6 Humanitarian action

A moral economic periodization of famine relief

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Although the history of humanitarian efforts has become a vibrant field of academic study, there have been few attempts to delineate chronological patterns of humanitarianism. A few overviews offer suggestions on how to understand humanitarian action as a succession of characteristic periods or turning points that encapsulate prevailing conditions and trends. This chapter seeks to contribute to this discussion by emphasizing societal factors (including culture, media structures, and economics) to a greater extent than research has hitherto done.[1]

We propose a new periodic outline of humanitarianism based on moral economic developments and their socio-political consequences, rather than a history of events.[2] This implies a shift from the question of "what" to that of "how," and a shift of focus from the imperatives of crisis management in the outside world to the mechanisms of relief efforts themselves. We realize that periodization can be problematic if imposed too rigidly. Our aim is to offer a heuristic device that will help researchers improve their understanding of humanitarian efforts, particularly in relation to famine relief. We illustrate our temporal suggestions with three episodes of transnational famine relief: the Great Irish Famine in the 1840s, the famine in Soviet Russia and Ukraine in 1921–1922, and the Ethiopian famine of the mid-1980s.

A revisionist periodization

The years 1945 and 1989 appear in Michael Barnett's *Empire of Humanity* as turning points for humanitarian action. They illustrate the prominence of geopolitical explanations in humanitarian studies, such as the process of decolonization and the Cold War, and mirror the presentism that governs relief agencies and academic discourse alike. Practically all studies identify 1989 as a watershed.[3] Our economic and cultural approach to the history of humanitarian action deviates from such geopolitically determined perspectives, although some histories of humanitarianism do blend geopolitical and societal perspectives. A consistently cultural and socio-economical approach such as ours challenges the dominant paradigm that rests on issues of war and intervention, and government perspectives.

We identify three phases of humanitarian action, each with widely differing societal, political, and international circumstances: (a) nineteenth-century ad-hoc efforts, (b) twentieth-century organized relief based on planning and economics of scale, and (c) expressive humanitarianism characteristic of the half century from 1968 to the present. These periods correlate with (a) the politico-economic regimes of elitist laissez-faire liberalism, (b) Taylorism and mass society, and (c) an ambivalent blend of individualized post-material lifestyles, flexible production and communication regimes, and neoliberal public management. They are also connected with three distinct industrial revolutions (circa 1800, 1900, and 1970). The characterization of our first two periods as "ad hoc" and "organized" humanitarianism builds on the work of Curti.[4] Our

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framework also resonates with that of those who challenge the notion of a "short" twentieth century extending from 1914 to 1989 and who advocate an alternative narrative of a "long" century from the 1890s until the present, with the 1970s as a decisive transformative period.[5]

The term "organized humanitarianism" reflects the proliferation of "organization" as a guiding principle in the early twentieth century. While the First World War raised relief efforts to a magnitude previously unimagined, this represents a high point in an ongoing transformation of philanthropic endeavors that started in the 1890s.[6] This transition involved physicians, social workers, engineers, and later public relations specialists and accountants who actively promoted scientific and technological innovations, new media, and business methods. An expansive humanitarian vigor surfaced in the merging of Protestant missionary zeal and liberal civilizational aspirations during the Russian Famine of 1890–1891, when a reluctant US government agreed to lend logistical support to relief efforts, heralding the transition from "non-interventionism" to a "missionary humanitarianism."[7] Curti emphasized the correlation between voluntary and government action and the institutionalization of relief, both of which had manifested themselves in the run-up to the Spanish–American War of 1898. According to this analysis, the bureaucratic-rational and semi-official approach of the American Red Cross (ARC) marginalized earlier popular relief efforts.

The advancement of organizational structures, mass appeals, and government intervention brought about a sea change in humanitarian action.[8] Ian Tyrrell calls attention to the 'historical experience of organized giving' in response to the geographically distant calamities of the 1890s. He also points to the gradual displacement of idiosyncratic human-interest endeavors by the more systematic work of foundations, which facilitated the emergence of philanthropy as a coherent epistemic community in the decade after 1900.[9] Georgina Brewis has traced the transition from religious philanthropy to organized social service in relief efforts during the Indian famines in the last years of the nineteenth century.[10] Such developments coincided with the systematic employment of photographs in the fundraising campaigns for India in 1896–1897 and the Second Boer War (1899–1902), creating an enhanced sense of the authenticity of aid causes in an unholy alliance "with the sensationalistic mass culture that intensified after the turn of the century."[11]

The period after the First World War, with its collapsing empires, civil and border wars, expulsions, and waves of refugees created a vast humanitarian crisis. The war became a node for organized humanitarianism that displaced earlier ad-hoc charity efforts.[12] Here though, the rise of international organizations after the war resumed an ongoing trend the conflict had interrupted.[13] The turn-of-the-century economic globalization, including new communication and transport technologies, enabled global civil society and encouraged philanthropy.[14] Moreover, pre-war imperialism had a profound impact on British humanitarianism, including the "ethics of relief," aid practice, and staffing. Administrators and relief workers with experience from colonial institutions or religious organizations remained an integral part of the humanitarian "mixed economy" of voluntary and official relief. Newly established organizations including the Save the Children Fund (SCF) and the American Relief Administration (ARA) "utilized the expert knowledge and techniques of famine relief first elaborated by the liberal imperialism of the late nineteenth century."[15] The period is also characterized by an increased emphasis on the hunger and suffering of children;[16] a group of beneficiaries that required specialized relief.

In contrast to the views of Curti and others, we concur with Johannes Paulmann that the Second World War was not the watershed in the history of humanitarian action that it is often proclaimed to be, since ideas and procedures that marked this period drew strongly on previous developments.[17] Paulmann suggests, instead, the late 1960s and early 1970s as a turning point, and this is one with which other researchers also agree.[18] The international famine relief

effort during the Biafran Civil War at this time is widely recognized as a rupture in the history of humanitarianism. It effected the split of the Red Cross movement with the formation of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), molded a generation of relief workers, and brought civil society organizations to center stage as mediators between Western audiences and the "Third World."[19]

The concept of "expressive humanitarianism" that we propose pertains to post-material values of self-expression, an increasing fusion of relief with advocacy strategies, the notion of rights, utilization of media, spectacles of various kinds, commercial branding, populism, and the aggressive conduct of humanitarian intervention. These tendencies emerge from what economic analysts and contemporary historians identify as a caesura around 1970 that was the origin of many formative developments for society.[20] Therefore, just as the names we have chosen for the first two periods correlate with ad hoc or more systematic humanitarian logistics and ways of engendering compassion, the third refers to dramatized humanitarian choreography and to spectacular forms of intervention.

The truism that the end of the Cold War transformed the world has led many to assume that a new period of humanitarianism began after 1989. However, there is little evidence that there has been a major shift in the culture of humanitarianism parallel to the geopolitical change.[21] Paulmann leaves open the question of whether we have witnessed "a new departure" or merely an emphasis on emergency aid containing conflicts at low cost. At the same time, in underscoring the global nature of modern media pertinent to the present, Paulmann points to satellite transmissions and the BBC report on famine in Ethiopia that led to the Live Aid benefit concert in 1985, that is, events that pre-date the end of the Cold War.[22] He has also questioned the significance of the geopolitical shift of 1989 for humanitarian "so-called complexities" in general.[23]

Lilie Chouliaraki, who contrasts examples from the 1970s and 1980s with those of recent years, characterizes the whole period since the 1970s as an "age of global spectacle" typified by three transformations: the market-compliant instrumentalization of aid, the decline of the grand political narrative of solidarity, and the technologically fueled rise of self-expressive spectatorship. Taken together, she suggests they effect an epistemic shift toward an emotional, subjective humanitarianism correlated to narcissistic morality and an emergent "neoliberal lifestyle of 'feel good' altruism."[24] Our concept of expressive humanitarianism encapsulates these trends, which are also summarized in Alain Finkielkraut's formula of the "sentimental alienation" that has characterized humanitarian efforts since the late 1960s.[25]

A focus on plateaus achieved guided our selection of episodes by which to illustrate the three periods we term (a) ad-hoc, (b) organized, and (c) expressive humanitarianism. We present a brief overview of relief efforts during the Great Irish Famine of the 1840s, the Soviet Famine of 1921–1922, and the Ethiopian Famine of 1984–1985, rather than dwelling on forerunners.[26]

Ad hoc humanitarianism and the Great Irish Famine

Curti has explained that nineteenth-century ad hoc humanitarianism lacked formal and institutional connections between different relief efforts, emphasized voluntary initiatives, and relied on a fundraising repertoire that had emerged from the philhellenic movement of the 1820s. It involved the formation of ad hoc committees to oversee the collection of money and the transportation of foodstuffs, the holding of public meetings, church fund drives, charity events, ladies' bazaars, and newspaper campaigns.[27]

In the UK, building upon the long-distance imperial charity of the eighteenth century, ad hoc humanitarianism emerged during the Napoleonic Wars. Despite the war context, humanitarian activities were then entirely civilian endeavors with links to the British and Foreign Bible

Society, the evangelical and anti-slavery movement, and domestic charity. In addition to Curti's points, there were patterns for committee procedures and for the documentation of subscriptions and disbursements. However, there were no agencies for the continuous monitoring of food insecurity or other disasters, nor was there any permanent infrastructure for fundraising or aid distribution. Governments were also unprepared to manage foreign aid.

While famines had occurred periodically in Ireland, the first significant British relief effort to address an Irish famine emerged in 1822. The Irish famine that followed in 1831 was aided by the fundraising of a Catholic newspaper in Paris.[28] However, the "Hungry Forties" represented a difficult time for transnational relief. Throughout Europe, they were years marked by bad harvests, an economic downturn, and political unrest. Both the Vatican State and the Ottoman Empire banned the export of grain, although Pope Pius IX and Sultan Abdulmejid I made significant personal donations in 1847.[29] In France, only when domestic food scarcity abated at the beginning of the harvest season did relief efforts take on a broader scale. Disaffection with the Age of Metternich, culminating in the revolutions of 1848, minimized the concern of European elites with the Irish disaster.

The first distant group to provide relief in 1845 was the Irish community in Boston. In 1846, the British imperial forces in Bengal, which included Irish soldiers, initiated another long-distance effort. When the famine intensified at the end of that year, Catholic parishes and proselytizing societies in England, as well as Irish organizations in the US and transnational Quaker networks began raising funds.[30] The Society of St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) expanded its model of local Catholic charity in major Irish cities.[31]

However, before the establishment of the British Association for the Relief of Extreme Distress in the Remote Parishes of Ireland and Scotland on 1 January 1847, transnational activity was low. While this initiative was managed by the financial elite of London, it was directed by the same officials responsible for inadequate government relief. Politically, the association served to showcase charitable leadership to the Irish and British, allowing for a slightly less bureaucratic distribution of aid alongside the stringent public relief work system. One-sixth of the total fund was reserved for Scotland, where some districts had also experienced poor harvests, though the situation was far less severe than the famine in Ireland. The £390,000 collected for Ireland, which included donations from across the empire and the wider world, was depicted as a success, although it barely exceeded funds raised during the more minor famine of 1822.[32]

This major British campaign encouraged the nascent relief efforts of Irish communities in the US and Catholics around the world. Thus, a considerable, although short-lived, international voluntary effort came about in 1847, and for some time alleviated Irish distress. In England, Catholic districts organized collections, and the Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, became a conduit of news to the British public. It continued to serve famine relief long after that cause was fashionable. The newly inaugurated Pope Pius IX mandated collections for Ireland in mid-January 1847. His second encyclical in March 1847 extended the call for famine relief to the wider Catholic world. Prelates from Italy and elsewhere forwarded the offertories of their districts to the Vatican's Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, which distributed the sums among two dozen Irish bishops and archbishops.

French fundraising was also carried out by dioceses but was ultimately coordinated by the voluntary *Comité de secours pour l'Irlande*, which conveyed the proceeds to the Irish clergy. The committee's first action, taken at a time when the Pope's sphere of activity was still limited to Rome, was to ask him to address the world at large.[33] The key figure behind the petition was Jules Gossin, the president of SVP.[34] Gossin's circular to SVP chapters, issued in February 1847, resulted in funds that helped establish SVP branches in a number of Irish cities.[35] These groups and their transnational network transcended the ad hoc humanitarianism of the nineteenth

century, although the sum they raised did not exceed £6106, and their *raison d'être* was local charity. SVP branches continued their work throughout the years of famine, even after external sources had dried up.

In contrast to Europe, conditions for providing famine relief to Ireland were propitious in the US, where a populous community in close touch with its homeland existed. Irish-American organizations became the nucleus for broader civic engagement and a nationwide campaign. At the same time, plentiful US harvests enabled great profits in undersupplied European markets, facilitating generosity and even giving rise to the notion of a moral obligation to compensate those who suffered most under the anomalous terms of trade. Moreover, opposition to US aggression against Mexico at the time inclined many people toward humanitarian action.[36] The isolated relief initiatives in the US were coordinated and expanded by a national fundraising meeting that took place in Washington, D.C., in February 1847. Principal collection committees were established in major cities, sending relief ships to Ireland. There, local agents, primarily from the Society of Friends (Quakers), distributed the provisions to the populace.[37] Overall, contributions from the US amounted to roughly £200,000.

Thus, the Irish Famine of 1847 saw a broad, well-coordinated network of fundraising bodies, aid providers, and local distributors working together on a hitherto unknown scale. Irish aid recipients frequently exaggerated aid received from abroad, while downplaying the British efforts. Nevertheless, there was no preparedness for a sustained effort in any quarter. By the summer of 1847, relief committees in the US and elsewhere began to disband, church bodies turned their attention to other issues, and volunteers on the ground who had distributed aid were exhausted. Famine raged for another three years with no significant voluntary or official relief efforts. The number of victims amounted to one million people and another million emigrated, reducing the population of Ireland by one-fourth. Although some Catholic and Irish American collections exhibited anti-British sentiments, few abroad could have anticipated that a powerful government like the UK would remain largely passive in view of such an ongoing domestic calamity. When, in the autumn of 1847, civil servants in London declared the situation in Ireland under control, it was generally assumed that this was in fact the case. Thus, after a single season, almost all efforts ceased, showing that ad-hoc humanitarianism was a weak and unreliable source of aid. This is also evident when one considers that direct remittances from Irish people abroad to family and friends dwarfed humanitarian efforts, even at the height of voluntary action.[38]

Despite the trust in public authorities, by the mid-nineteenth century, a European, trans-Atlantic, imperial disposition to engage in far-reaching humanitarian projects had emerged. It surpassed the bilateral endeavors of the Napoleonic era and the limited chiefly military philhellenic activism of the 1820s. The SVP illustrates the potential of charitable structures that are more enduring than the temporary committees of the nineteenth century, and even more than religious organizations with their multiplicity of obligations. While other relief initiatives slackened, the SVP spread its net of auxiliaries throughout Ireland providing an infrastructure for the local middle class to engage with their suffering compatriots.

Organized humanitarianism and the Russian famine of 1921–1923

Historians and contemporary witnesses cite the Russian Famine of 1921–1923 as a defining moment in the history of humanitarian aid.[39] The extensive international relief efforts it called forth illustrate trends that originated in the years around 1900 and that were reinforced, refined, and in part redirected during and after the First World War. Those efforts provide a paradigm for what we term organized humanitarianism. The era is characterized by the professionalization

of humanitarian practice, including business-like fundraising, purchasing, and accounting procedures, the active role of experts, and the impact of scientific methods. A "mixed economy" of voluntary and state efforts, as well as the systematic use of photographs and film footage in fundraising campaigns, became more common.

With origins in the late nineteenth century, the model of organized humanitarianism gained considerable momentum in 1914 when Herbert Hoover created the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB), the blueprint for US relief efforts after the war. Between 1914 and 1919, the CRB managed an aid operation of unprecedented scale, sustaining an entire nation that was suffering under German occupation and the Allied blockade. After the war, Hoover continued his work with the American Relief Administration (ARA), first in Central Europe and then during the famine in Soviet Russia. Mainly a government-sponsored organization, it was also supported by tens of thousands of private donors and spent $5 billion between the armistice of 1918 and 1924.[40] The principal US goals were unloading an agricultural surplus, boosting the US economy, and securing future markets. In addition, the ARA and affiliated organizations like the American Red Cross (ARC) were tools to contain communism and influence the nation- and institution-building process in Europe.[41]

Whereas the CRB and the ARA were examples of twentieth-century relief efforts that were state-financed and partly state-led, the British SCF combined service with advocacy, and it functioned as a corrective to government policy. Eglantyne Jebb, who co-founded the SCF in 1919, saw her organization's role as a counterforce to nationalist politics and consciously chose "enemy children" (first German and Austrian, then Russian) as primary beneficiaries of famine relief.[42] American and British Quakers were another significant group during the Russian Famine. Quakers had already set up humanitarian missions during the Russian famine of the 1890s in the city of Buzuluk, which became the center of their famine relief. They returned in 1916 and 1917 and were later engaged by both the ARA and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to channel relief.[43] During World War I, transnational Quaker relief was professionalized, and the British Friends Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee (FEWVRC) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) were established in 1915 and 1917, respectively. Initially, both organizations cooperated closely.[44] Generally, the organization and professionalization of efforts elevated famine relief to a new level.

The famine in parts of Soviet Russia in 1921 followed a bad harvest, a harsh winter, and subsequent drought, especially in the Volga Valley. The White armies were still active, and the methods of war communism, including confiscation and collectivization, had made rural communities vulnerable. Twenty million people were threatened by starvation; an estimated two million died.[45] Nevertheless, to avoid acknowledging political weakness, the Bolshevik government did not officially recognize the famine until mid-1921. At that time, the renowned Russian author Maxim Gorky dramatically appealed for aid, immediately triggering a relief campaign for starving Russia and Ukraine.

The Western public was now facing an ethical and political dilemma: would famine relief benefit or undermine the Soviet regime? Moreover, was the answer of any relevance in the decision to help a starving population? In the end, some one million metric tons of relief goods reached the famine regions between late 1921 and early 1923. By the time operations peaked in August 1922, more than eleven million people were receiving food aid through foreign organizations.[46] The extent of the assistance is even more remarkable as the Soviet government was not recognized by any Western power at this time. Moreover, Soviet officials showed a distrust of any foreign interference often bordering on paranoia. While conservative politicians and Russian exiles warned that famine relief would keep a weakened regime alive, Soviet officials

feared a counterrevolution in humanitarian disguise. One way to circumvent such tensions was to frame humanitarian aid as (partly) self-interested action when lobbying and fundraising for aid.[47]

Relief was mainly delivered by two umbrella agencies, both of which signed treaties with the Bolshevik government, namely, Hoover's ARA and the International Committee for Russian Relief (ICRR) led by Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen.[48] The ARA drew on the experience of its vast relief efforts in post-war Europe and provided more than four-fifths of all foreign relief. The ICRR was a creation of the ICRC, in cooperation with the Secretariat of the League of Nations. Most US relief agencies, including the ARC, worked under the ARA heading, while Nansen represented organizations from two dozen primarily European countries. Most of these organizations were exclusively fundraising bodies. However, the SCF established its own distribution system in the province of Saratov. British and American Quakers also worked on the ground, although they did not join forces. The FEWVRC became part of Nansen's coalition, whereas the AFSC initially opted for ARA, favoring a national affiliation and access to governmental funds over a transnational collaboration.[49]

Nansen struggled with the fact that few governments supported the ICRR; participating humanitarian organizations were unwilling or unable to commit themselves financially. Only the SCF gave an advance pledge to feed 10,000 children. While Hoover drew on the functioning machinery of the ARA and ample financial means when bargaining with suspicious Russian authorities, Nansen's position was weak as he negotiated the conditions under which relief would be provided. When Nansen arrived, Hoover's representative had just successfully secured far-reaching US control over distribution and had obliged the Russian government to fund much of the relief work with its gold reserves.[50] Nansen's agreement was less favorable, particularly regarding distribution. However, his major problem remained funding.[51] The ICRR continued its work as a private charity, supported by minor sums from a few governments such as Norway, Sweden, and the Baltic states. The principal affiliated organizations like the SCF, the British Quakers, or the Swedish Red Cross, remained largely independent in their fundraising and relief work, but in many cases became distributing agencies for ICRR provisions.

The development of humanitarianism after 1900 culminated in the relief efforts during the Russian Famine. Foreshadowing the label we have chosen for this humanitarian era, the SCF proclaimed in 1922 that "whatever is not organized is dead."[52] While ARA officials praised the centralized relief work under a national umbrella in alignment with official policies, they showed little understanding of the wishes of affiliated organizations to preserve independent operations or their own culture of altruism. With regard to efficiency, the ARA suggested that "all these organizations would be greatly benefitted if their funds were donated outright to the ARA."[53] SCF adopted a similar position suggesting that there was no longer room for "the amateur philanthropist."[54] Professionalization also meant that experts would handle logistics of relief, procurement of food and other supplies, accounting, as well as marketing and public relations – the latter an area that especially engendered conflicts.[55] Photography had begun to be used for fundraising before the war, and during the Russian Famine various organizations produced films. The SCF appropriated the slogan "Seeing is believing" and attempted to settle public controversies by claiming their documentaries provided "incontrovertible evidence of the ravages of the famine."[56] As was to become a common refrain among fundraisers, they believed the ends justified the means of using such famine imagery.

A symbiotic mixed economy, with private relief organizations and the state, was a necessity if comprehensive relief was to be provided for millions threatened by starvation. The success of the ARA illustrates this. It was possible because Hoover's goals and those of his government were generally the same.[57] Nansen and the SCF were equally quick to declare governmental

support indispensable, and they put great effort into lobbying for state-financed relief missions. Other than symbolic success, however, they failed, because they were unable to persuade European governments that a joint commitment was justified. In view of the self-image as a government corrective, the SFC's attempts to gain state support illustrate the inevitability of the humanitarian mixed economy. Even the Quakers, with their storied incorruptible relief philosophy, considered it necessary to adapt to the new development during the Russian Famine, and so the AFSC reluctantly engaged in a pragmatic relationship with the ARA, not least of all because of Hoover's access to government funding.

Expressive humanitarianism and the Ethiopian famine of 1984–1985

The famine in Ethiopia has been widely cited as another landmark in the history of humanitarianism.[58] It signifies what we term expressive humanitarianism. The Ethiopian disaster relief effort saw the culmination of several trends that originated in the late 1960s and became prominent during the famine in Biafra 1967–1970, which claimed the lives of at least one million people. Expressive humanitarianism included a media-driven understanding of disasters and relief efforts and an emphasis on celebrity, spectacle, and mass participation in relief.[59] It was marked by the emergence of new groups of donors and spontaneous organizations, typified by the Band Aid and Live Aid movements, which became conduits between donor governments, the charitable public, and recipients.[60] There was also increased emphasis on humanitarian concerns for witnessing.[61] In 1968, a group of French doctors denounced the Red Cross principles of silence and neutrality in Biafra. On returning home, they organized marches and media events to raise awareness of Nigerian atrocities against civilians. Their activism, followed by similar experiences in Bangladesh, led to the formation of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) in 1971. The new organization propagated the idea of *témoignage* (outspoken witnessing), heralding a new humanitarian style.[62]

The role played by voluntary organizations in disaster relief attracted public attention more than long-term development efforts. Toward the end of the twentieth century, it became increasingly clear that "association with high profile disasters was good for business."[63] Various relief operations of the 1970s saw voluntary agencies build a reputation for efficiency, in part based on a perceived ability to work with grass-roots communities.[64] From the 1960s, global musicians and pop stars became increasingly involved with humanitarian efforts, a development that was exemplified in George Harrison's 1971 Concert for Bangladesh and the 1979 Concerts for the People of Kampuchea (Cambodia).

In January 1985, Bob Geldof launched a new UK charity, *The Band Aid Trust*, to disperse the funds raised by the recorded single "Do They Know It's Christmas?" The Trust also arranged additional fundraising efforts, of which the Live Aid concerts were the most significant. The success of the original recording encouraged the production of Michael Jackson and Lionel Ritchie's song "We Are the World" and at least twenty other charity singles in many languages.[65] The West German "*Nackt im Wind*" [Naked in the Wind] addressed the gravity of the situation and lack of political consciousness, while the chorus of the Austria für Afrika song "*Warum*?" [Why?] stated that "we" were sending money in order not to feel so bad, providing an ironic commentary on the Western response to the famine.[66]

The famine had been developing since December 1982. By late 1984, it was affecting wide swaths of Sahelian Africa and acutely threatened more than seven million people in Ethiopia – approximately one-fifth of the total population. Ethiopia was a Marxist state, ruled by military officers who had assumed power after a coup d'état in 1974. The causes of the famine are disputed, but civil war with secessionist militias, years of drought, compulsory land reform, and

forced collective farming all played a part.[67] In addition, food aid was late in coming and when it did arrive, problems with relief to rebel-held areas and the regime's program of forced resettlement for famine-affected people from Northern Ethiopia added to the death toll. Estimates vary, but between 400,000 and one million people are believed to have died from 1984 to 1986.[68]

Famine in Ethiopia was initially covered only to a limited extent by the international media. Approaching its tenth anniversary in power in August 1984, the Ethiopian government did not wish to draw attention to either famine or civil war. The US, for its part, had suspended development assistance to Ethiopia in 1979 and was reluctant to participate in a relief effort for a Soviet-aligned country.[69] It was not until 23 October 1984, in a now-famous BBC television news broadcast, that reporter Michael Buerk and video-journalist Mohamed Amin raised the world's awareness of the "biblical famine" affecting large portions of Ethiopia. In the days that followed, their announcement was rebroadcast by 425 stations, reaching a global audience of 470 million and sparking an enormous international response.[70]

In the expressive, media-driven humanitarianism of the late twentieth century, "an emergency begins and ends when the BBC says so," noted one commentator.[71] International donors began to mobilize in earnest, and Finnish diplomat Kurt Jansson was appointed UN Assistant Secretary General for Emergency Operations in Ethiopia.[72] The European Economic Community (EEC) development ministers pledged the equivalent of £19 million. Recalling the approach in Soviet Russia sixty years earlier, food aid was a political means to win the "hearts and minds" of a demoralized recipient population. The director of USAID visited Ethiopia, followed by legislators who helped secure support for relief in the US Congress. In early November 1984, an emergency airlift began that, however, transcended the Cold War and the North–South divide. It was a cooperative effort of the US, UK, France, Poland, Libya, and both German states.[73]

Around 1.5 million metric tons of emergency food aid reached Ethiopia. Food and non-food aid provided to Ethiopia between 1984 and 1986 was valued at $1.5 billion to $2 billion.[74] In early 1985, an estimated 600,000 of the most vulnerable people received cooked food and supplementary nutrition in relief camps. While most food aid was funded by governments, it was voluntary agencies that were largely responsible for distribution and allocation. The US government became the largest single donor, contributing more than $500 million to a USAID program, masking the Cold War geopolitics of such relief under the slogan "a hungry child knows no politics."[75] The largest bilateral donor of food aid in the EEC in 1985 was the Federal Republic of Germany, followed by the UK.[76] Other donors included Canada, Australia, the Scandinavian countries, Japan, China, and Zimbabwe. The creation of a special fund illustrates the stimulus the famine had on aid policy in Italy – the former colonial ruler of Eritrea and also briefly of Ethiopia, where Prime Minister Bettino Craxi developed one of the largest aid programs in the Horn of Africa, although one marred by corruption and misallocation.[77] Alongside its ongoing military support, the USSR's main contribution was the provision of transport for the government's resettlement program, the latter framed as a famine relief measure.[78]

Jansson judged that the role played by non-governmental organizations in this famine was greater than in any earlier emergency relief program. Although some agencies had long been active in Ethiopia, there was a rush to get into the country following the heavy media coverage after October 1984.[79] The number of organizations working on the ground in Ethiopia went from 21 at the beginning of 1984 to 48 by the middle of 1985.[80] An organization's presence during a world crisis had become essential to the humanitarian system by the mid-1980s.[81] The political reluctance of some donor nations to work with the Ethiopian Relief and Rehabilitation Commission had the effect of strengthening the position of voluntary agencies, which distributed 95 percent of the food aid the US provided.[82] The EEC was more willing to work with the Ethiopian government, although 29 percent of its food aid in 1985 was still given out

via voluntary organizations. Many smaller donor countries like Australia, Japan, and Finland directed all relief through civil society organizations.[83]

Food distribution was complicated by the fact that many of those affected by the famine were living in areas that were outside the control of the Ethiopian government, such as Eritrea, Tigray, and northern Wollo. There, quasi-autonomous aid organizations linked to rebel forces worked with supportive organizations abroad.[84] Both the Ethiopian government and the rebel groups tried to manipulate aid for their own ends. MSF was the only aid agency to publicly criticize the regime and its resettlement program and was ultimately expelled for doing so. MSF's refusal to "renounce our moral responsibilities or cooperate blindly in a perversion of the very meaning of international aid" is a hallmark of the era of expressive humanitarianism that developed after the Biafran crisis.[85] However, MSF's position was vigorously denounced by other aid organizations, who held that it left vulnerable famine survivors at greater risk.

The famine in Ethiopia catalyzed the formation of aid structures embodying what we call expressive humanitarianism: involvement of high-profile figures, large-scale televised spectacles, and engagement of the public (particularly young people). Musicians and celebrities across the world initiated fundraising activities. For the first time in the history of Germany, a joint campaign of voluntary organizations held a fundraising spectacular known as the *Tag für Afrika* (Day for Africa) in January 1985.[86] Aid organizations raised significant sums and benefitted from unsolicited donations from individuals outside their traditional support base.

Celebrity activism had played a role in earlier relief efforts but assumed far greater significance in the era of expressive humanitarianism. It reached its height when Band Aid and other groups capitalized on participatory enthusiasm but also contributed to a shared desire to downplay the political context of relief. Moreover, while the Ethiopian crisis in some ways marked the continuation of a process of professionalization of humanitarian action,[87] the Band Aid Trust, as a self-styled newcomer, stood in opposition to the professional aid industry with its high overhead and salaries. Geldof later suggested that the legacy of Band Aid was as much in mobilizing the public to believe that anything was possible, in contrast to experts telling them "it is hopeless," as in delivering on its relief and rehabilitation projects.[88] Even in the age of expressive humanitarianism, then, we see the incorporation of older forms of ad hoc humanitarianism, such as in Band Aid's critique of an aid industry that had emerged over decades of increasing professionalization and the marginalization of amateur philanthropy.

Conclusions

Unlike most forms of voluntary action, humanitarianism is a transnational phenomenon that is directly affected by geopolitics and international affairs. Suggested turning points and periods of humanitarian action show that the dominant narrative regards such factors as decisive. The power-political configuration of the international system and the famines and other emergencies resulting from the major wars of the twentieth century appear as formative for humanitarianism. Scholars thus emphasize landmarks such as the world wars or the breakdown of the Soviet Bloc around 1989. This is a convenient perspective for relief agencies, which tend to present themselves as neutral problem-solvers, rather than as intrinsically driven organizations that do a great deal more than simply respond to the emergency needs of distant strangers.

We have attempted to show that cultural and economic factors play an underestimated role in how humanitarians work, particularly in the field of famine relief, and that those factors may outweigh the power politics of international relations. Whether the West reasonably expected to achieve any of its geopolitical aims when providing large-scale relief to the Soviet Union in the

1920s or Ethiopia in the 1980s, cultural and economic dynamics of morality and capacity were embedded in those decisions and gave rise to specific moral economies in which donors and relief agencies endowed their allocations with altruistic meaning.[89]

Claims of periodization are inevitably simplifications. As analytical tools, they are frequently criticized for missing significant processes and details, or risk imposing limits on our understanding.[90] However, we hope that the periods of humanitarianism derived from this framework – nineteenth-century ad hoc humanitarianism, organized humanitarianism until the 1960s, and expressive humanitarianism in the decades thereafter – may assist future researchers in better understanding voluntary famine relief at large and, above all, the working conditions and challenges confronting humanitarian agencies.

Notes

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