

**IV ENIUGH Congress „Encounters, Circulations and Conflicts“: The Histories of Humanitarianism**

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The last few years have witnessed an increasing historiographical interest in the topic of humanitarianism. Influenced by a new focus on international and non-governmental organizations and the global civil society, the history of humanitarian aid has set out to contribute to our understanding of historical processes beyond the nation-state and thus of processes that have nowadays become a „major feature of global social life“.<sup>1</sup> So far the research on humanitarianism has been very much dominated by a western perspective, both in conceptual terms (i.e. the assumption that humanitarian thoughts and practices originated from the 'West' and were subsequently brought to and adopted by the non-western world) and in historical case studies (the majority of them looking at western organizations and their activities). Indeed, as Brandon Little has recently stated, there is still a lack of studies examining transnational and non-European humanitarian initiatives.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, many of the works dealing with humanitarian organizations are either following a linear narrative of their genesis or are dedicated exclusively to the 20th century which saw the emergence of the international system institutionalized by the United Nations. However, tracing the origins and the development of humanitarian initiatives should be a more complex endeavour. To establish a convincing periodization of humanitarianism, it is necessary to not only take into account the predecessors of today's institutions, but also to map out existing continuities, overlaps, contingencies as well as interruptions.<sup>3</sup> Both research themes – the question of non-western humanitarian initiatives and/or of a longue-durée perspective have been addressed in three panels dealing with humanitarianism at the ENIUGH conference

in 2014.

The first panel titled „Relief and humanitarianism in the Ottoman Empire, Japan, and China in comparative perspective: negotiated identities and the making of the modern world (ca. 1850 – ca. 1950)“ discussed three regional case studies analysing relief initiatives that emerged in the Middle and Far East from the mid-19th until the mid-20th century. The presentations on Japan (Frank Käser), China (Pfeiff), and the Ottoman Empire (Semih Celik) exemplified how the provision of humanitarian relief became an important tool for empire and nation building during this period of western colonial expansion in which notions of humanity and civilisation were defined. While tracing food aid provided by the Ottoman state and civil society actors for Ireland during the famine in the 1840s, Celik showed how this transnational engagement led to wider discussions about the possibilities, advantages and limits of humanitarian help in the Ottoman Empire. Alexandra Pfeiff dealt with the development of the Red Cross movement in China. In her analysis of two organisations, i.e. the Chinese Red Cross and the Red Swastika Society, Pfeiff elaborated on their contrasting traditions of helping and their different sources of legitimisation. A common argument in all three papers in this panel was that relief management debated and conducted in the Ottoman, Chinese and Japanese context helped to negotiate and to foster aspirations of political and cultural independence from the West.

The second panel on „Humanitarian cooperation beyond the West“ also focussed on non-western humanitarian practitioners, being either part of an international organization or individual actors. Including presentations on 19th century Japan (Torsten Weber), India during the First World War (Maria

<sup>1</sup>Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity. A History of Humanitarianism*, Ithaca 2011, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Brandon Little, *An explosion of new endeavours. Global humanitarian responses to industrialized warfare in the First World War era*, in: *First World War Studies* 5 (2014) 1, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup>Johannes Paulmann, *Conjunctures in the History of International Humanitarian Aid during the Twentieth Century*, in: *Humanity Summer* (2013), pp. 215–238; Peter Stamatov, *The Origins of Global Humanitarianism. Religion, Empires, and Advocacy*, Cambridge 2013.

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Framke), 20th century Egypt (Esther Möller), the Global South's influence on European NGOs (Kevin O'Sullivan) and the importance of a decentralised past for contemporary humanitarian practice (Eleanor Davey), the overarching question of the panel was how the study of different forms of southern humanitarianism can both complement and diversify our understanding of the global emergence of humanitarian initiatives. Although, there was a common agreement among the panellists that there is no universality in humanitarian thought or practice, but that humanitarian histories are always the products of both spatial and temporal specificities, it was interesting to discover certain similarities in different case studies, for example Indian and Japanese expressions of humanitarianism, which both, in the age of empire building, comprised empathy and a civilizing impetus. Another crucial point addressed in all of the panel's papers was the relationship between global and local levels of action and their place within as well as their transcendence of imperial, national, regional and local humanitarian spaces. Historical research on humanitarianism, as Alan Lester rightly remarked in his commentary, has to go beyond the classical dichotomy of „global donors“ and „local recipients“ of humanitarian aid. One way of doing this is to analyse how indigenous geographies entered into new relations with trans-imperial ones through the lens of humanitarian engagement.

The third panel explored the theme of „Voluntary food aid and the emergence of the global civil society“. By including case studies from the mid-19th to the late 20th century, the organisers pointed to the importance of adopting a long-term perspective when analysing relief work. The four papers in the panel dealt with transnational voluntary relief provision during the Irish famine (Norbert Götz), with the relief work of the Society of Friends during famines in Ireland and Finland (Newby), voluntary relief work in the U.S., Britain and Sweden in the 1940s (Katarina Friberg), and with the emergence of new aid actors during the famine in the Horn of Africa in the mid-1980s (Georgina Brewis). Starting from the assumption that a transnationally acting civil society is characterised by

a network structure, the papers analysed various interconnected voluntary responses during humanitarian emergencies. Thus, the papers revealed, according to Daniel Laqua, the multitude of actors that crowd the humanitarian scene. Although the focus of the panel was primarily on non-governmental action, Laqua pointed out correctly that a recurring theme was the interplay between state structures, international organizations and the examined voluntary initiatives.

In summary, these panels have shown that it is both necessary and fruitful to push further research on the entanglements of humanitarian histories with questions of empire and nation building and with decolonization.

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