

### Humanitarian Mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe During the Twentieth Century

**Veranstalter:** ERC Project „Unlikely Refugee?“, Masaryk Institute and Archives, Prague  
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**Bericht von:** Doina Anca Cretu / Francesca Rolandi, Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences

Scholarship has increasingly dealt with Central and Eastern Europe as a space of local, national, and transnational humanitarian mobilization in response to the human costs of abrupt political ruptures. In this context, the workshop organized by the framework of the European Research Council (ERC) Consolidator Grant ‘Unlikely refuge? Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the Twentieth Century,’ aimed to explore new themes and analytical angles that reflect on various dimensions of humanitarian mobilization in this region. First, it explored the organization and transfer of internationally driven relief. Second, it investigated the reception of foreign aid carried by various workers, institutions, and related networks. Lastly, it looked at local and national humanitarian practices elaborated in the region in response to the challenges posed by processes of nation-building and state-making in the interwar period, by the establishment of communist regimes, or by the post-1989 transition. The workshop thus had eight panels that followed these general themes.

The panel ‘Humanitarian Workers: Local Action and the Need to Help’ focused on individual trajectories. It featured three case studies ranging from the interwar period to the aftermath of the Second World War. Looking at the figure of Julia Vajkai, a female humanitarian worker in interwar Hungary, FRIEDERIKE KIND-KOVÁCS (Dresden) showed a locally-driven and transnationally-implemented approach to relief. Vajkai was an enabler of local work to aid children in need and a collaborator of international humanitarian organizations; this work encompassed education and vocational training for children with the aim to improve their fu-

ture condition and mobilize them in the name of democratic ideals and rehabilitation of interwar Hungary. Another transnational relationship emerged in MARIJA VULESICA’s (Berlin) presentation, which focused on the activities of Aleksandar Klein, a key figure in supporting the Jewish refugees in Yugoslavia in the 1930s. Vulesica showed how Klein implemented a Zionist agenda in his relief work; thus, he represented an emblematic case of convergence of humanitarianism and political commitment. The gendered aspects of the work performed by the female humanitarians employed in the Child Search Branch (CSB) of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) was the main theme in the presentation by CHRISTINE SCHMIDT (London) and DAN STONE (London). The presentation explored the intertwining of moral convictions, complex decision-making processes, and the feminine connotations attached to care work within the CSB.

Transnational assistance practices provided a common feature for the presentations in the panel ‘Transnational Interactions: Networks and Dialogues’. By focusing on three figures of humanitarian activists, RUTH NATTERMAN (Munich) offered an insight into the coexistence of different and often conflicting forms of commitments in post-revolutionary Russia, whose orientation ranged from Christian to liberal and socialist. KINGA FROJMOVICS (Vienna) explored controversial encounters between the Jewish-American Joint Distribution Committee (JDC) and the consolidating socialist dictatorship in Hungary after the Second World War. The presentation followed measures enacted by the state to neutralize and finally ban the JDC’s activities, after having, in fact, benefitted from its reconstruction programs. The paradigmatic lack of understanding between the Romanian population and the Western humanitarians after 1989 was present in LUCIANA JINGA’s (Bucharest) presentation. Focusing on various Western NGOs and their work on behalf of Romanian children in the early 1990s, Jinga pointed to issues of distrust and allegations of abuse in the relationship between donors and recipients.

Established international agencies served

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as a common thread for the panel 'International Organizations: Methods and Motivations.' FRANCESCA PIANA (Trento) focused on the activities of the International Migration Service (IMS), which engaged with social work on behalf of female migrants to the US, promoting a model centered on the reunification of migrant families; the presentation particularly provided insights into the Polish branch of the organization, compelled to deal with the challenges that the context of Polish state-building entailed. PAMELA BAL-LINGER (Michigan) investigated the entanglements between the unresolved status of the city of Trieste until 1954 and that of the „hard core cases;“ these were refugees stranded in the Adriatic city, whose chances for resettlement were equally restricted by their poor health conditions and the liminal position of the Trieste „transit zone.“ SARAH KNOLL (Vienna) challenged the narrative of Austria as a welcoming country for refugees. Knoll looked at the dynamic interaction between the government and the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), whose resettlement efforts allowed Austria to remain predominantly a transit country.

The local implementation of relief, its outreach and its meaning, represented the backbone of the panel 'Practices of Humanitarianism.' JO LAYCOCK (Manchester) moved the focus to the Caucasus and looked at the responses implemented by the government of Soviet Armenia to face the mass population movements from the Ottoman Empire; this ultimately sparked new forms of state intervention in healthcare. Similarly, as argued by SARA SILVERSTEIN (Connecticut), the relief measures to contain typhus epidemics in post-1918 Poland were tied into proved crucial process of state-building in Poland. Furthermore, Silverstein's analysis of the Polish government's collaboration with the League of Nations Health Organization (LNHO) showed the ways humanitarian relief was an avenue for Polish state officials and health experts to develop internationalist networks. The unpacking of the idea of „rehabilitation“ was central to KATARZYNA NOWAK's (Manchester) presentation. Nowak highlighted the discourse and practices of a „civilizing mission,“ targeting

Displaced Persons (DPs) in refugee camps during and immediately after the Second World War. This was tied into a form of training to become members of Western societies they were to join. Further, the presentation delved into the refugees' attempts to navigate through and sometimes circumvent the set of additional regulations imposed on them.

Different practices implemented in circumscribed and well-defined areas in Central and Eastern Europe is the common feature of the panel 'Local humanitarianism'. FRANCISZEK ZAKRZEWSKI (Paris) explored the local humanitarian organizations operating as part of the social care system in the Polish city of Lubartów in the interwar period; the presentation emphasized their ethnic-based structure which mirrored the balance of power between the Catholic and the Jewish population. MAREN HACHMEISTER (Dresden) offered an insight into the self-organized elderly care in a border region of the former East Germany before and after the post-1989 „turn,“ an engagement which was often marked by continuity across the changes. The escape route for Jews out of Nazi-occupied areas of Czechoslovakia was documented by LAURA E. BRADE (Albion), as she drew on network analysis. As Brade pointed out, this analytical and methodological approach developed through testimonies and international records and is capable of complementing the lack of sources produced by the same actors.

Various forms of organization of humanitarianism under socialism was the key theme of the panel 'State-Organized or Civic: Humanitarianism Under State Socialism'. NIKOLA KARASOVÁ (Prague) looked at the relief provided to child refugees of the Greek Civil War and, later, the Korean War. The two conflicts and the fate of refugee children from these specific countries generated replicated patterns of education and professional training in Czechoslovakia, where state aid became increasingly centralized. SIELKE KELLNER (Leiden) explored the immaterial aspects of humanitarianism through the lens of „spiritual relief“ carried by the Dutch NGO Open Doors in Romania in the 1980s. This „spiritual relief“ ranged from Bible smuggling to fact-checking mission as methods to bring and strengthen Christian values among those re-

pressed in this socialist country. CRISTIAN CAPOTESCU (Seattle) made the case for informal and grassroots assistance to refugees in transit through Budapest in the late 1980s. Here, Capotescu elaborated on the concept of „socialist refugeedom,“ which enabled both humanitarians’ and refugees’ agency. It further revealed refugees’ plans and expectations and reflected on their movement between socialist states.

The panel ‘Humanitarianism and Nation Making’ bridged presentations on the aftermath of the two world wars. GÁBOR EGRY (Budapest) focused on the activities of the American Relief Administration (ARA) in four post-Habsburg states – Austria, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania. Egrý highlighted this organization’s work as focused on the goal of protecting the middle class through aid and welfare and on the strengthening of hierarchies among states. Looking at Kemalist Turkey and the reception of Muslims from the Balkan post-Ottoman territories, ELIF BECAN (Paris) presented on the relationship between the relief provided by the Turkish authorities and the reframing of the nation-building process. Further, Becan looked at continuities between the imperial and republican period in terms of both the conceptualization of that arguably peculiar migration path and the economic goals pursued. Focusing on the case study of Saxony, JULIA REINKE (Prague/Jena) explored the GDR’s growing state-organized humanitarian effort which preceded and followed the establishment of the GDR in 1949. Reinke looked at the case of the Greek child refugees’ reception in the East and the solidarity campaign led by the Socialist Unity Party of Germany on their behalf.

Considerations regarding discourse and related practices of international and local aid featured in the panel ‘Conceptualizing and Debating Humanitarianism’. ČARNA BRKOVIĆ (Goettingen) elaborated on the concepts propagated by the Yugoslav Red Cross during the 1975 Peace Conference, which challenged the ideas of neutrality and the non-political status attached to the organization; in this context, Brković also reflected on the position played by Yugoslavia within the Non-Aligned Movement and what the conceptualization of

humanitarianism meant in this framework. NICK WETSCHEL (Dresden) shifted the focus to the first humanitarian responses in post-1989 former East Germany, in the midst of a discourse of rejection of those in need. The paper discussed the spontaneous mobilization in support of foreigners, often (but not exclusively) driven by Christian values. It drew on common experiences of refugees in the past, triggered by the experience of violation of human rights in the GDR.

Finally, organizers DOINA ANCA CRETU (Prague) and MICHAL FRANKL (Prague) analyzed what the workshop, and the plethora of papers presented in the different panels, added to the broader understanding of humanitarianism. As clearly portrayed by the geographically and chronologically wide range of papers, the concept goes beyond emergency relief and encompasses education, training, support in navigating bureaucratic hurdles, while also engaging with the implementation of welfare and development as inscribed in state- and nation-building agendas. Overall, the participants have elaborated on the entanglement between transnational, national, and local actors; they used the perspective of top-down relationships between givers and recipients, as well as an investigation of self-organizing practices. In their papers, they looked at Central and Eastern Europe as an area of aid reception, but also as a region where a multiplicity of relief-oriented networks actively performed. The papers showed that an active role of beneficiaries often shaped formal and informal practices of humanitarianism. As presentations indicated, aid recipients held recurrent agency, as they expressed gratitude to the aid givers or contested the relief processes; they also adapted, circumvented, or reshaped relief work and related categories and labels. Many presentations also emphasized continuities in practices, models, as well as personnel, which were part of humanitarian endeavors. Lastly, participants highlighted the often-uneven relationship between givers and recipients, as well as logistical conditions in various countries of Central and Eastern Europe, as generators of archival gaps and inaccessibility of sources; nonetheless, as the papers showed, archival silences and breaks prompted the creativity of

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scholars in finding alternative paths to building of narratives.

The workshop 'Humanitarian Mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe during the Twentieth Century' sought to explore a multiplicity of actors, discourses and practices of relief. It attempted to offer further reflection on what the lens of humanitarianism tells us about the region in various historical moments in the twentieth century. Alternatively, it aimed to reflect on what the study of Central and Eastern Europe tells us about the history of humanitarianism. Relatedly, organizers emphasized the need for further exploration of the „local“ in broader analyses of humanitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe (and beyond). Lastly, they called for an integration of this region into narratives of global history through the study of a broadly defined humanitarian mobilization.

#### **Conference overview:**

*Panel 1: Humanitarian Workers: Local Action and the Need to Help*

Chair: Doina Anca Cretu (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Friederike Kind-Kovács (TU Dresden): Teach Them to Earn a Living; Julia Vajkai and the Humanitarian Idea of Children's Education

Marija Vulesica (Humboldt-University); Aleksandar (Aleksa) Klein (Arnon): A Key Actor of the Jewish Humanitarian Work in Interwar Yugoslavia

Christine Schmidt (Wiener Holocaust Library, London) and Dan Stone (University of London): Women and Child Search: A Gendered View of Post-World War II Reconstruction

*Panel 2: Transnational Interactions: Networks and Dialogues*

Chair: Lidia Zessin-Jurek (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Ruth Nattermann (Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich): „The same spirit that led me into war, makes me today leave for Russia.“ Italian and Transnational Actors and Their Humanitarian Work for Postrevolutionary Russia

Kinga Frojimovics (Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies): Western Humanita-

rian Aid During the Era of Emerging Communist Dictatorship: The JDC in Hungary in 1948-1949

Luciana Jinga (The Institute for the Investigation of Communist Crimes and the Memory of Romanian Exile, Bucharest): What Dialogue Between Humanitarians and Beneficiaries? The Intricate Case of the Humanitarian Aid Towards Children in Romania During the 1990s

*Panel 3: International Organizations: Methods and Motivations*

Chair: Francesca Rolandi (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Francesca Piana (Italian-German Historical Institute of Trento, ISIG-FBK): Casework for Families Beyond Borders. The International Migration Service in Interwar Poland

Pamela Ballinger (University of Michigan): Trieste and the Problem of the Hardcore

Sarah Knoll (University of Vienna): International Aid for Refugees in Austria During the Cold War (1956-1990)

*Panel 4: Practices of Humanitarianism*

Chair: Alice Szczepaniková (Independent researcher and analyst)

Jo Laycock (University of Manchester), Soviet Remedies for Displacement: Refugees and Public Health in the South Caucasus

Sara Silverstein (University of Connecticut): Typhus, Refugees, and Humanitarianism in the Integration of Poland's Second Republic

Katarzyna Nowak (University of Manchester): Civilising Mission in the Archipelago of Refugee Camps

*Panel 5: Local Humanitarianism*

Chair: Ágnes Katalin Kelemen (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Franciszek Zakrzewski (EHESS/ERC Lubartoworld): Between Grassroot Organisations and Social Policies: Humanitarian Aid in the Interwar Lubartów

Laura Brade (Albion College): A Network Approach to Tracing Humanitarian Mobilization for Refugees from the Bohemian Lands

Maren Hachmeister (TU Dresden): Self-

Organized Elderly Care in the Three Border Region: From Late Socialist Humanitarianism to Post-1989 Transformations

*Panel 6: State-Organized or Civic: Humanitarianism Under State Socialism*

Chair: Ondřej Vojtěchovský (Charles University)

Nikola Karasová (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef): Humanitarian Mobilization under the Conditions of an Emerging State Socialist Regime: The Greek Civil War and Korean War Child Refugees in Czechoslovakia

Sielke Kelner (Leiden University): Spiritual Empowerment as a Form of Humanitarian Relief. The Work of Open Doors in Communist Romania

Cristian Capotescu (University of Washington): More than Speechless Emissaries: Civic Response and Socialist Refugeedom in Hungary, 1987-1989

*Panel 7: Humanitarianism and Nation Making*

Chair: Maximilian Graf (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Gábor Egry (Institute of Political History, Budapest): From the Other Masaryk to the Romanian Queen. Transnational, Humanitarian State-building and the Post-Habsburg Transition

Elif Becan (Collège de France): Relief Programs as Means of Nation Building in Turkey: The Welcome of Muslims from the Balkans During the Interwar Period

Julia Reinke (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef/University of Jena): Refugees in the 'Better Germany'. Socialist Humanitarian Aid to Greek Refugee Children in the Early German Democratic Republic

*Panel 8: Conceptualizing and Debating Humanitarianism*

Chair: Karla Koutková (Masaryk Institute and Archives/ERC UnRef)

Čarna Brković (University of Goettingen): Disagreement Over the Non-Political: 1975 Red Cross Peace Conference

Nick Wetschel (ISGV Dresden): Recht, Huma-

nität, Barmherzigkeit": (Re-)Establishing Humanitarian Frames of Meaning and Action After State Socialism

Final remarks

Tagungsbericht *Humanitarian Mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe During the Twentieth Century*. 23.06.2021–25.06.2021, digital (Prague), in: H-Soz-Kult 25.08.2021.