crimean Tatars considerably. The former alliance between the Mejlis and DUMK was broken when the Russian authorities declared Mejlis to be an extremist organisation and subsequently expelled it from Crimea to Kyiv. DUMK, meanwhile, was forced through various coercive methods into collaboration, and became involved in Russian anti-Mejlis and anti-Ukraine campaigns (Muratova 2019). Hizb ut-Tahrir became a primary target of the Russian persecution of Crimean Tatars, based on religious and political reasons articulated under the banner of counterterrorism (McNeil-Willson 2021). More than a hundred people associated with Hizb ut-Tahrir were accused of terrorism, resulting in long prison sentences (Crimean Solidarity n.d.).

This led to a change in the discourse and activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Crimea (Muratova 2019). I argue that the annexation of Crimea and the persecution of Hizb ut-Tahrir resulted in this reorientation of its activity from anti-Western protest actions to various forms of humanitarianism from below aimed at victims of Russian persecution. These actions went beyond the traditional perception of humanitarianism as ‘an ethos, a cluster of sentiments, a set of laws, a moral imperative to intervene, and a form of government’ (Ticktin 2014, 274), focusing primarily on the physical and psychological suffering of people in times of crisis (Redfield and Bornstein 2010, 6). In post-2014 Crimea, humanitarianism from below goes hand in hand with solidarity and reciprocal efforts that involve radical openness and collaboration (Brković 2023, 3), as well as human rights activism.

Even though Hizb ut-Tahrir’s activities in various regions of the world – the Middle East, the West and Central Asia – are well studied, its Crimean manifestation has not yet become an object of in-depth analysis. Existing research focuses on the tactics and goals of the party; its relations with the Mejlis and DUMK (Aulin et al. 2019; Bogomolov et al. 2006; Muratova 2020); the transformation of its discourse after Crimea was annexed by Russia (Muratova 2019); and its relations with the Ukrainian state (Shestopalets 2024). However, the humanitarian and solidary practices of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea, both before and after the annexation, have not yet received proper attention. This chapter aims to address this gap by answering the following questions: How did the 2014 annexation of Crimea by Russia affect Hizb ut-Tahrir's humanitarian and solidary practices amongst the Crimean Tatars? What motivates and underpins these practices?

This chapter is based on interviews with representatives of political and religious activism in Crimea, conducted before and after it was annexed by Russia. These interviews help to illuminate the context that contributed to the popularisation of the party's ideas amongst the Crimean Tatars. To understand the party's discourse and scope of activities before the annexation, I analysed articles from between 2005 and 2013 in the newspaper *Revival* (*Vozrozhdenie*), published by Hizb ut-Tahrir's Crimean office. In particular, I analysed more than a hundred publications posted on the newspaper's website between March 2009 and November 2013. To then grasp the transformation of Hizb ut-Tahrir's discourse and practices after 2014, I used social media analysis, particularly focusing on the Facebook page of the Crimean Solidarity organisation, which was established by Hizb ut-Tahrir activists in 2016.

This chapter begins with an overview of Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology and methods, using social movement theory to explain why this organisation became so popular amongst the Crimean Tatars. I will then describe Hizb ut-Tahrir's humanitarian and solidary practices in Crimea before the 2014 annexation. In the section that follows, I will demonstrate how these practices have changed in occupied Crimea.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology and methods

Since the ideology and activities of Hizb ut-Tahrir are not the direct focus of my research, I will highlight only a few points essential for understanding the party's Crimean context. Hizb ut-Tahrir was established in 1953 in Jerusalem by the renowned Islamic scholar Taqiuddin an-Nabhani (1914–1977). Initially, the party's members were Palestinians, but over time, the organisation expanded to other countries in the Middle East and beyond. Today, Hizb ut-Tahrir operates in more than 45 countries worldwide, and in many of them, including Muslim-majority nations like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Uzbekistan, it is outlawed (Orofino 2018, 8). However, in Lebanon, Hizb ut-Tahrir is still legally active, which is why this country was chosen as the location for its Middle East headquarters and central media office.

The party's ideology rests on two main principles. The first is Islamic law, which holds that sharia should govern all aspects of human life – politics, economics and ethics. The second principle is the establishment of an Islamic state, as it is believed that a complete society can only exist within such a political framework (Karagiannis 2005, 145). Hizb ut-Tahrir aims to establish an authentic Islamic state modelled after the system that existed in the seventh century under the Prophet Muhammad and his first four successors. The party seeks to revive a caliphate that encompasses all Muslims. This caliphate would be headed by a caliph, a supreme leader who merges religious and political authority, elected by an assembly (*Majlis al-Ummah*), which in turn is elected by the people (Karagiannis 2005, 145). The materials disseminated by Hizb ut-Tahrir in various regions, including Crimea, demonstrate the promotion of alter-politics – 'alternative economies, alternative modes of inhabiting and relating to the earth, alternative modes of thinking and experiencing otherness' (Hage 2015, 4). The party emphasises the caliphate as the only legitimate system, thereby rejecting any Western political organisation, including the Westphalian model of nation-states, as well as the capitalist system and the global order derived from it (Orofino 2018, 3). Accordingly, the group prohibits its members from participating in political activities, and it discourages forms of active citizenship such as voting or seeking public office.

Over its 70-year existence and worldwide expansion, Hizb ut-Tahrir has effectively established a system of meanings, symbols and concepts that cultivate a strong group identity amongst its members and foster deep-seated loyalties (Orofino 2018, 31). At the grassroots level, members are organised into cells (*daira* or *halka*), typically comprising five individuals, who are instructed by a teacher (*mushrif*) on the organisation's core ideological principles. Continuous exposure to the culture, values and beliefs of Hizb ut-Tahrir fosters a collective identity, solidarity and a sense of duty amongst its members. Consequently, members are willing to make sacrifices for 'the cause' and take risks to support their comrades within the group (Karagiannis 2005, 145; Wali 2017, 108).

Scholars studying Hizb ut-Tahrir emphasise its high level of institutionalisation, which is characterised by clear divisions of functions and responsibilities in all the countries where the party operates. Since its inception, the organisation has remained focused on its original mission: advocating for justice and engaging in intellectual battles to secure the rights of Muslims worldwide (Orofino 2018, 7). With a presence in so many countries, Hizb ut-Tahrir demonstrates its ability to adapt to local contexts and political landscapes. While maintaining a global perspective – advocating for the establishment of a caliphate and a separation from non-Muslims (*kuffar*) – each branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir nevertheless tailors its strategies to suit its particular national context, within guidelines set by the central leadership. Elisa Orofino (2018, 4) stresses that variations in the group's approach towards local authorities in terms of assertiveness and criticism are determined by each branch's assessment of its political opportunities and risks; local branches are granted a degree of decision-making authority to devise strategies and actions that best suit their specific circumstances.

Hizb ut-Tahrir is classified in various ways by different researchers. Emmanuel Karagiannis (2005, 140) sees it as a political party with an Islamic ideology, and considers it a 'revolutionary social movement' due to its pyramidal structure of command, its long existence, and its aim for radical change through peaceful means. Others are sceptical about labelling Hizb ut-Tahrir as a party because it refuses to participate directly in the political process (Bogomolov et al. 2006, 51). Farhaan Wali (2017, 102) describes Hizb ut-Tahrir as a 'radical vocal Islamist group' advocating for the reestablishment of the caliphate and the implementation of sharia, while rejecting violence and the legitimacy of ISIS's caliphate. Orofino's (2018, 84) study suggests that Hizb ut-Tahrir operates similarly to transnational corporations, balancing local autonomy with centralisation.

In the next section of the chapter, I discuss how the party's flexibility and adaptability in Crimea's local post-Soviet context, and its sensitivity to the challenges of integration into Crimean society enabled Hizb ut-Tahrir to win Crimean Tatars' support.

Social movement theory and Hizb ut-Tahrir in Crimea

Social movement theory has been the common theoretical tool for studying Hizb ut-Tahrir for decades. It has been adopted by a significant number of scholars for studying Islamic activism in general, which is understood as a mobilisation of contention to support Muslim causes (Wiktorowicz 2004). Social movement theory has also been useful for examining how groups develop their networks, how they collect and mobilise resources, and to what extent they affect the lives and worldviews of their members (Orofino 2018, 77–8).

The structural-functional analysis of social movement theory posits that system equilibrium is a natural condition within society. According to this perspective, societies naturally develop institutional frameworks to regulate the balance between inputs and outputs in the political system. Responsive institutions are created to accommodate societal demands, channel various interests, and formulate optimal policies. These policies, in turn, address demands and work to maintain the system's equilibrium. However, as Quintan Wiktorowicz (2004, 6) points out, when structural strains from external sources occur, they can lead to system disequilibrium, generating new grievances and undermining the effectiveness of institutions. This can result in pathological dysfunctions that lead to political instability. If institutions cannot adequately address new societal demands, it can lead to social frustration and political disorder. Structural-functional models propose a linear causal relationship: structural strains lead to psychological discomfort, which then prompts collective action. Individuals feeling isolated and powerless due to societal changes are thought to join social movements as a coping mechanism with which to regain a sense of belonging and empowerment, and to alleviate psychological discomfort (Wiktorowicz 2004, 6). The emergence of Islamic activism and the popularity of Hizb ut-Tahrir amongst the Crimean Tatars in post-Soviet Crimea may be attributed to structural strains relating to politics, socioeconomic conditions and identity.

The return of the Crimean Tatars to their homeland from exile coincided with the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of independent states from its ruins. This period saw a decline in economic stability and living standards for many citizens due to the severed economic ties between former Soviet republics. For the Crimean Tatars, repatriation meant leaving behind their jobs, homes and established lives in places of exile to start anew in Crimea. The economic crisis, inflation and weak institutions in the young Ukrainian state hindered its ability to provide comprehensive assistance to these returning citizens. Despite the introduction of a state programme in the 1990s aimed at integrating Crimean Tatars and other formerly deported citizens into Crimean society (Bilukha et al. 1999), the programme fell short of addressing the complex economic and social challenges these people faced (Mikelic 2013; OSCE HCNM 2013). Many were left to navigate their difficulties independently. These social and economic strains in post-Soviet Crimea led many Crimean Tatars to lose faith in Ukraine's existing political and economic institutions, which had pledged commitment to democratic values and a free market. Consequently, some Crimean Tatars began exploring alternative political and economic models which were actively promoted by various Islamic groups, including Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Political tensions also played a significant role in driving Crimean Tatars towards Hizb ut-Tahrir. Efforts by Crimean Tatars to attain recognition as an indigenous people in Crimea,[6] and to thereby influence the region's political and economic landscape despite their minority status, were met with resistance from regional and central elites. As a minority group unable to participate on equal terms in elections, Crimean Tatars called for quota representation in Crimea's governing bodies. However, a quota system that existed for a few years (1994–8) was abolished, leaving Crimean Tatars with a sense of powerlessness and little recourse beyond protest actions (Mirimanova 2013; OSCE HCNM 2013). The political marginalisation of Crimean Tatars in post-Soviet Ukraine, particularly during Viktor Yanukovich's presidency (2010–14), resulted in growing criticism of the nation-state system and an increase in anti-Western sentiment. This dissatisfaction led to disillusionment with the existing political regime and with what were perceived as unfair and humiliating 'rules of the game' (Kouts and Muratova 2014, 39–46). This was especially felt amongst Crimean Tatar youth, who encountered blocked social mobility, social alienation and anomie. As a result, young people became particularly susceptible to Hizb ut-Tahrir's Islamist message, demonstrated by the predominance of youth within its ranks. By portraying Crimean Muslims as part of the *ummah* (the global community of Muslims, encompassing all those who believe in Islam) striving for a global caliphate, Hizb ut-Tahrir instilled in Crimean Tatars a sense of belonging to something significant, and it offered opportunities for fulfilment within the party's structures (Bogomolov et al. 2006). Hizb ut-Tahrir activists in Crimea often highlighted this belonging, and the comfort and contentment derived from this connection, as in a 2011 *Revival* piece:

> Islam transcends the narrow confines of Crimean Tatar identity based solely on national or linguistic grounds. It forms an ideological connection with the one and a half billion strong Islamic ummah, fundamentally altering self-perception. It's crucial to recognise that Islam addresses the problems of all, irrespective of skin colour, language or faith. By acknowledging themselves as bearers of an idea capable of saving humanity, the Crimean Tatar people can overcome the sense of inferiority they have come to feel. (Kadyrov 2011)[7]

The threat of assimilation and loss of cultural identity was another factor contributing to the popularity of Hizb ut-Tahrir amongst the Crimean Tatars. This issue is linked to the psychological discomfort caused by the realisation of their status as an ethnic minority, unable to resist the dilution of their cultural boundaries within the Slavic and Orthodox majority of Crimea. While the secular-oriented segment of the Crimean Tatar population sees opposition to assimilation in terms of the preservation of their native language, ethnic and religious traditions, as well as, most importantly, in terms of the restoration of Crimean Tatar statehood, the religiously oriented segment seeks to escape assimilation by strengthening their people's Islamic identity (Kouts and Muratova 2014, 19–20). They aim for ideological and political integration into the ummah, which they believe will help overcome the 'minority complex' and the threat of assimilation into a non-Islamic environment. Hizb ut-Tahrir's public discourse reveals the significant emphasis on the topic of assimilation:

> It is necessary to clearly and distinctly understand that the material problems our people have faced are undoubtedly important, but particularly over the last twenty years, these issues have made us forget about another, more crucial problem – the issue of assimilation. It is crucial to understand clearly that we, Muslims of Crimea, have preserved ourselves as one people solely thanks to Islam. Over the course of two hundred years of assimilation, we have managed to maintain our essence. What will preserve us as a people is only Islam. Thus, our priority is the preservation of Islamic identity and resistance to assimilation. (Revival 2011)

Hizb ut-Tahrir activists in Crimea freely disseminated this messaging through numerous conferences, round tables, protests and media outlets (Bogomolov et al. 2006). This was possible because Ukraine is one of the few post-Soviet countries in which the party is not considered extremist or terrorist and can operate without restrictions. While party members in other post-Soviet countries have been persecuted, Crimea became the location for a branch of Hizb ut-Tahrir's central media office, which provided coverage of the party's persecution in other countries of the region. This office remained active until the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

Muslim solidarity in post-Soviet Crimea

Hizb ut-Tahrir's discourse and activity in post-Soviet Crimea were heavily influenced by an anti-Western stance, which is common amongst other branches of this organisation around the world. Western governments were consistently accused of oppressing Muslims and promoting their cultural assimilation. Anti-Western sentiments were prevalent in nearly every publication of the newspaper *Revival*, which often aimed to convince Crimean Tatars to refrain from relying on Western support in achieving their collective rights:

> We must understand that seeking assistance from countries and institutions that are directly involved in the extermination of other Muslim peoples in various parts of the world is wrong. Inactive in the face of the torment of the Syrian people, who aspire to govern according to their own Islamic values, America and Europe will only help us if we agree to abandon our ethnic and religious values, becoming promoters of Western interests in Ukraine. (Amzaev 2013)

Criticism was directed not only towards the values and policies of Western countries and pro-Western governments in the Muslim world, but also towards the Crimean Tatar Mejlis for its pro-Western and pro-democratic stance. Hizb ut-Tahrir members accused the Mejlis of adopting values and goals that, according to Hizb ut-Tahrir, failed to protect the collective rights and cultural identity of Crimean Tatars. These values and goals included participation in Ukrainian electoral processes and the pursuit of positions in regional authorities. As Fazyl Amzaev (2013), the head of the Hizb ut-Tahrir media office in Crimea, stated:

> The blatant disregard by the authorities for the opinion of the Mejlis reveals the fact that the entire arsenal of tools through which we have been trying to address the issues of the Muslim people of Crimea in recent years has proven useless. These tools, acquired through participation in the electoral process, in the form of numerous deputies and government officials of various levels among the Crimean Tatars, do not possess any influence whatsoever … The reason for the weakness of our position lies in the fact that we agreed to play by rules that are inherently unacceptable to us. The essence of these rules is accepting democratic methods of political struggle.

Interestingly, while rejecting participation in Ukraine's elections and governing institutions, Hizb ut-Tahrir at the same time accepted other forms of engagement in Crimea's civic life, such as active involvement in non-violent protests. To justify these forms of engagement, activists referred to the experience of the Crimean Tatar National Movement, which was formed in exile in the 1960s and used various non-violent protest initiatives to obtain permission from the Soviet authorities to repatriate to Crimea:

> Allah has legalised and entrusted us with the duty of taking an active stance, such as engaging in peaceful protest actions. The history of the national movement before returning to Crimea and in the first half of the 1990s shows us the effectiveness of this method. At that time, thoughts about the prohibition of entering authority structures were widespread among the people, and this idea was present in our political elite at an intuitive level. (Amzaev 2013)

There have been numerous non-violent protests organised in post-Soviet Crimea by Hizb ut-Tahrir activists in solidarity with Muslims from other parts of the world. Participants in those protests often condemned the suffering and persecution of Muslims by what they saw as repressive puppet regimes of Western countries, as well as by Western governments. Many of these events included statements by Hizb ut-Tahrir about systemic violations of Muslims' rights and interests worldwide in the absence of a caliphate, emphasising the urgent need to restore it.

For instance, on 5 August 2012, a rally in support of the people of Syria gathered more than four hundred people in Simferopol, Crimea's administrative centre (RISU 2012). Participants held placards with slogans like 'Muslims are one ummah', 'Armies of Islam, help the people of Sham!', and 'Victory is only from Allah!', with others condemning the Syrian regime. On 20 November 2012, Hizb ut-Tahrir supporters picketed in front of the Russian consulate in Simferopol to protest the arrests of their associates in Russia (Abduraimov 2012). Around 50 people gathered, holding banners with quotes from the Quran and posters reading 'Allah's help is near' and 'Allah, bring down your wrath on the oppressors.' On 7–8 October 2013, Hizb ut-Tahrir representatives planned to hold an international forum in Simferopol to discuss the oppression of Muslims in former Soviet countries, but it was cancelled at the last minute after the National Drama Theatre, where the forum was to be held, unilaterally terminated the contract (Sokolovskaya 2013). In response, forum delegates staged an unauthorised protest outside the theatre, attracting several hundred activists.

Many protest events organised by the Crimean arm of Hizb ut-Tahrir were synchronised with similar actions by the organisation's branches in other countries (Naharnet 2012; Sky News 2012), which featured similar slogans and messages (Hizb ut-Tahrir 2011a and 2011b; Re-photo 2011). Hizb ut-Tahrir's protest in response to the film *Innocence of Muslims*, held on 27 September 2012 in Simferopol, attracted between 500 and 1,000 people (Dorofeev 2013). At the rally, along with slogans and posters like 'The curse of Allah lies on liars' and 'The faith of Muslims is untouchable!', there were also more politically charged statements such as 'Democracy is a source of evil and violence.' Another rally in Simferopol on 6 June 2013, dedicated to the 89th anniversary of the fall of the Caliphate,[8] brought together about 2,000 people (BBC News Russian Service 2013). Demonstrators held white and black flags with Islamic symbols, as well as banners with inscriptions like 'Caliphate, the ummah is waiting for you', 'Caliphate is the shield of the ummah', 'One ummah – one flag', 'Capitalism – oppression, Islam – justice'.

Aligned with Hizb ut-Tahrir's role as a protest-for-justice group involved in an intellectual struggle for the rights of Muslims (Orofino 2018, 7), another kind of Muslim solidarity emerged in post-Soviet Crimea. This took the form of human rights support for Muslims being targeted by Ukrainian law enforcement for practicing their religion. Women wearing headscarves would encounter obstacles in obtaining official documents when authorities would insist that they remove their headscarves for passport or driver's license photos. Some Muslim women also experienced discrimination and harassment at educational institutions or workplaces due to wearing headscarves. In response to these challenges, in 2010 Hizb ut-Tahrir established League of Muslim Women Justice (*Insaf*), led by Lutfie Zudieva, a prominent female Hizb ut-Tahrir activist (Revival 2013). The League offered legal and psychological assistance to affected women, and also organised conferences and seminars on various topics related to the history of Islam, including women's human rights and their violations in Ukraine and other countries.

Also in 2010, there were several cases in Crimea in which practicing Muslims had their homes searched, were subjected to questioning, and had their religious literature confiscated. In response, Hizb ut-Tahrir formed the Human Rights Movement of Crimea (*Pravozaschitnoe Dvijenie Kryma*) in order to represent their interests and defend their rights. These Muslims belonged to various Islamic groups (such as the Salafi movement), some of which had ideological differences with Hizb ut-Tahrir. However, Hizb ut-Tahrir presented this initiative as a demonstration of Muslim solidarity rather than pursuing the interests of one group.

Thus, Hizb ut-Tahrir's activities in post-Soviet Crimea primarily focused on promoting the party's ideology and demonstrating anti-Western solidarity with oppressed Muslims, both globally and within

Ukraine. This universalist activism established Hizb ut-Tahrir as a prominent player in Crimea, and attracted considerable attention from Crimean Tatars, regional and international media and Ukrainian officials. In the next section, I will discuss how this focus shifted towards grassroots humanitarian efforts following Russia's annexation of Crimea.

Humanitarianism from below after the 2014 annexation

After Crimea was occupied and annexed by Russia, where Hizb ut-Tahrir is designated as a terrorist organisation, party members began to face intense pressure from law enforcement agencies. Some members have already been sentenced to prison terms of up to 19 years in penal colonies, while others, at the time of writing this chapter, remain under investigation. Some were detained in the course of large-scale operations conducted by the Russian Centre for Combating Extremism (the so-called 'Centre E'). These operations would take place early in the morning, involving street cordons and several dozen armed officers. Typically, individuals' homes would be searched, during which security forces would seize phones, computers and other equipment.

In 2016, the families of detained and arrested members of Hizb ut-Tahrir formed Crimean Solidarity (*Krymskaya Solidarnost'*). This organisation also included lawyers, members of the Crimean Tatar National Movement, the Mejlis, journalists, human rights activists and other sympathisers. Despite their diverse backgrounds and sometimes opposing views, these individuals were united in their rejection of Russia's oppressive policies towards the Crimean Tatars and in their opposition to Russia's control over Crimea.

The diverse composition of Crimean Solidarity inevitably led to a transformation in Hizb ut-Tahrir's discourse. Activists no longer publicly associate themselves with Hizb ut-Tahrir, which is understandable given its classification as a terrorist organisation in Russia. Additionally, they have moved away from the exclusively Islamic rhetoric previously dominating their discourse, which had caused significant friction with the secular-oriented circles of the Crimean Tatar community (Bogomolov et al. 2006, 62–3). They started to use the term 'Crimean Tatars' as often as 'Crimean Muslims', and they actively employ references to the 1944 mass deportation to show their connectedness to the community. Statements condemning Western influence, criticising democracy, or rejecting the nation-state system are no longer heard. These topics have disappeared from the rhetoric of Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Crimea because they have begun to speak at various Western human rights platforms, where voicing such ideas would obviously be inappropriate (Muratova 2019).

Humanitarianism from below, focused on supporting victims of Russian persecution and their families, has become the primary form of Hizb ut-Tahrir's activity in Crimea since 2014. The organisation's sense of solidarity, which was previously directed mostly towards Muslims in other countries with repressive regimes, has now been redirected towards Crimean Tatars.

Crimean Solidarity activists engage in various 'experimental' forms of humanitarian practices in which 'there is sometimes no need to differentiate the savers from the saved' (Brković 2023, 7). They primarily address the immediate physical and psychological needs of Hizb ut-Tahrir members, providing support to arrested members and their families in the form of money, food, clothing and assistance with household matters. One wife of an arrested Hizb ut-Tahrir member mentioned in an interview that if she has an issue with fixing a faucet or anything else, she contacts a person from Crimean Solidarity who comes and does the repairs for free.[9] Another wife shared that when she faced financial problems, Crimean Solidarity activists helped her with food and money.[10] At Crimean Solidarity's monthly meetings, expressions of gratitude from the families of arrested Hizb ut-Tahrir members are directed towards the organisation:

> May Allah be pleased with the *jamaat* [community] that comes every day with words of support to our homes. Showing that everything that touched us today is not only our problem but the problem of the whole people. Because Muslims are like a single body whose parts support one another. Your support gives us strength, perseverance and a firm belief that the tests that touched us today, we, *In sha Allah* [by the will of God], with the help of God and yours we will pass with dignity. Indeed, the truth is on our side.[11]

Crimean Solidarity has also launched several fundraising campaigns in Crimea to help detained and arrested Crimean Tatars pay fines for administrative charges related to their protest activities. For instance, in July 2019, they organised a campaign to cover fines by collecting ten-ruble coins, roughly equivalent to quarters in US currency (Veselova 2019).

Psychological support for detained and arrested Crimean Tatars and their families has been another focus of Crimean Solidarity's humanitarian practice since 2014. The organisation has initiated letter-writing campaigns to send messages of encouragement and holiday wishes to those in custody; these individuals in turn often compose open letters to the community which are shared on Crimean Solidarity's Facebook page and website, serving as a means to stay connected and to share their thoughts and reflections. Crimean Solidarity activists regularly visit the families of detained individuals to offer support and prevent them from feeling isolated. The organisation's monthly meetings serve a similar purpose, providing these family members a supportive environment where they can interact with others who have undergone similar experiences.

Amongst Crimean Solidarity's humanitarian endeavours, there are also several projects focused primarily on children. One such project is Our Children (*Bizim Balalar*), which distributes money for children whose fathers are in custody. The fund also provides clothing and toys, facilitates leisure activities and medical treatment, organises psychological rehabilitation and offers household assistance to the children's families (Krym Realii 2017). This initiative was spearheaded by Lilya Budzhurova and Elzara Islyamova, prominent figures from the Crimean Tatar media organisation Karadeniz Production. Leveraging their popularity amongst the Crimean Tatar community, they have organised multiple fundraising campaigns. Another initiative tailored for children is Crimean Childhood (*Krymskoe Detstvo*), which primarily focuses on the psychological wellbeing and religious education of children whose fathers have been detained or arrested (see Figure 7.1). It was launched by women affiliated with Crimean Solidarity whose children have been affected by their fathers being targeted by Russian law enforcement agencies. Mumine Saliyeva, the coordinator of Crimean Childhood, initiated this project upon realising that many children who had been left without fathers needed not only material support but also psychological assistance:

> Upon our arrest, simply observing our children made me realise that it is insufficient to merely provide them with shoes, clothes and food. After the arrests [of my husband and others], the number of children reached exactly one hundred, and this figure deeply impacted me. At that juncture, numerous individuals began offering their assistance, offering to tutor, mentor, and help with homework, among other things. This prompted me to institutionalise this support at a systematic level, ensuring it occurred with regularity.[12]

Figure 7.1 A religious training event for girls organised by the Crimean Childhood initiative, May 2019. *Source*: © Mumine Saliyeva 2019.

In Crimea, as in other regions under oppressive state regimes, the distinction between humanitarianism and human rights becomes blurred (Redfield and Bornstein 2010, 12; Ticktin 2014, 282). Steven Robins (2009) illustrated this overlap in the case of the Treatment Action Campaign in South Africa, where xenophobic attacks prompted the organisation not only to provide basic necessities but also to advocate for refugee rights. Similarly, Crimean Solidarity, drawing on Hizb ut-Tahrir's history as a protest-for-justice group and its pre-2014 experiences, incorporates human rights practices into its civic activism.

The merging of humanitarianism with human rights is also compounded by the fact that helping victims of Russian persecution in Crimea is viewed by the state as anti-politics and a potential threat, often leading to further arrests. Thus, the line between the 'saviours' and the 'saved' is indistinct (Brković 2023, 7), with today's activists potentially becoming tomorrow's recipients of aid. There is a pattern in which Russian law enforcement agencies systematically target the most active members of Crimean Solidarity, prompting new individuals, predominantly from Hizb ut-Tahrir, to step in and fill the vacant roles within the organisation. These newcomers are motivated by the strong sense of group identity and enduring loyalty that their affiliation with Hizb ut-Tahrir fosters (Orofino 2018, 31). Evidently, this solidarity within the Hizb ut-Tahrir group compels them to take risks for 'the cause' and to support their fellow members (Karagiannis 2005, 145; Wali 2017, 108) in post-2014 Crimea.

Since the 2014 annexation, there has been a noticeable shift in Hizb ut-Tahrir's approach towards Western international human rights organisations, which it previously had criticised harshly. Currently, the party's human rights activists and civic journalists are working to gain recognition and support from these organisations (Melkozerova 2017), ensuring that the persecution of Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Crimea is reflected in international reports and media outlets (Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights 2023; Freedom House 2024). This has necessitated an adaptation of Hizb ut-Tahrir's rhetoric to align with the discourse embraced by these organisations and, obviously, to refrain from anti-Western criticism. With the assistance of the Crimean Tatar Mejlis in Kyiv, Hizb ut-Tahrir activists have had the opportunity to discuss the persecution of their group during events organised by Human Rights Watch, Frontline Defenders, and others (see Figure 7.2). This has contributed to Ukraine's efforts to gain international support in condemning Russia's occupation of its territories. Some of these activists are women, for whom human rights activism within Crimean

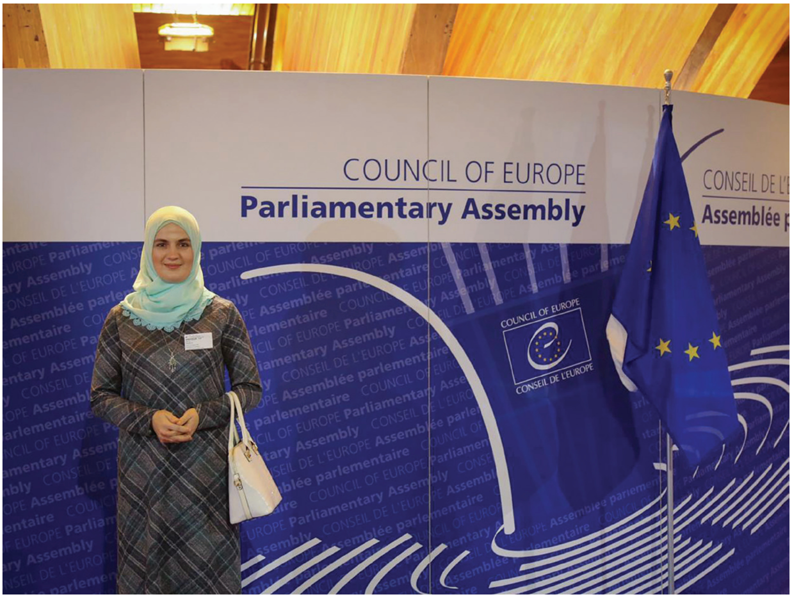

Figure 7.2 Mumine Saliyeva, a coordinator of the Crimean Childhood initiative, as a member of the Ukrainian delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), January 2020. *Source*: © Mumine Saliyeva 2020.

Solidarity has significantly expanded opportunities for women's self-fulfilment through education and professional training (Muratova 2022). Recognising the sensitivity surrounding the topic of Hizb ut-Tahrir in the West, where the party has a controversial reputation and is widely banned, its activists choose to portray victims of Russian repression in Crimea not as members of Hizb ut-Tahrir, but rather as Crimean Tatars or Crimean Muslims who have suffered for political reasons.

Conclusion

Hizb ut-Tahrir's history in Crimea vividly illustrates how the universalist Islamist group, aiming to restore the caliphate on a global scale, adapts to changing political and security contexts in specific regions. Researchers studying Hizb ut-Tahrir in other parts of the world have previously noted the group's adaptability and flexibility. This chapter confirms these findings and details the transformations that have occurred during the group's adaptation to a new repressive context.

The Crimean branch of the party has moved away from public anti-Western rhetoric and protest activities, towards a more secular rhetoric that is acceptable to Crimean Tatar society and to Western human rights organisations. The group has also shifted its image from that of a protest-for-justice organisation engaged in an intellectual struggle for the rights of Muslims worldwide, to that of a humanitarian organisation providing material and psychological support to Crimean Muslims. Based on the Crimean Hizb ut-Tahrir members' assessment of political opportunities and risks, and with a degree of decision-making authority to devise strategies and actions suited to their specific circumstances, they have sidestepped Islamist universalism and alter-politics, rediscovered their Crimean Tatar identity, and adopted the universalist Western discourse of human rights. While it is beyond the scope of my research to assess the sincerity of this shift, I cannot rule out the possibility that the repressive environment in post-2014 Crimea may have provoked a rethinking of identity and values.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's humanitarian activities since Crimea was annexed by Russia can be understood as a form of protest against the Russian authorities' discriminatory and repressive policies targeting both the Crimean Tatar community and the party itself. With traditional methods of protest and alter-politics – such as mass demonstrations, press conferences and open information campaigns – rendered impossible under the highly repressive regime, the party has adopted 'officially sanctioned' humanitarianism as an alternative outlet. Although humanitarianism is typically seen as 'neutral' and rooted in 'moral sentiments' (Fassin 2012, 1) aimed at aiding those in need, in the context of post-2014 Crimea, it also functions as a strategic form of anti-politics. Recognising the element of protest in these humanitarian efforts, the Russian authorities have responded by repressing, targeting and punishing the most active members of Crimean Solidarity.

The chapter also illustrates that in repressive contexts, the line between different forms of 'doing good', such as humanitarianism and human rights activism, become indistinct. Hizb ut-Tahrir activists demonstrate that providing material and psychological aid alone is inadequate in situations where basic security needs are unmet. Consequently, legal defence and support (consultation, representation in court and civic journalism) have become integral components of Hizb ut-Tahrir's humanitarian efforts in Crimea.

Hizb ut-Tahrir's humanitarian initiatives also highlight its horizontality and reciprocity. The distinction between helpers and those being helped is exceptionally blurred as the state targets the group's most prominent members, and today's helpers often become tomorrow's helped. New activists, driven by a strong sense of group identity and solidarity cultivated through the group's ideological cohesion, step in to replace those who have been arrested. This reciprocal effect further reinforces Hizb ut-Tahrir's group identity. The heightened sense of insecurity and vulnerability the group's members experience in the face of increasing repression translates into a profound sense of gratitude, involvement and belonging felt by both helpers and those being helped. Thus, the cohesion and resilience of Hizb ut-Tahrir in post-2014 Crimea continues to strengthen.[13]

Notes

1 In May 1944, the Soviet authorities accused the Crimean Tatars of collaborating with Nazi occupiers, and deported them from Crimea. About 200,000 people were forcibly resettled in the Soviet republics of Central Asia and the Urals.

2 After the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, the Soviet government renamed regions, cities and streets in order to ideologically transform the Crimean cultural space.

3 The Mejlis was formed in 1991 during the Second Qurultay of the Crimean Tatar people. It consists of 33 people elected by delegates of the national congress. From 1991 to 2013 the Mejlis was chaired by Soviet dissident Mustafa Dzhemilev. In 2013, he was replaced by Refat Chubarov.

4 The Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Crimea (DUMK), or the Crimean Muftiate, is a centralised Islamic organisation created in 1992 to coordinate processes in the religious lives of Crimean Tatars. The Muftiate is headed by the mufti, who is elected by delegates of the Qurultay of the Muslims of Crimea. There have been three muftis: Seitdzhelil Ibragimov (1992–5), Nuri Mustafaev (1995–9) and Emirali Ablaev (since 1999).

5 The minority status of Crimean Tatars is a result of several waves of forced displacement from Crimea, beginning with its annexation by the Russian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century and continuing until the early twentieth century.

6 Ukraine recognised the Crimean Tatars as one of the three Indigenous Peoples of Crimea (along with the Krymchaks and Karaites) only in 2021, after Russia annexed Crimea.

7 All interview materials and quoted newspaper articles were translated from Russian by the author.

8 The dissolution of the Ottoman Caliphate – the last institutionally recognised caliphate in the Islamic world – was enacted by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey on 3 March 1924.

9 Interview, Bakhchisaray, August 2019.

10 Interview, Simferopol, August 2019.

11 Speech at Crimean Solidarity's monthly meeting on 26 May 2019.

12 Interview, Bakhchisaray, August 2019.

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Afterword: humanitarian assemblages

Stephan Kloos

When I first introduced the concept of 'humanitarianism from below' in a workshop near Paris in 2015 (Kloos 2020), the idea was to direct attention to the existence of other, notably non-Western and non-Christian forms of humanitarian engagement besides the mainstream forms described by Didier Fassin and others (for instance, Fassin 2012; Ticktin 2011; Bornstein and Redfield 2010). Using the example of Tibetan medicine in exile, I showed how, even in its conventional definition, humanitarianism is not the monopoly of rich states and powerful international organisations of the Global North, nor is it necessarily based on secularised Christian ethics or Euro-American understandings of politics and life itself. Informed by Buddhist ethics, a uniquely Tibetan understanding of life, and a complex political tradition of its own, Tibetan medicine in exile nonetheless operates on a global scale, has universal humanity as its subject and an ethics of compassion as its motivating force; it involves a clear distinction between giver and recipient, and thus engenders power relations with a conscious political agenda. It represents a humanitarianism from below, I argued, by virtue of its reversal of roles: poor, stateless refugees setting out to help their host country as well as the world more generally, explicitly including the rich North, but still adhering in form and structure to mainstream international humanitarianism. As such, Tibetan medicine in exile constitutes an exceptional, perhaps even paradigmatic, case that complicates the narrative of humanitarianism as a uniquely Western phenomenon.

The present volume widens the concept of humanitarianism from below considerably, enriching it with intriguing studies of various practices of welfare, care and solidarity that blur and transcend the lines between above and below, global and local, universal and particular, relational empathy and liberal altruism, giver and recipient. While they all continue to combine genuine altruism and care with calculated self-interest (that is, ethics and politics), these practices negotiate multiple scales and pursue an array of alter-politics (Hage 2015). They creatively – and often subversively – connect kinship, race and ethnicity to universalised values and notions of the human. Often, they are located on a much more intimate affective register than mainstream humanitarianism, and they involve much higher stakes, including not only the lives of victims but also those of the humanitarian agents themselves. Often, too, these practices are counter-humanitarian insofar as they actively or implicitly position themselves laterally, transversely or adjacently to other, more hegemonic forms of colonial, settler or mainstream humanitarianism.

As I will discuss, by blurring these lines, the contributions to this volume open inquiry into a wide range of complex alter-politics, ethics of engagement and visions of humanity that might otherwise fall through the cracks of a still insufficiently decolonised scholarly gaze on humanitarianism. From Fassin's clear-cut definition of its hegemonic Western form and my own mirror image thereof as practised by Tibetans in exile, both inadvertently representing Weberian ideal types of humanitarianism, we have now arrived at the messiness and contradictions that characterise politics, care and solidarity – indeed, humanity – across the world, which anthropology is so well placed to explore. One important part of this messiness is the coexistence of multiple forms of humanitarianism that are mediated, and engage with the world and one another, through complex and highly uneven histories and relations of power, including constructions of gender, class and race (Benton 2016). A fundamental virtue of this volume, then, is its critical engagement with and analytic focus on humanitarian pluralism, made possible by the strong ethnographic grounding of its various contributions and by the comparative perspective thereby afforded.

Inevitably, the above-mentioned messiness also raises some questions, most fundamentally one that several chapters grapple with: in what sense can practices of care and solidarity be described as humanitarianism (from below or otherwise) if they do not easily map onto conventional, ideal-typical characteristics thereof? How, for example, can we call Thai student hunger strikes (Bolotta), the crowdfunding of warfare in Ukraine (Fedirko), or the use of human rights discourse in defence of Islamists (Muratova), instances of humanitarianism? As Mostowlansky and Muratova ask in the introduction: why, what and where is humanitarianism from below? To which one might fruitfully add: what do we gain, analytically and theoretically, by framing our subjects and their practices as humanitarian, and 'from below', in the first place? Do we not reinforce the hegemony of 'big-H Humanitarianism', as Benton argues in her chapter, by assigning local, non-Western forms a positionality 'below', thus undermining the very effort to decentre the former?

One thing seems clear: the humanitarian adjective conceptually positions all the case studies in this volume within a common analytic framework. This makes them comparable with one another and enables us not only to explore potential connections between them or patterns of how universalisms regarding 'the human' are mobilised, but also to inquire into their relationships with conventional, international humanitarianism. As such, this volume constitutes a productive conceptual and heuristic intervention from outside, irrespective of the humanitarian claims by the actors described. By drawing attention to the pluralism that shapes humanitarian practice worldwide, it also decentres humanitarianism, and encourages its critical reassessment as a diverse and truly global phenomenon, rather than a singular one originating in Western political and moral history.

However, the forms of care, solidarity and doing good described here also qualify as humanitarian in and of themselves, precisely because they are centrally shaped and defined through their engagement with dominant humanitarian discourse and practice. The fact that all these various engagements take a distinctly critical, counter-hegemonic form, be it through mimicry, tactical borrowing and subversion of mainstream humanitarianism, or through bypassing, traversing or confronting it, provides them with a distinct positionality 'from below'. This positionality, however, should not be mistaken for an unreflected, normative value statement that solidifies existing power inequalities. Rather, this volume's chapters reveal it as integral to its actors' strategies of consciously moving across humanitarianism's different scales, and creatively playing with, blurring and destabilising the distinctions between 'above' and 'below'. In addition to its heuristic value, there is thus considerable irony and subversive potential in humanitarianism from below, both as an analytical concept and as a practice of engagement. The question mark in the book's title skilfully hints at this from the outset.

The multiple humanitarian engagements described in this volume, crucially, go beyond documenting alternative, non-Western or counter-hegemonic politics of aid and care. They also explore the ontological and epistemological notions that inform them: what does 'doing good' mean in the context of wartime Ukraine? What exactly is 'life' for the Anishinaabe people, or the 'human' for the Kyrgyz or for West Africans?

How are virtue and sacrifice defined by Thai Buddhists? This is about more than simply teasing out the emic perspective. In Bolotta's chapter, for example, humanitarianism emerges as an assemblage of Buddhist morality, which is fundamentally hierarchical; Gandhian anti-colonial politics, which were not so much pro-democracy as about national self-determination; a Western human rights discourse inspired by NGOs like Amnesty International that was resented by royalists for being foreign; and Thai social sensibilities about kinship and seniority that the demonstrators may critique but cannot ignore. Similar humanitarian assemblages of partially contradictory and partially overlapping discourses, audiences, histories, politics and cultural symbols are also a central feature of the other chapters. These elements and the ways in which they come together matter deeply, not only in how humanitarianism is practised, but also how it is conceived, and what kinds of alter-politics are at stake.

Besides consisting of multiple elements that are not reducible to a single logic but that nonetheless make up a larger phenomenon, assemblages are characterised by their emergent temporality, their open-ended trajectories, and their de- and re-territorialising functions (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Rabinow 1999; Collier and Ong 2005; Kloos 2017). By this definition, the practices of solidarity and care described in this volume are indeed humanitarian assemblages. As we have seen, they are centred on notions of humanity and they strategically position themselves in relation (whether aligned, lateral, or transversal) to mainstream humanitarianism, sometimes employing universalising discourses themselves. They are informed by multiple and at times contested histories; they de-territorialise sometimes incompatible humanitarian, political and cultural subjects, discourses and meanings, and re-territorialise them in different configurations and contexts; and they are emergent phenomena whose outcomes and futures are very much open-ended. They are more than simple events or individual responses to particular crises, but they are not yet stabilised as apparatuses comparable to large international humanitarian organisations. Indeed, their tentative temporalities and multiscalar positionality are important features that distinguish them from mainstream humanitarianism.

Exploring various humanitarian assemblages, this volume not only pluralises humanitarianism and thus allows for comparison, but it also addresses important theoretical and methodological questions of scale, universality, ethics, the 'human', and life itself. Indeed, one important feature of the humanitarianism from below seen in most of the chapters in this volume is the centrality of horizontal engagements, to the point where even the distinction between helpers and the helped blurs, sometimes to the point of disappearing. With the exception of Ephrussi's case of undocumented Afghan refugees providing aid to Turkish earthquake victims, all the other chapters describe Canadian First Nations, Kyrgyz, Crimean Tatars, Thai students, Ukrainians or West Africans helping, first and foremost, members of their own social, political, ethnic or national group. Even in Ephrussi's case, an aspirational horizontality is central insofar as Afghan refugees sought, through their humanitarian engagement, to position (or at least perceive) themselves as equal and legitimate members of the Turkish state. Although such practices of care and solidarity are obviously shaped by internal hierarchies of kinship, social status and politics of belonging, they can nonetheless be regarded as horizontal insofar as they take place within an imagined community where the helpers and the helped are, to an important degree, interchangeable. Here, we are reminded of Benedict Anderson's (1991) theorisation of horizontality as a major feature of modern polities. This constitutes a major point of departure from the conventional model of international humanitarianism that is shaped by marked power differentials between donors and recipients. To a remarkable extent, then, in all these cases such power differentials are not simply reversed, but rather negated altogether.

However, as I noted above, what turns these instances of ordinary solidarity into humanitarian engagements is their vertical dimension. While operating horizontally, they also make universalising claims about humanity or human rights, tactically engage with mainstream humanitarianism, and position themselves in relation to the world. From this perspective, humanitarianism from below emerges at the intersection of a horizontal axis consisting of practices of solidarity and care, and a vertical axis of references to universal humanity, morality and humanitarianism from above. While maintaining a continuum with the latter, humanitarianism from below at once decentres, critiques and transforms it by adding a collective, relational and local dimension. Maxwell's chapter illustrates this particularly well by contrasting European settler humanitarianism, which aims to protect individual life but undermines Indigenous collective ways of life, with Anishinaabe humanitarian care, which focuses on the protection of individual *as well as* collective life.

There is a final common thread running through all these chapters, alongside the topics of ethics, politics and life itself, that may be less directly thematised but is nonetheless central: the question of economy and value. Humanitarianism existentially relies on the mobilisation of material resources, and this is no different in the cases discussed in this volume. Most obviously, there are the flows of money in Kyrgyzstan enabled by trade that circumvents sanctions against Russia (Mostowlansky and Toktogulova), and there is Ukraine's crowdfunded war economy (Fedirko). Taking a larger perspective, humanitarianism – even when from below – is an important industry in and of itself, which certainly does not operate outside the capitalist market but very much within it. Yet from a closer vantage point, humanitarian politics are often better seen as gift economies, where resources are temporarily diverted from the market to earn not direct financial profits but religious merits, social status, political influence, or simply a sense of agency and recognition. There are also other economies of value at play: economies of humanisation or dehumanisation, valuations of human life, economies of virtue. As this volume demonstrates, the equivocal continuities between a pervasive capitalist logic and the value of human life, religious merits or cultural values are well worth exploring – a task that is by no means completed.

In the end, this may be the most important intervention of this scholarly endeavour: beyond the insights and analyses offered by the individual chapters, beyond even their comparative value and collective knowledge as an edited volume, this book – like the humanitarian practices it documents – widens, complicates and enriches our understanding of humanitarianism. Like so often, the view from below encourages us to engage in critical, creative and compassionate ways with the world around us, ultimately transcending categories like 'above' and 'below' altogether. As such, this volume is as provoking of thought as it is, hopefully, of further work – scholarly, ethical, political – in the field of humanitarianism. Despite the moral rhetoric usually attached to it, humanitarianism is not so much about doing good (or, indeed, bad) as it is about learning to understand the cultural diversity, political complexity and moral nuances of one of the most universal human practices there is: helping one another.

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Index

Page numbers for figures are in *italics*.

4th African Conference on Emerging Infectious Diseases and Biosecurity (Freetown) 28–9

Abayomi, Dr 29
Ablaev, Emirali 185n4
Aboriginal people 141, 144, 162n4
acting out the citizen 109–33
  migration contention 113–14
  'people do good, the good will be seen' 120–30
  power in disclosing:
    on visibilisation and performativity 116–20
  refugees in troubled times 115
  shaking ground 111–13
Action Campaign, South Africa 182
Adams, Brad 94
Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) 146, 147
AFAD (Afet ve Acil Durum Yönetimi Başkanlığı) 120, 125, 128
Afghanistan 1, 121–2
Afghan migrants, Turkey 110–33
Agamben, Giorgio 7
AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi) 113, 114, 117–18
Akylbek (imam) 61, 75
Alcoholics Anonymous 157
al-Nabhani, Taqiuddin 170
al-Qaeda 8
Al-Shaya, Muhammad 65, 66
alter-politics 8–9
Amarasuriya, Harini 98
American Indian Movement (AIM) 137, 143, 144, 149, 151–2, 162n14
Amnesty International 85, 101, 102, 104, 192
Amzaev, Fazyl 176
Anderson, Benedict 192
Anicinabe Park, Kenora 148–9, 152
Anishinaabe march, Kenora (1965) 144–5
Anishinaabe people 137–65
Antakya, Turkey 115
'anti-politics' 7, 8, 13, 185
apartheid 162n6
Arab Coordination Group 65
Arendt, Hannah 44, 53
Artur (volunteer/street activist) 51, 54n23
As-Safa 64–81, *68*, 79n1–2
assemblages, humanitarian 189–95
Atambaev, Almazbek 65
Atiq (Esmatullah's nephew) 121
Australia 138, 141, 144, 159–60, 162n4

Bambiland (Jelinek) 44
Banivanua Mar, Tracey 141
Banks, Dennis 152
barami (moral perfection) 92–6
Barker, Joshua 86
BBC 101, 102
Benton, Adia 19–32, 30n6, 140, 191
Beothuk Patrol, Vancouver 151
Biafran War (1967–70) 145–6
'big-H Humanitarianism' 21, 23, 30n5, 191
bintabat chiwit (receiving life as an offering) 96
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan 65
Black May uprising (1992) 88
Black Panther Party 137, 149, 150–1, 152, 153, 157
Black Panther Party of Self Defense 150–2, 153

Black people 138–9, 141, 143–51, 159, 161, 162n3, 162n15
Black Power Movement 139, 148
blasphemy laws 90
Bobb, Ray 151
Bodhisattva 83, 90
Bolatta, Giuseppe 83–108, 190, 192
Boltanski, Luc, *Distant Suffering* 44
Bosnia 6, 8
Bourdieu, Pierre 110
Brada, Betsey 30n5
Brantly, Dr Kent 27
Britain
  Ebola crisis (West Africa) 26, 27
  hunger strikes 88, 93
  imperialism 138, 139, 140–2, 145, 147
Brković, Čarna 3
Buddhism
  moral framework 4, 5
  starving for humanity 83–108
Budzhurova, Lilya 181
Butler, Judith 110, 116, 130
buzkashi game 71–9, *71*, *77*

Calhoun, Craig 2
Cameron, Dorothy 157
Canada 137–65, 162n4, 162n14
Caribbean Crown Colonies 138, 139, 140–1
Carruth, Lauren 129
Central Asia 66, 75, 78, 169, 185n1
Chalad Worachat 88
Chamlong Srimuang 88
China 65, 67
Chippewa people 152
CHP (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi) 113, 114, 116, 117–18
Christianity
  discourse 144
  Judeo-Christian tradition 84
  moral framework 5, 139, 141, 146, 153, 189
Chubarov, Refat 185n3
‘classmates’ (*klastashtar*) 63
Cold War 2, 105n5
Colombia 124
colonialism 2, 8, 12, 138, 140–6, 157, 160–2, 162n3–5
Come Back Alive 37
Comfort, Mark 150
Community Alert Patrol, Watts 150
Community Development and Employment Project, Australia 159–60
Community Response Group Sierra Leone 26
compassion, logic of 39–44
convalescent serum therapies (CSTs) 22, 27–9
Copenace, Charles 153–4, 155–7, 161
Copenace, Sam 153–4, 161
Coulthard, Glen 151
COVID-19 pandemic 33, 78, 98
Crimea 40, 167–88
Crimean Childhood (*Krymskoe Detstvo*) 181, *182*
Crimean Muftiate 168, 169, 185n4
Crimean Solidarity (*Krymskaya Solidarnost*) 179–82, 184
Crimean Tatar National Movement 177, 179
Crimean Tatars 1, 167–88, 185n1
crowdfunding campaigns
  international 54n16
  military 33–6, 37–41, 45–6, 48–9, 53, 54n2, 54n4
Crow Dog, Mary 144

Damira (Dar al-Khair resident) 69–70
Dar al-Khair (Place of the Good) 67, *68*, 69, 78
‘dark’ aspects, of humanitarianism 3
Deacons for Defense and Justice (USA) 150
de Certeau, Michel 142, 161
dernek (civil society organisation) 122, 124–5
Devji, Faisal 7–8
Dharmaraja 83, 90
diaspora and solidarity (Ebola crisis) 19–32
  grassroots and diaspora initiatives 25–8

qualified humanitarianism 22–5
'value added' 24
Distant Suffering (Boltanski) 44
'distributed humanitarianism' 34
Donbas, Ukraine 33, 37, 41, 50, 53n1
Donini, Antonio 30n7
drone warfare 45–6, 54n17
Dubal, Sam 7
DUMK (Spiritual Administration of the Muslims of Crimea) 168, 169, 185n4
Dussart, Fae 140–1
Dzenovska, Dace 8
Dzhemilev, Mustafa 185n3

earthquake, Turkish/Syrian (2023) 109–33, *112*, *119*
migration contention 113–14
'people do good, the good will be seen' 120–30
power in disclosing:
on visibilisation and performativity 116–20
refugees in troubled times 115
shaking ground 111–13
East Africa 1
Ebola crisis, diaspora and solidarity during the (West Africa) 19–32
care and support outside the suite of humanitarian fare 26–7
grassroots and diaspora initiatives 25–8
health education and outreach 25–6, 30n3
laboratory of opportunity 27–8
Education for the Liberation of Siam 94
Egypt 5, 126, 170
Elmira (As-Safa rep) 67
emotional contagion, Thai 98–9
enmity, logic of 45–8
Ephrussi, Alexander 109–33, 192
Esmatullah (fundraising organiser) 114, 121–2, *122*, 124, 126, 128–9
European Union (EU) 113–14

Facebook 19, 40, 170, 181
Fanon, Frantz 150
Fassin, Didier 48, 189, 190
Fedirko, Taras 33–57, 54n3, 190, 194
Feldman, Gregory 116, 118
Feldman, Ilana 84
female citizenship 54n21
Ferguson, James 7
Fierke, Karin M. 89
figures of humanitarianism 83–108
Fine, Dr (Rhode Island Department of Health) 25–6
First Nations reserves 137
First Person View (FPV) drones 45–6
Free Youth anti-government rally, Bangkok 94
French Revolution 53
Fresenius Kabi 27–8
Friendship Centres, Canada 143, 153–4
Frontline Defenders 183
fundraising
Afghan efforts in Turkey 109–33
Crimea 180–1
Ebola crisis (West Africa) 26
Kyrgyzstan 71–9
Thai youth activists 91, 102
Ukraine 34, 38, 45, 47
See also crowdfunding

Galbraith, James K. 39
Gandhi, Mahatma 91, 92, 95
GAR (Göç Araştırmaları Derneği) 115
General Assembly, UN 20
geospatial orders 9–10
Global Emerging Pathogens Treatment Consortium 28
Global North 23, 145, 189
'global protectorate', emergence of Islamic aid in the 64
Global South 23, 41, 62, 101, 145
Global War on Terror 47, 66
goat humanity, housing and Islamic aid in small-town Kyrgyzstan 61–81

Göç İdaresi (Presidency of Migration Management) 114, 121, 125, 128–9, 131
‘good deeds with spiritual merits’ (*soopchuluk*) 61, 71, 73
grassroots and diaspora initiatives (Ebola crisis)
  care and support outside the suite of humanitarian fare 26–7
  health education and outreach 25–6, 30n3
  laboratory of opportunity 27–8
Greece 116
Grill, Jan 124
Guevara, Ernesto ‘Che’ 150
Guinea 20
Gülchö bridge 73, *73*
Gülchö classmates 72–8, *73*
Gülchö, Kyrgyzstan 61–81, *62*, *68*, *71*
Gulf States 64, 65, 66, 69, 78

Haberkorn, Tyrell 103
Hage, Ghassan 8, 140
hamāhang (in harmony with others) 123–4
Harms, Erik 86
Heerten, Lasse 145–6
Hekmatullah (fundraising organiser) 124–5, 126, 127
Herod, Andrew 5
Hill, Daniel 143
Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami 1
Hizb ut-Tahrir evolution, Crimea 167–88
  humanitarianism from below after the 2014 annexation 179–84
  ideology and methods 170–2
  Muslim solidarity in post-Soviet Crimea 175–9
  social movement theory and 172–5
housing and Islamic aid in small-town Kyrgyzstan 61–81
  building a social town 66–71
  emergence of Islamic aid in the ‘global protectorate’ 64–6
  humanity’s carcass 74–8
  kin and the goat 71–4
‘humanitarian enterprise’ 8
humanitarianism from below 3–9
  alter-politics 8–9
  concept 189
  (in)humanity 7–8
  scale 4–5
  universality 5–6
human rights activism 83–108, 151, 167–88
  See also individual organisations
Human Rights Movement of Crimea (*Pravozaschitnoe Dvijenie Kryma*) 178
human rights violations 52
Human Rights Watch 85, 94, 102, 183
hunger strike resistance, Thai 83–108
hunger strikes, global 88
Hürriyet newspaper *117–18*

Ibragimov, Seitdzhelil 185n4
Igbo people, Nigeria 145–6
Iğsız, Aslı 116
iLaw 85
imperialism 140–1, 145, 146, 150, 160, 162n4
Indian Act (1876) 162n4
Indian-Eskimo Association, Toronto 143, 162n5
Indigenous people 12, 137–65, 167–88, 193
(in)humanity 7–8
Innocence of Muslims (2012) 178
International Committee of the Red Cross 5
Ishchenko, Volodymyr 55n24
Islam 5, 7–8, 63–4, 167–88
Islamic aid
  in the ‘global protectorate’ 64–6
  goat humanity (Kyrgyzstan) 61–81
Islamic Development Bank 65
Islyamova, Elzara 181

Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 120
Istanbul, Turkey 110–33, *117–19*, *122*

Japarov, Sadyr 66
Jeenbekov, Sooronbai 65–6
Jelinek, Elfriede, *Bambiland* 44
jihad 6, 8, 47
Jim Crow laws 149, 162n15
Jordan 170
Judeo-Christian traditions 84

Kabba, Yusuf 29
Kahramanmaraş, Turkey 115
Kairat (Ulak classmate) 72
Kalys (Ulak classmate) 74–6
Karadeniz Production 181
Karagiannis, Emmanuel 172
karma 84, 95
Katsumoto, Karen 95–6
Kelly, Fred 143
Kelly, Peter 148, 152, 161
Kenora Miner and News *154*
Kenora, Ontario 137–65, 162n6
Kenora Presbyterian Church 143
Kenya 26
Kick Out Ebola Day (Providence, Rhode Island) 19–20, 21
Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark, Heidi 142, 159
King, Martin Luther Jr 143
Kloos, Stephan 2, 3–4, 13–14, 189–95
Ku Klux Klan 143, 149, 150, 161
Kursk, Russia 46
Kurtović, Larisa 8
Kuwait 64, 65, 67, 90
Kuwaiti foundation 63
Kyrgyzstan 61–81
Kyriakides, Theodoros 142, 159

Latour, Bruno 5
League of Muslim Women Justice (*Insaf*) 178
Lebanon 170
legitimacy, quest for 109–33
legitimate humanitarian violence 6, 7–8
lese-majesty charges, Thai 85, 90, 98, 103–4, 105n2–3
Lester, Alan 140–1
'liberal altruism' 91
liberationist humanitarian tactics, street patrols as 149–61
liberatory politics and humanitarian tactics (protecting Indigenous life) 137–65
Liberia 20
Liberian-American youths 19–20, 21
Liberian Community Association, Rhode Island 21, 30n2
Li, Darryl 5–6
Lindquist, Johan 86
Lord's Resistance Army, Uganda 7

Mackereth, Kerry Anne 100–1
McNevin, Anne 130
Maidan revolution (2013–14) 33, 55n24
Makhno, Nestor 54n8
Manning, Ryann 26
Mann, Michael 34–5
manut ('human') 105n1
Mao Zedong 150
Mapping Actors and Networks in Ukraine project (MANU) 54n4
Maracle, Lee 163n16
March Against Fear, USA (1966) 150
marriage, polygamous 70
martial citizenship 33–57, 55n24
  hierarchies of belonging 48–52
  logic of compassion 39–44
  logic of enmity 45–8
  people's economy of war 36–9
Maxwell, Krista 137–65, 193
Mayor's Committee, Kenora 146
Médecins Sans Frontières 21, 24
media, use of
  Hizb ut-Tahrir 168, 170, 175, 179, 183
  Kenora, Ontario 143, 144, 145, 152, *154*

media, use of (*cont.*)
  Thai youth activists 86, 88, 93, 96, 99, 101
  in Turkey 113, 114–15, 116–17, 126
  See also social media
medicine, traditional 3–4, 189
Mejlis (Crimean Tatar executive body) 168–9, 176, 179, 183, 185n3
Middle East 169, 170
migration 110–33
migration, illegal 117–18, *117–18*
military voluntarism (Ukrainian nation-state) 33–57, 54n2
Missbach, Antje 130
Mittermaier, Amira 5, 77, 126
monarchy reform, Thai 94, 96–7
Monobank, Ukraine 38
'moral economies' (Kyrgyzstan) 61
Morrison, Don (Giizhiiganang) 155
Morrison, Joseph 153–5
Mostowlansky, Till 1–15, 61–81, 87, 190–1, 194
Move Forward Party (Thailand) 103
Mullah Yaqub 109, *122*, 125, 126–7, *127*
Muratova, Elmira 1–15, 87, 167–88, 190–1
Muslims 8, 63, 84, 90, 167–88
Mustafaev, Nuri 185n4

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) 149–50
Native Alliance for Red Power 151, 163n16
Ne-Chee Street Patrol, Kenora, Ontario 137–65, *154*, *158*
  'protection': settler humanitarianism and Indigenous tactics 140–9
  street patrols as liberationist humanitarian tactics 149–61
Nelson, Alondra 151
Nettelbeck, Amanda 141
Newton, Huey P. 150
Nigeria 145–6
non-governmental organisations (NGOs) 26–7, 65, 85–6, 88, 91, 100, 101–2, 192

Oglala Sioux tribe 162n14
Ojibway Warriors Society 149, 152
Ontario Human Rights Committee 143
Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services 153
Orofino, Elisa 172
Ottoman Caliphate 178, 186n8
Our Children (*Bizim Balalar*) project 181
Oushakine, Serguei Alex 54n9
Ozdağ, Ümit 115

Paine, Thomas 93
Pakistan, northern 1
Palestinians 170
Pallister-Wilkins, Polly 30n6
Pankhurst, Emmeline 93, 95
Panusaya 'Rung' Sithijirawattanakul 83–108, *87*, *100*
parami see barami (moral perfection)
Parit 'Penguin' Chiwarak, 83–108, *87*, *102*, 105n9
Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) *183*
Pasit Wongngamdee 85
Pavlo (Ukrainian crowdfunder) 40–1, 43, 45
people's economy of war (martial citizenship) 36–9
People's Party 2020 105n4
People's Supplies 41, 43, 45
performativity, visibilisation and 110, 116–20, 130
Petric, Boris 66
pharmaceutical production 4
Pheu Thai Party (Thailand) 103
Phra Payom Kanlayano 96
police, Turkish 114
'politics of pity' 44
Pomare, Queen 141
Pooley, Will 27
PowerWomen232 26

Pozniak-Khomenko, Natalka 54n9
Prayuth Chan-o-cha 84–5, 94
Presbyterian Fellowship Centre, Kenora 149
‘protection’ concept 162n4
Providence, Rhode Island 19–20, 21

Qatar 65
qualified humanitarianism 21, 22–5

rachathan (‘royal punishment’) 104
racialisation 137–65, 162n15
Red Cross 64
Redfield, Peter 24
Red Power movement 139, 151–2, 163n16
‘Red Shirt’ United Front for Democracy Against Dictatorship (2010) 105n4, 105n6
Refugee Agency 113
refugees 110–33
Reid-Henry, S. M. 25, 29
‘relational empathy’ 91
religious moral economies 5
religious movements 65
Revival newspaper 174, 175, 176
rhizome metaphor 5
Rhode Island 19–20, 21, 25–6, 29, 30n2
Robins, Steven 182
Rohingya refugees 130
Russia
  annexation of Crimea 167, 169–70, 186n5–6
  sanctions against 67
  Ukrainian invasion 9, 37–8, 41, 45, 46
  Ukrainian occupation 1, 33
Russian Centre for Combating Extremism (‘Centre E’) 179
Rutherford, Scott 143, 144–5, 162n5

Saadi Shirazi 109, 126, 132n1
Sacra, Dr Richard 27
Saliyeva, Mumine 181–2, *183*
satyagraha theory (Gandhi) 91
Saudi Arabia 65, 90, 170
Save the Children 64
scale, conceptualising 4–5, 62–3
Seale, Bobby 150
Security Council, UN 20
self-defence, armed 149–50
self-sacrifice (*kansiasala*) 88–91
Serhii Prytula Foundation 37
Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahayan Charitable Foundation 66
shifting ground 10–11
Sierra Leone 20, 21, 26–9
Sierra Leone Action (SLA) 27–8
Simferopol rallies (2012–14) 177–8
‘*Sınır namustur*’ (‘Border is honour’) 116
Siwichai, Khruba 92–3, 95, 105n7
slave trade, transatlantic 138, 139, 140–1
‘small-scale humanitarianisms’ 3, 62–3
Sobocinska, Agnieszka 2
social media
  Facebook 19, 40, 170, 181
  Thai youth activists 93, 98, 99
  Turkey 113, 115, 126
  Twitter 94
  Ukraine 33, 46
social movement theory, and Hizb ut-Tahrir 172–5
social networks 65
social towns 61–81, *68*
solidarity, social 36, 54n5
soopchuluk (‘good deeds with spiritual merits’) 61, 71, 73
soop/sawab (‘giving to God’) 73
Soviet Armed Forces 41
Sowa Rigpa (Tibetan medicine) 3–4, 189
Srettha Thavisin 103
Starblanket, Gina 142, 159
starving for humanity (Thailand) 83–108
  hunger strike as humanitarianism 88–92
  Panusaya: hunger strike as an act of friendship 97–101

starving for humanity (Thailand) (*cont.*)
  Parit: hunger strike as *barami* 92–6
  Thai humanity under question 101–4
Stepaniuk, Natalia 41, 54n9
Sternenko, Serhii 40, 45–6, 47
Student Union of Thailand 94
Suchinda Kraphrayoon 88
Syria 109, 111, 123, 176, 177
Syrian migration 113, 115

tactical universalism 12–13
tactics, humanitarianism and Indigenous ('Protection') 140–9, 161
Tatars, Crimean 1, 167–88, 185n
'terrorism', *inhumane* practice of 6, 7–8
Tetiana (People's Supplies) 43, 47, 54n13
Thailand
  Criminal Code 85, 90, 95, 98, 103–4, 105n2–3
  Criminal Court 105n2, 105n9
  Thai youth starving for humanity 83–108
Thai Lawyers for Human Rights 85, 102–3, 105n3
'Thainess', redefining 84–5, 89, 93, 96, 99, 103–4, 105n5
Thaksin Shinawatra 103
Thammasat University Massacre (1976) 104, 105n4
Thongchai Winichakul 104
Tibetan medicine 3–4, 189
Ticktin, Miriam 84, 87
Toktogulova, Mukaram 61–81, 194
Tolkun (sick widow) 76–7
transnational humanitarianism 5, 21, 62–3
Turkey 109, 110–33, *117–19*, *122*, 170
Turkish Red Crescent 128
Twitter 94

Uganda 7, 8, 26
Ukraine
  emergency assistance 1
  GDP 38, 41
  Hizb ut-Tahrir and 176
  martial citizenship 33–57, 54n2
  and Russia 1, 9, 33, 37–8, 41, 45–6
  Tatars and 186n6
  volonterstv (definition) 34
  See also Crimea
Ukrainian Armed Forces 41–2, *49*, 50, 54n11
ulak tartysh game 71–9, *71*, *77*
United(24) 37, 38, 54n16
United Arab Emirates (UAE) 65, 66
United Kingdom 21, 27
United Nations Mission for Emergency Ebola Response (UNMEER) 20
United Nations (UN) 64
United States of America (USA)
  Black liberation struggle in 149–50
  civil rights movement 144, 149–50
  street patrols in 144
  War on Poverty 148
  West African Ebola crisis 21, 27
Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN (1948) 85, 89
universality 5–6
UN peace-keepers 6
unsteady ground, humanitarianism on (acting out the citizen) 109–33
USSR, collapse of 167, 168, 173
Uzbekistan 170

Vessantara (*Vessantara Jataka*) 105n8
Victoria, Queen 141
voluntarism, military (Ukrainian nation-state) 33–57, 54n2

Wali, Farhaan 172
Watson, Irene 160
Wauzhushk Onigum (Rat Portage) 143, 144, 161
Waystation hostel, Kenora 146–8
weaponised self-defence (USA) 149–50
West Africa 19–32
West Asia 169
widows, Kyrgyzstan 65, 67, 69–70, 76
Wiktorowicz, Quintan 173
Williams, Robert F. 149
Willoughby, Dr Victor 27
Wolfe, Patrick 162n3
women, Muslim 178
World Health Organization (WHO) 20

Yanukovich, Viktor 174
Yawney, Carol 147
Yingluck Shinawatra 94
yntymak bolso ('coming together in solidarity') 74–5
Yoruba Elders of Rhode Island 25–6

Zafer Partisi (Victory Party) 115
Zelenskyi, Volodymyr 40, 46, 51–2
Zhuravlev, Oleg 55n24
Zudieva, Lutfie 178

Since the late twentieth century, wealthy nations and international organisations have claimed a monopoly on humanitarianism. Even critical views of this regime of global aid and assistance have reinforced the image of a phenomenon shaped by secularised Christian ethics and Euro-American politics of life. At the same time, around the world various humanitarian institutions and practices have flourished that remain outside this realm.

Mostly invisible to Western publics, these forms of humanitarianism have reshaped global landscapes of aid in tangible ways; from protecting Indigenous communities in Canada to African diasporic initiatives in response to the Ebola pandemic; from Islamic economies of giving and Buddhist concepts of the human to crowdfunding aid in Ukraine. Written by leading scholars in the field, *Humanitarianism from Below?* forcefully illustrates that these humanitarian actors do not merely represent grassroots initiatives but have altered humanitarianism at large, involving alternative economies and politics. Drawing on original ethnographic and historical research, *Humanitarianism from Below?* addresses a wide audience of scholars and students in humanitarian and development studies, anthropology and political science. This volume considers humanitarianism's multiple histories and relations of power and offers a profound reassessment of humanitarian pluralism today.

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