

Continuity, change and contest

Meanings of 'humanitarian' from the 'Religion of Humanity' to the Kosovo war

Katherine Davies

HPG Working Paper

August 2012



About the author

Katherine Davies completed her doctoral research at the University of Manchester in 2008 on French Catholic intellectuals and their philosophical, political and cultural exchanges in interwar France. Since then she has lectured in Modern European History at Magdalen College Oxford and the University of Manchester, and has worked as a research assistant on histories of humanitarian aid at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute, University of Manchester. She is currently pursuing independent research in the historical field and in humanitarian action.

Humanitarian Policy Group
Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD
United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44(0) 20 7922 0399
Website: www.odi.org.uk/hpg
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org.uk

ISBN: 978-1-907288-80-7
© Overseas Development Institute, 2012

Readers are encouraged to quote or reproduce materials from this publication but, as copyright holders, ODI requests due acknowledgement and a copy of the publication. This and other HPG Reports are available from www.odi.org.uk/hpg.

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1 Nineteenth century origins	3
1.1 The ‘Religion of Humanity’	3
1.2 The Humanitarian League	4
1.3 Early histories	4
1.4 The birth of the Red Cross and ‘international humanitarianism’	5
Chapter 2 The ‘master-narrative’: International Humanitarian Law and the International Red Cross Movement	7
2.1 IHL: 1929; 1949; 1977	7
2.2 Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, 1965	8
Chapter 3 The politics of the political–humanitarian divide: from relief to human rights	11
3.1 A nineteenth century case: Bulgaria	12
3.2 The League of Nations	12
3.3 UNRRA	13
3.4 UNHCR	14
3.5 Oxfam	14
3.6 MSF	15
Chapter 4 Distortion, diversification or dissolution of the master-narrative?	17
4.1 ‘Humanitarian’ after the Cold War	17
4.2 Visibility of politicisation	18
4.3 ‘Humanitarian intervention’	18
Conclusion	21
Annex I	23
References	25

Introduction

This study examines the evolving meaning of the term ‘humanitarian’, from its emergence in the mid-nineteenth century through to the end of the twentieth century. As part of the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG)’s project on the ‘Global History of Modern Humanitarian Action’, its primary objective is to trace the development of the concepts and ideas that the word denotes and connotes, the ways in which the word has been used (and ‘misused’) and its discursive operations. More specifically, the study explores how the goals of humanitarian action have developed, the principles that guide it, the range of actors that pursue it and its relationship with politics. The study is not a history of humanitarianism; rather, it seeks to show how the term is reflective and constitutive of humanitarian action.

Recent scholarship has attested to the ambiguity of the term: ‘there is no general definition of humanitarianism’; there is not one humanitarianism but ‘multiple humanitarianisms’; and, crucially, ‘humanitarian’ is complicated by the suffix ‘-ism’, signifying ‘an ideology, a profession, a movement, a set of institutions, and a business and industry’ (Cutts, 1998; Barnett, 2011; Donini, 2010). Humanitarian is a noun designating an actor, and it is an adjective qualifier of a goal, a principle, an action and an event. Like any understanding of words, what it means depends on who is doing the talking; humanitarian is ‘self-defined and self-referential’ (Donini, 2010). In this light, the study works with some of these inherent ambiguities in tracing a history of the term, specifically the tension between a lexical historical investigation and a history of concepts. The distinction between word history and concept history is important: whilst the former involves analysis of the different meanings of a given term, the history of concepts involves a semantic field that allows for investigation of a concept in terms of a range of characteristic synonyms and associated words. A historical investigation of the term ‘humanitarian’ is made problematic by the fact that it was only in the last decade of the twentieth century that it came into wide and frequent circulation. Indeed, in the late 1980s the terms that were still most frequently used were those of ‘emergency relief’, ‘disaster relief and rehabilitation’ and ‘conflict prevention’. Thus, whilst the study focuses principally on explicit uses of the word ‘humanitarian’, it may also attend to cases where the term has been retrospectively applied by scholars and commentators.

Barnett’s periodisation of the history of humanitarianism – pre-1945, 1945 to the end of the Cold War and from the early 1990s onwards – provides a loose framework for the study, but for the most part it is structured thematically (Barnett, 2011). Chapter 1 explores the origins of the term ‘humanitarian’ in the nineteenth century. In particular, it highlights how ‘humanitarian’ was a broad church of ideals and activities. Chapter 2 traces the conceptualisation of the term and its

development through the lens of International Humanitarian Law (IHL), in particular the Geneva Conventions and Additional Protocols, and through the Red Cross Movement, specifically Jean Pictet’s Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. IHL and its ‘guardian’, the International Committee of the Red Cross, are presented as embodying a ‘master-narrative’ in this study, not because all definitions of humanitarian goals and principles directly and transparently follow the Red Cross mandate or humanitarian law, but rather because of the predominance of the ICRC in crystallising norms of humanitarianism. It should be noted that a focus on the ICRC here does not preclude the co-existence of other ‘master-narratives’ within a broader history of humanitarian action (which certainly began and continued under a name other than ‘humanitarian’). For example, the Catholic Church has a centuries-old tradition of charity, from the work of the Early Church which first institutionalised care for widows, orphans, the sick and the poor, to, for example, the launch of the first Caritas in 1897, which has now grown into a global confederation of 165 Roman Catholic relief, development and social service organisations.

Chapter 3 traces the development of the term ‘humanitarian’ outside of the ICRC and IHL through a number of case studies, and includes examination of NGOs, international organisations (IOs) and particular responses to events that have been purportedly ‘rationalised’ by way of humanitarian discourse. The case studies illustrate how the term has been conceptualised and deployed, its complex relationship with ‘the political’ and how this relationship contributed to, and was reflected by, the shifting goals and principles of humanitarian action. Finally, Chapter 4 explores the rapid proliferation and expansion of the term ‘humanitarian’, and the ways in which it came to be deployed strategically. Where once the political–humanitarian relation may have been negotiated in accordance with some sense of pre-established notions of conceptual territory, in the early 1990s this relationship became more complex: politicisation became visible and politics self-consciously became an integral modifier of, and shared space for, humanitarian action. By becoming an adjectival qualifier (of ‘intervention’ and ‘event’, for instance) ‘humanitarian’ was no longer an appellation that could be employed without ‘the political’ being embedded in its operations. As several scholars have noted, this shift in the 1990s may not have signalled a qualitatively new development in practice – as though there was some prior apolitical ‘golden age’ – but rather it was a matter of the increasing *visibility* of the distortion, diversification and even dissolution of the master-narrative.

A historical investigation of the term ‘humanitarian’ reveals that there is no clear chronological development whereby one usage or meaning discretely replaces another. Multiple

meanings exist concurrently and there are different levels upon which both continuity and change can be detected in humanitarian discourse, such as the macro historical level and the micro level of individual organisations. In broad terms, there seems to be a foundational meaning of ‘humanitarian’ that has remained unchanged from the late nineteenth century through to the present day: a concern for the welfare of the whole of mankind and a desire to effect change in this regard. Against the fluctuations of the geopolitical context of the twentieth century, ‘humanitarian’ too has fluctuated in the actions it denotes, ranging from emergency relief to rehabilitation, development and human rights, and in the formulation and enactment of its principles.

Such range in the scope of ‘humanitarian’ is itself a continuous thread in the history of the term. In the nineteenth century

‘humanitarian’ covered a wide variety of activities, from penal reform to animal welfare, and today the term can refer to peace-building initiatives and human rights advocacy. Of course, the ‘content’ of this range has changed over time, but the term itself seems to have begun life just as loose and expansive as it is today, with a similarly wide compass. Aside from continuity in the way ‘humanitarian’ is constructed, the types of problems and issues that the term can evoke are long-standing. For example, during the late nineteenth century commentators observed how an increasingly interdependent world meant that it was in people’s own interest to concern themselves with the welfare of others. Such conscious self-interest in helping distant people in need resonates strongly with the politicisation, globalisation and oligopolistic nature of the humanitarian enterprise today (Donini, 2010).

Chapter 1

Nineteenth century origins

The range of meanings encapsulated by the word ‘humanitarian’ (or ‘*humanitaire*’¹) circulating across the nineteenth century makes impossible any simple narrative of the origins of the term. ‘Humanitarian’ was invoked to assert the human nature of Christ, but it also referred to those who replaced Christianity with ‘humanity’ as the supreme object of worship. At the same time, ‘humanitarian’ designated a concern for the whole of mankind, a compassion and kinship with all living creatures, and it was applied to describe the efforts of those who advocated for human welfare. But across the nineteenth century, there was a general shift from moral philanthropy or the ‘good of humanity’ as an abstraction, to an imperative of transformation and social and political change. This marked a transition from humanitarianism as a concept or vision, or as the cultivation of affection for humanity, to a humanitarianism that was operational, whereby ideas and ideals were given concrete form.

1.1 The ‘Religion of Humanity’

The first use of the term ‘humanitarian’ in English occurred in the early part of the nineteenth century (the *OED* tentatively suggests a citation as early as 1792 and confirms the neologism in a citation of 1819), designating the theological position of one who believes that Christ’s nature is purely human and not divine. This theological definition existed alongside a broader reference to a person who professes, or is concerned with, humanistic religion or a ‘Religion of Humanity’. The French philosophers Pierre Leroux (1797–1871) and Auguste Comte (1798–1857) were both progenitors of humanistic religion; in their contemporary English reception, Leroux was described as ‘the most distinguished of the Humanitarians’ (1844), whilst Comte was identified by his construction of a ‘Humanitarian religion’ (1857).²

Leroux’s ‘Religion of Humanity’ was grounded in his romantic socialism, in notions of equality and in a decidedly mystical bond of human solidarity, and was expounded most fully in his *De l’humanité* (1841). The humanitarian character of Leroux’s thought is brought into focus by his assertion that ‘man is a real being in who lives, in a virtual state, the ideal being called humanity’ (Tournier, 2001). Comte was the founder of the philosophical movement of positivism, which sought to replace metaphysical and theological explanations of the world with scientific or ‘positive’ explanations. The core of Comte’s ‘religion of humanity’ was his call to ‘Live for Others’; self-sacrificing service was transferred from God to man

(Comte, 1853; 1875–77). The fundamental goal of Comte’s positivist system was to ‘strengthen the social passions relative to the egoistic ones by promoting the universal love of humanity’, and in doing so to ‘regulate and rally’ to effect ‘universal improvement’ (Pickering, 2009). There was a circuitous logic to Comte’s ‘Humanitarian’ religion: human activity directed towards the betterment of social conditions allowed for emotional and intellectual development, which in turn made humans more cooperative, altruistic beings who wished to cultivate the love of humanity and serve its improvement (Pickering, 2009).

The British positivist and translator of Comte, Frederic Harrison, provides insight into how Comte’s ‘Religion of Humanity’ may have informed the dissemination of the term ‘humanitarian’, and highlights the potential for subtle expansion in its implications. In an 1879 article, Harrison stresses the twinning of ‘science’ and ‘humanity’: the latter is a movement of affection by which we live for others – to live as a social being and to live truly for the whole – with the former providing a proper foundation of knowledge for this affection. Affection ‘must stir us not only to the right things, but to the right things through the right means’ (Harrison, 1879). Harrison’s concern shifts from matching up the means and ends in our movement of affection to a concern for the circumstances which demand a response of affection: ‘The famines, the diseases, and the revolutions which afflict mankind are no longer the judgments of God. They are the inevitable consequences of known and preventable conditions’ (Harrison, 1879). Thus, the religion of humanity not only involves activities to improve the social conditions of man, but it is possible, once Divine Providence is abandoned, to serve humanity by the *prevention* of man-made and natural disasters.

Separately from the system-building and ‘religious’ gloss of Comte and Leroux, humanitarian was used in its general sense as a descriptive term for all that is concerned with benevolence towards humanity as a whole, with human welfare as a primary good, and as a noun designating someone who advocates action for such ends. For example, a report in *The Times* in 1843 refers to the ‘humanitarian advocates’ of the ‘coolies’ native to India in the context of cautious praise of the 1834 Emancipation Act (*The Times*, 27 December 1843). At the same time, usage of humanitarian in this sense was often derisive; ‘humanitarians’ were excessive sentimentalists. For example, *The Leeds Mercury* ran an article under the title ‘Humanitarian Legislation’, relating to the bill to facilitate the discharge of insolvent debtors, in which a distinction was made between ‘healthy philanthropy’ that ‘would rescue criminals from an earthly hell’ and the ‘sentimental philanthropy of modern times’ embodied in the proposed bill, ‘which would provide them

¹ The poet Alphonse de Lamartine was one of the first to coin the term ‘*humanitaire*’, which was characterised by other contemporary writers in rather less favourable terms as ‘dream-like’ and ‘chimerical’.

² *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. 56, no. 349, November 1844; see also Rev. E. Pressensé in Steane (1852).

with an earthly heaven' (*Leeds Mercury*, 16 July 1864). At other times 'humanitarian' was a mark of disingenuousness: Daniel Harvey Hill wrote of the 'crimes of philanthropy' in his magazine *The Land We Love*, detailing the 'cruelty of humanitarian philanthropy' by 'two of its favorite schemes, abolition of negro slavery, and the Peace Society'. Hill castigated the 'philanthropy of the humanitarian' whose 'natural sympathy' is 'succeeded by an instinctive pleasure, which in man's imperfect heart is never wholly disinterested, but involves some elements of self-love, and appetite for applause'.³

'Humanitarian' was also used in a more unsavoury context: in 1892 Victoria Woodhull, an American social reformer and feminist activist, launched the monthly eugenics-based journal *Humanitarian* in London and New York. In the first edition of the journal, Woodhull explained that it would 'discuss all subjects pertaining to the well-being of humanity', but such interests of humanity were conceived specifically through the lens of eugenics. For example, Woodhull advocated that the 'physically exhausted should not be allowed to breed in ignorance of the injurious effects that their depleted condition will have on their offspring' (Woodhull, cited Ziegler, 2008). Underpinning Woodhull's project was her feminist ambition: the fundamental 'humanitarian' eugenic task was the 'education of women about the dysgenic effects of their unequal and oppressive marriages' (Ziegler, 2008).

1.2 The Humanitarian League

In the late nineteenth century a radical pressure group based in London adopted 'humanitarian' to identify its members and its cause. The socialist Henry Stephens Salt (1851–1939) established The Humanitarian League in 1891, which remained active until 1919 and for which he also edited two journals, *Humanity*, later renamed *The Humanitarian* (1895–1919), and *The Humane Review* (1900–1910). The League's mandate was 'to enforce the principle that it is iniquitous to inflict avoidable suffering on any sentient being' and 'to protest not only against the cruelties inflicted by men on men, in the name of law, authority, and conventional usage but also, in accordance with the same sentiment of humanity against the wanton ill-treatment of the lower animals' (Salt, 1891). The distinctive purpose of the Humanitarian League was to consolidate and give consistent expression to the principle of *humaneness*, and through public education clear the way for further and more advanced legislation (Salt, 1891).

The League's two principal concerns were the creation of a more humane administration of the criminal law and prison system and rigorous monitoring of the application of laws preventing cruelty to animals. Sharing much in common with Comte's 'Religion of Humanity', the League emphasised the rational grounds of compassion: 'Humanitarianism is

not merely a kindly sentiment, a product of the heart rather than of the brain, but an essential portion of any intelligible system of ethics or social science' (Salt, 1891). The League also borrowed Comte's vocabulary, describing its humanitarianism as 'a "religion of humanity" – humanity in no narrower sense than compassion, love, justice for every living creature'. Just as Comte's Religion of Humanity strove to foster altruism over individualistic egoism, so too the League hoped to cultivate a 'sympathetic imagination'. The League's stress on the kinship of all sentient beings also resonates with Comte's assertion that the difference between animals and humans was one of degree, not of kind, with respect to their affective and intellectual capacities (Pickering, 1993).

The League distinguished itself from other activities that might go under the banner of 'humanitarian' in its efforts to improve human welfare by promoting humanitarianism as 'political and constructive', in contrast to 'partial and short-sighted philanthropy' (Weinbren, 1994). Salt's sights were set not simply on the provision of temporary comfort or relief, but rather on the practical changes that could be effected through legislation and the benefits brought by the promotion of compassion to both victims and perpetrators of violence (Weinbren, 1994). The League's call for both 'collective, state-instituted reforms and individual self-improvement' illustrates its commitment to tackling social problems and making better citizens with a respect for their own capacities. Whilst certainly not devoid of the language of compassion or an element of paternalism through its support for state-led changes, the League did shed the overtly sentimental depoliticised tone of philanthropy and adopted instead a sense of empowerment and engagement. However, Salt's 'Creed of Kinship' attracted an eclectic range of people – socialists, spiritualists, occultists, vegetarians and anti-vivisectionists – which confined its 'humanitarian' reach to the general and rather visionary objective of softening human existence.

1.3 Early histories

Some of the first 'histories of humanitarianism' were written in 1906 by Frank T. Carlton, who identifies the period 1825–50 as the 'chief humanitarian era' in the United States, and by Maurice Parmelee in 1915, who provides a sociological account of the 'Rise of Modern Humanitarianism'. Carlton reflects on a 'humanitarian movement' which encompassed calls for better conditions for workers and the poor; educational advance; prison and penal reform; the temperance movement; charity organisations; the formation of local and national trade unions; and communistic aspirations and cooperative communities (Carlton, 1906). Humanitarianism was the 'natural fruit of a condition of social flux and unrest', underpinned by the social and economic dislocations caused by market expansion, industrialisation and urbanisation (Carlton, 1906). Such changes prompted the development of both religious and secular 'public interventions that would help restore a moral order' (Barnett and Weiss, 2008). Carlton's

³ *The Land We Love*, vol. 2, November–April 1866–67. Daniel Harvey Hill was a confederate general in the American Civil War. *The Land We Love* was a monthly magazine devoted to literature, military history and agriculture.

vision of ‘humanitarian’ contained both the practical and the idealistic, and was explicitly aligned with paternalist ideologies and commercial developments. ‘Humanitarian’ is associated simultaneously with movements of emancipation and liberation and civilising efforts to contain and control society (Barnett, 2011).

If Carlton’s definition of ‘humanitarian’ encompassed broad efforts to improve social conditions and welfare, Parmelee is concerned chiefly with humanitarianism from a sociological and evolutionary standpoint. Parmelee’s conception of ‘humanitarian’ appears to be even broader than Carlton’s, including the abolition of slavery, animal welfare and social legislation to improve the conditions of the working class and lessen poverty. Parmelee emphasises the importance of a worldwide community in the rise of the ‘modern humanitarian movement’; ‘increasing interdependence of different parts of the world made it evident to individuals and social groups that it was in their interest to concern themselves with the welfare of others’ (Parmelee, 1915). Parmelee’s typology distinguishes between a ‘modern’ humanitarianism and older forms. First, he details the ‘spontaneous form of humanitarianism’, which grows out of pure altruism, whereby an individual is moved to perform services for another in need or suffering and is untouched by any reflection as to the causes of the suffering or the consequences of the services rendered, as for example in almsgiving. Second, the ‘sentimental type’ of humanitarianism is altruism associated with ideas of a partisan fashion, evidenced in some forms of organised charitable work and reform. Finally, the most ‘evolved’ form of humanitarianism is the intellectual type, which is altruism controlled by ideas, whereby every humanitarian action is evaluated for its ultimate effect on the welfare of mankind, and which refers to ‘far-reaching social movements and many other kinds difficult to distinguish’. Parmelee distinguishes the first two types of humanitarianism in their philanthropic form from the third, which concerns itself with ‘the spirit of social justice’ and endeavours to ‘benefit all mankind and not benefit one group which may cause injury to another group’.

1.4 The birth of the Red Cross and ‘international humanitarianism’

Significantly, Parmelee’s conception of ‘humanitarian’ includes the regulation of warfare by the Red Cross to make it more humane and to lessen the suffering it causes, which was absent from Carlton’s account (Parmelee, 1915). Whilst Parmelee does not develop a discussion of the ICRC beyond a passing mention, he does highlight a shift from humanitarianism as the preserve of domestic affairs to humanitarianism as a form of international action. Indeed, Barnett notes that the creation of the ICRC (and the establishment of National Committees for the relief of wounded troops) in 1863 was probably the tipping-point in breaking down borders for ‘humanitarian action’ and directing efforts specifically towards ‘distant strangers’ (Barnett, 2011). In 1866 Dr. R. T. Trall (pioneer of

the natural hygiene movement) confidently gave the ICRC the appellation ‘International Humanitarian Movement’ because of its particular efforts towards ‘the recognition of the rights of humanity and the brotherhood of nations’ (Trall, 1866).

According to one early twentieth century commentator, Henry Dunant credited Florence Nightingale with inspiring the creation of the ICRC, the Geneva Convention and the establishment of the Red Cross societies (Cook, 1913). This claim might seem erroneous given that Nightingale initially rejected Dunant’s idea of the Red Cross, calling it ‘absurd’ because his pitch for volunteer efforts to alleviate the suffering of wounded soldiers would ease the burden on war ministries, and thus by default make war more attractive and more likely. Nevertheless, Nightingale was an important influence on Dunant, and was instrumental in the setting up of the British Red Cross. Described as the ‘humanitarian spirit during modern wars’ (Blavatsky, 1884), Dunant attributed the inspiration for his efforts at Solferino during the war of 1859 to Nightingale’s work in the Crimea. Nightingale’s ‘humanitarian spirit’ shared a close family resemblance to the Red Cross principle of neutrality: ‘suffering lifts its victim above normal values. While suffering endures there is neither good nor bad, valuable nor invaluable, enemy nor friend. The victim has passed to a region beyond human classification or moral judgments and his suffering is a sufficient claim’ (Nightingale, cited Woodham-Smith, 1951). Nightingale also directly influenced the creation of the British Red Cross in 1870: she advocated for its establishment, advised on nursing and operational matters in hospitals and served as a member of its Ladies’ Committee. Even the particular character of Nightingale’s ‘humanitarian spirit’ was passed on to volunteers at the inception of the British Red Cross. Described as ‘eminently practical’ and as having a ‘driving will and a heart to use all her powers for humanitarian purposes’ (Gittings Reid, 1922), Nightingale called for Red Cross volunteers that were ‘not sentimental enthusiasts but downright lovers of hard work’ (Nightingale, cited in Cook, 1913).

At the 1884 International Conference for the Red Cross held in Geneva, it was resolved ‘that the Red Cross societies in time of peace engage in humanitarian relief work analogous to the duties devolving upon them in periods of war’ (Bacon-Foster, 1918). This followed the example of the disaster relief work carried out by the American Red Cross, founded by Clara Barton in 1881. From the late nineteenth century and especially in the early twentieth, National Red Cross Societies began to extend their role and operational capacity beyond care for the sick and wounded on the battlefield. Following the First World War, the Covenant of the League of Nations (1919) sanctioned official state recognition of the peacetime role of the voluntary Red Cross National Societies, and the League of Red Cross Societies was established. These designated peacetime ‘humanitarian’ activities included the ‘improvement of health, the prevention of disease, and the mitigation of suffering throughout the world’, including intervention in the event of natural disasters.

Chapter 2

The ‘master-narrative’: International Humanitarian Law and the International Red Cross Movement

Nowhere in the Geneva Conventions, or in any other instruments of International Humanitarian Law, is the ICRC given a mandate to define humanitarianism (Cutts, 2008). Whilst this is an important caution against those who would uphold the ICRC as the model of ‘orthodox’ humanitarianism, it is clear that the ICRC has maintained a privileged place in the development of the term ‘humanitarian’. Described as a ‘beacon’ and ‘guardian’ of humanitarianism up until the early 1990s, ‘the Red Cross had a monopoly on the definition and elaboration of humanitarian principles’ (Weiss, 1999; Barnett and Weiss, 2008; Leader, 1998). For instance, in 1986 the International Court of Justice chose not to define humanitarianism, but rather simply equate it with the work of the Red Cross (Weiss, 1999). Likewise, when the UN General Assembly attempted to set up a framework for humanitarian action after the Cold War it did so explicitly on the basis of the three fundamental Red Cross principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality. In 1994, the ICRC-sponsored *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations in Disaster Relief* led the way in detailing common standards for humanitarian action (Cutts, 1998).

2.1 IHL: 1929; 1949; 1977

The ICRC and IHL provide an attractive rendering of the humanitarian story because of their ordering and codification of experience and knowledge. ‘Master-narrative’ serves as a useful description of the Red Cross and IHL because it expresses how they have embodied expectations and assumptions about the term ‘humanitarian’, reinforcing their image as the arbiter of humanitarianism. At the same time, however, IHL and the ICRC are just one part of the story of humanitarianism, and their so-called ‘monopoly’ on definitions is certainly not immune from challenge.

The relationship between the ICRC and IHL has always been an intimate one. The ICRC exercises three roles in connection to IHL: it helps to develop the law, helps to disseminate the principles and rules of the law and helps to apply the law (Forsythe, 2005). Indeed, the ICRC has been called the ‘spearhead’ of the Geneva Conventions (Pictet, 1975). Action in the field preceded legal codification of that action, so that ‘humanitarian’ refers to a practice first, before its intellectual or conceptual boundaries are defined (Forsythe, 2005).

The first explicit use of the term ‘humanitarian’ in IHL occurs in the 1929 Convention on the ‘Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field’, which refers to the ‘humanitarian’ activities of Voluntary Aid Societies during peacetime and their corresponding authority to use the Red Cross emblem in this capacity, and the 1929 ‘Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War’, which directly refers to the ‘humanitarian’ work of the ICRC (Articles 79 and 88). In 1929, ‘humanitarian’ activity was defined as the protection of wounded, sick, shipwrecked and captured combatants; it was only in 1949 that ‘humanitarian’ was extended to the protection of civilians. The absence of international humanitarian law relating to the protection of civilians following the First World War, and the subsequent delay in its codification until after the Second World War, is notable, especially given the fact that the First World War had created thousands of civilian victims. The ICRC repeatedly pushed for civilian protection, but this was delayed, initially on the grounds that the fate of civilians in enemy hands fell under the laws of war and was not a matter for the Red Cross, and then by the outbreak of war in 1939.

The Conventions do not confer ‘rights’ or ‘obligations’ on ‘humanitarian’ organisations, and thus there is no legal imperative inscribed within the term as such (Mackintosh, 2000). Rather, the Conventions ‘describe situations in which states must allow assistance to be delivered to civilians and the conditions they are entitled to impose on such delivery’. In this respect, the IHL definition of ‘humanitarian’ refers to a circumscribed field of action (Mackintosh, 2000). Three points emerge in the 1949 Conventions that crystallise and extend the meaning of ‘humanitarian’. First, the ‘impartial’ quality of ‘humanitarian’ action is solidified in Article 3 common to all Four Conventions of 1949, and the ICRC is cited repeatedly throughout the Conventions as exemplifying an ‘impartial humanitarian organization’. Second, whilst the term ‘neutrality’ does not appear in the Conventions explicitly, the concept of non-interference and non-participation in hostilities is critical to the conditions under which relief provision is permitted according to IHL (Leader, 2000). The parties to conflict are obliged to permit free passage of relief only if they have ‘no serious reason for fearing that a definite advantage may accrue to the military efforts or the economy of the enemy through the substitution of the above-mentioned consignments for goods which would otherwise be provided or produced by the enemy’ (Article 23). Neutrality is thus a ‘pragmatic operational posture prescribed by

international humanitarian law' (Slim, 1997). It is worth noting that the principles of impartiality and neutrality were part of humanitarian identity-formation prior to the Conventions, first by way of Gustave Moynier's formulation of basic working principles for the Movement's Societies in 1874, which included the principle of neutrality towards victims (neutrality here not referring to a form of abstention but rather the active principle of non-discrimination), and then in 1921 through a modification of the ICRC's Statutes, which enumerated impartiality as one of its four fundamental principles (along with action independent of any racial, political, religious or economic considerations, the universality of the Red Cross and the equality of the National Red Cross Societies).

Third, 'humanitarian' is stretched by virtue of the incorporation of human rights into the 1949 Conventions (Schindler, 1999). Article 3 common to the four Conventions constitutes a type of human rights provision; it regulates the relationship between governments and their own nationals in the event of an internal armed conflict, stipulating that persons taking no active part in hostilities should be 'treated humanely without any adverse distinction founded on race, colour, religion or faith, sex, birth or wealth, or any other similar criteria'. Applicable to all persons irrespective of nationality, to persons hors de combat in times of internal armed conflicts, the article makes provision for certain non-derogable rights such as the right to life, juridical guarantees and the prohibition of torture and cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Besides common Article 3, the Geneva Conventions grant civil rights, such as the freedom of religion and the protection of the family, as well as social rights including the enjoyment of health and adequate housing, food and clothing. The Conventions identify victims as individual human beings first, and in this vein Jean Pictet, the Swiss jurist, long-time senior officer at the ICRC and from 1971–79 its Vice-President, identified the object of the 'humanitarian organization' (defined by IHL) as 'the condition of man, considered solely as a human being without regard to the value which he represents as a military, political, professional or other unit' (Pictet, cited Blondel, 1989). It was only after the 1949 Conventions and the incorporation of civilian protection within the remit of 'humanitarian' activity that the term 'international humanitarian law' was introduced by the ICRC, largely replacing the terms 'law of war' and 'law of armed conflicts' (Schindler, 1999).

The Additional Protocols of 1977 broke new ground in the meaning of the term 'humanitarian' by recodifying the conditions upon which, and the situations in which, humanitarian activity was to be invoked. Whilst the Conventions of 1949 had brought major improvements in the legal protection of victims of conflict, they applied essentially to international conflicts, and the provisions for internal conflicts in common Article 3 were largely of a general nature. The wars in Vietnam and Nigeria/Biafra, conflicts between Arab states and Israel and the national liberation wars in Africa demanded reconsideration of

the application of humanitarian law. The UN began adopting resolutions insisting that the Geneva Conventions were to be applied to national liberation wars and, in 1968, the International Conference on Human Rights and the UN General Assembly adopted resolutions under the title 'Respect for human rights in armed conflicts' (Schindler, 1999).

The Protocols aimed for a more complete appraisal of what constitutes humanitarian action. For example, Chapter VI of Protocol I elaborates the scope of 'civil defence', which refers to the performance of humanitarian tasks 'intended to protect the civilian population against the dangers, and to help it to recover from the immediate effects, of hostilities or disasters and also to provide the conditions necessary for its survival'. The humanitarian tasks outlined include evacuation, the management of shelters, medical services, fire-fighting, the provision of emergency accommodation and supplies and assistance in the preservation of objects essential for survival (Article 61). Humanitarian action is specifically emergency relief – saving lives, protection and relief of suffering – whilst recovery is limited to managing 'immediate effects' and ensuring the conditions necessary for survival.

The Additional Protocols 'humanised' humanitarian law by broadening and deepening the protection of human rights during armed conflicts. Specifically, Additional Protocol II was formulated entirely for the protection of victims of internal conflicts. The confluence of IHL and International Human Rights Law (IHRL) is evident in the wording of Additional Protocol II, which refers to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966 in Article 5 (on detention) and Article 6 (on judicial guarantees). Moreover, Article 75 of Additional Protocol I, which codifies fundamental human rights by refusing distinctions between different groups such as POWs and civilians, illuminates for the first time how non-discrimination is built into the term 'humanitarian': it is 'universalised'.

2.2 Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, 1965

In 1956 Pictet outlined what were to become the seven Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross. Proclaimed in Vienna in 1965, the principles are humanity, equality, due proportion, impartiality, neutrality, independence and universality. These principles unite the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. In his commentary on the Fundamental Principles, Pictet is unequivocal in claiming that the principle of humanity is 'that from which all the other principles flow'; it is at once the 'basis of the institution', 'its ideal, its motivation and its objective'.

Pictet frames the principle of humanity in terms of the historical origin of the Red Cross, which was 'born of a desire to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield ... to prevent and alleviate human suffering wherever

it may be found'. Humanity is here brought into focus at the point at which it is refused; an understanding of humanity emerges in the context of experiences of 'inhumanity': 'when everything seems lost, when man has chosen the path of suffering and annihilation, the Red Cross stands as the defender of the supreme interests of humanity' (Pictet, 1979). In this light 'humanity presupposes an equality of rights and of concern among human beings ... that all lives are equally sacred and that all sufferings deserve to be relieved' (Fassin, 2011). Pictet characterises humanity as 'a sentiment of active goodwill' – that which is possessed by someone who shows himself to be human – which elicits sympathy for one's fellows, particularly those who are suffering.

This feeling of kinship must be accompanied by an understanding of 'humanity' as a community of human beings. Whilst shifting conceptualisations of civilisation invoke different interpretations of who constitutes 'humanity' (Barnett and Weiss, 2008) –Dunant's humanitarian protection, for example, would serve European soldiers during times of war but not non-Christian counterparts – the ICRC was responsible for expanding 'membership' of humanity to victims of internal war as well as international war, to civilians as well as wounded combatants through IHL. Pictet argues that the principle of humanity is to 'protect life and health and to ensure respect for the human being', and to promote 'mutual understanding, friendship, co-operation and lasting peace amongst all peoples'. Humanity is not simply a matter of material existence, but extends to encompass 'life, liberty and happiness' (Slim, 1997). The principle of humanity is not so much a guideline for action but rather a reminder of the objectives of the Red Cross Movement.

The Fundamental Principles define not only what is to be distributed and why, but also how it is to be distributed; there is an explicit concern for the purity of means and ends (Blondel, 1989). The principle of impartiality demands 'no discrimination as to nationality, race, religious beliefs, class or political opinions. It endeavours only to relieve suffering, giving priority to the most urgent cases of distress'. Assistance is given regardless of identity and based solely on need. Pictet pays particular attention to the personal quality of impartiality, whereby the individual is called upon to make a judgement or choice according to pre-established rules without the intrusion of personal or subjective interests and beliefs. Achieving the 'interior freedom' required of impartiality entails a refusal to prioritise one's own sincerity (the congruence between avowal and actual feeling) and instead demands a sustained effort to 'depersonalise' one's action (Pictet, 1979).

The principle of neutrality insists that the Red Cross 'may not take sides in hostilities or engage at any time in controversies of a political, racial, religious or ideological nature'. Central to this principle is abstention from military involvement and ideological activity; prevention, which requires the organisation to ensure that neither party is able to use the

organisation to its advantage; and impartiality, which insists that the organisation applies equal terms to the warring parties in its dealings with them (Plattner, cited Slim, 1997). Whilst the principles of impartiality and neutrality share family resemblances, Pictet notes that impartiality allows for a degree of judgement in accordance with pre-formulated criteria, whereas the neutral humanitarian 'refuses to make a judgement' from the outset (1979). Finally, the principle of independence seeks to protect against any intrusion of politics into the sphere of action of the Red Cross.

Two points deserve particular attention with respect to the principle of humanity. First, the quest for universality amidst difference has been made critical to an understanding of 'humanitarian', underscored not only by the notion of non-discrimination, but more widely by the idea that all people share the common values of humanity. Pictet argues that, whilst there is a 'pluralism of cultures', 'humanitarian principles belong to all peoples'; in this light, 'humanitarian' is supposedly universally accepted as a 'good'. Pictet's notion of a 'universal heritage of mankind' suggests an evolutionary gloss to ground the imperative of the unity of peoples and the concept of ownership of and participation in 'humanitarian' values. Whilst many commentators and scholars have recognised the Northern/Western oligopoly of humanitarianism (e.g. Donini, 2010), a recent report on the perceptions of the humanitarian enterprise by 'beneficiaries' in six country studies outlines that a 'common core of humanitarian values' exists even though such values may be interpreted in different ways according to location and the particular circumstances of the situation (Donini, 2008).

Second, Pictet's interpretation of 'humanity' as the principle from which neutrality, impartiality and independence stem, and as that which concerns 'liberty and happiness' beyond bare life, alerts us to a possible aporia in the Red Cross master-narrative. Alluding to the 'good life' as opposed to merely survival or bare existence, it might be expected that the Red Cross would arrogate to itself human rights advocacy. Yet the mandate of the ICRC, namely to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and internal strife and to provide them with immediate relief in accordance with the principles of impartiality and neutrality, precludes ideological or political involvement or speaking out against violations. The 'life, liberty and happiness' enshrined in the Red Cross principle of humanity invokes a concern for human rights in a very particular way, and the principles of neutrality and impartiality follow from the principle of humanity insofar as they are *operational* rather than the *object* of action.

Whilst IHL and IHRL have increasingly converged, the difference stands in the production of their norms: 'Humanitarian law originates from traumatic empirical encounters and produces legal instruments to ensure that they never happen again', whilst human rights are rooted 'in certain axioms about human nature or human dignity which are considered self-evident' (Loos, 2005). IHL follows an inductive method, while human rights is

deductive and is led by a priori assertions. However, despite their different approaches both sets of rules are answers to the suffering of human beings and both seek to protect human dignity (Loos, 2005). ‘Humanitarian’ in Red Cross discourse refers to the prevention and alleviation of suffering with the provision of immediate relief and assistance, and upholds a pragmatic respect for human rights rather than the juridical imperative to condemn and blame.

The grammar of the Fundamental Principles illuminates the subtle ways in which the Red Cross definition of humanitarian action seals itself off from the partiality and political nature of human rights efforts. Five out of the seven principles – humanity, impartiality, voluntary service, unity and universality – make use of verbs of action; one principle – independence – uses a verb of state, saying that the Red Cross must ‘maintain’ its autonomy; and only one principle contains a verb of abstention, that of neutrality (Moreillon, 1980). ‘Humanitarian’ work for the Red Cross is a matter of providing aid and helping a suffering human being, which demands an ‘open, alert, constructive state of mind’, whereas the monitoring of human rights violations ‘implies internal tension and a negative, even aggressive attitude, an undertaking to act against something instead of for someone’ (Moreillon, 1980).

An example may serve to illustrate this tailoring of ‘humanitarian’ in Red Cross discourse. Whilst the Red Cross seeks to alleviate the suffering of political detainees, it avoids attacking the reasons for their detention, precisely because doing so would involve entering the political arena. In a more nuanced fashion, the ICRC has analysed the impact of armed conflict on women to better understand their plight with a view to responding more appropriately to their needs (Lindsey-Curtet et al., 2004). This programme may have an indirect influence on women’s longer-term happiness by improving their socio-economic position, but it avoids any policy set on transforming gender relations, precisely because this would be incompatible with the ICRC’s mandate and its fundamental principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence. If ‘humanity’ is the principle from which all others derive, Pictet’s reference to ‘life, liberty and happiness’ does not simply override the original operation of emergency relief and assistance embedded in the conception of the ICRC, but rather it denotes the almost transcendent object upon which all humanitarian activity is predicated, the object towards which the Red Cross works but which it by no means owns: ‘the ideal of the Red Cross is much greater than its own action’ (Pictet, 1979), a sentiment that allows for a space in which others can strive to ensure ‘life, liberty and happiness’ by different means.

Chapter 3

The politics of the political–humanitarian divide: from relief to human rights

The ICRC’s humanitarian identity is defined by its mandate to meet urgent human needs. In the words of Cornelio Sommaruga, ex-President of the ICRC:

The International Committee of the Red Cross has always maintained that ... humanitarian action deals only with the symptoms of a crisis, not the crisis itself or its causes; it seeks only to relieve the victim’s suffering, not to punish their tormentors; it is essentially an act of charity, which is not necessarily a guarantee of justice (Sommaruga, cited Cutts, 1998).

Sommaruga’s statement reaffirms the original relief objectives deliberated in 1863, when the ICRC was established, and in so doing shores up the purported historical stability of the ICRC’s pedigree. Insofar as war and violence can be understood to be extensions of the ‘political’, the ICRC has always sought to maintain a humanitarian space ‘in the midst of, but separate from, the political’ (Warner, 1999). Of course, this dichotomy was dependent upon a particular pejorative conception of politics as ‘manipulative’ and ‘self-interested’, overlooking the positive connotations of politics, such as ‘diplomacy’ and ‘prudence’ (Cutts, 1998). Whilst humanitarian agencies have recognised their existence in the political world and their political effects, the touchstone for humanitarian identity has invariably been the political–humanitarian distinction (Barnett, 2005). Yet as Warner (1999) argues, ‘it is a very political move to separate the political from the humanitarian’. The case studies that follow shed some light on the ‘politics’ of the political–humanitarian distinction.

A reassessment of the relationship between the ‘political’ and the ‘humanitarian’ leads to the question of the substantive content of the latter term. The common narrative relates how ‘humanitarian’ has expanded in scope over the years, from designating emergency relief to include development, human rights, peace-building and advocacy. According to Barnett, consideration of the relationship between relief and reconstruction began slowly with the First World War, gathered momentum with the Second, accelerated at the end of the Cold War and culminated at the end of the twentieth century in a protracted debate between ‘emergency humanitarians’ and ‘alchemical humanitarians’, or those seeking to remove the cause of suffering (Barnett, 2011). Leader has identified the shift in the early 1990s, in the form of a challenge to the ICRC’s monopoly of ‘humanitarian’ by a ‘deepening’ and ‘broadening’ of the term (Leader, 1998): whilst NGOs that seek a more ‘committed solidarity form of intervention’ in conflict

situations have stressed the importance of protecting human rights for ‘at risk’ groups as well as the provision of assistance, developmental NGOs stress that humanitarian action includes long-term assistance such as capacity-building and empowerment (Chandler, 2001). This vertical and horizontal expansion of ‘humanitarian’ in terms of political engagement and goals and objectives is expressed as a symptom, in part, of a need to manage the so-called ‘new complex emergencies’ ushered in by the end of the Cold War.

This process has given rise to a lively identity crisis. One side speaks out at the deformation of the term because of a perceived hyperbolic appropriation of human rights by NGOs. The other offers a more generous reading of the symbiosis of human rights and humanitarianism. Thus, Chandler critiques the human-rights discourse appropriated by some NGOs as a ‘lever for strategic aims drawn up and acted upon by external agencies’. In contrast to ‘principled neutrality’, such NGOs often refuse a commitment to a ‘basic level of humanitarian relief as a universal right’ if this threatens to obscure or damage their broader human rights objectives (Chandler, 2001). In this light, ‘humanitarian’ has been distorted beyond recognition. On the other side, Slim argues that the purported dichotomy between humanitarianism and development, grounded in the distinction between IHL and IHRL, is a false one. He contends that ‘both humanitarianism and development are concerned with saving lives, both are short and long term, and both are political, in the proper sense of being concerned with the use and abuse of power in human relations’ (Slim, 2000). It is, Slim argues, only through human rights that we can dissolve the distinction between the two by recognising human dignity. In this view, those who charge that the absorption of human rights into humanitarianism is a degenerative move are missing the point.

These two positions, one expressing concern about the deformation of the word ‘humanitarian’ by its expansion, and the other asserting consistency and unity of the term in encompassing relief and development, offer useful conceptual markers for a historical examination of ‘humanitarian’. The following case studies explore the meanings and uses of ‘humanitarian’. Beginning with the case of the Bulgarian massacres in the late-nineteenth century, ‘humanitarian’ is brought into focus as a site of tension between national interests and the interests of humanity. Examination of the League of Nations, the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) illuminates the ways in which ‘humanitarian’

was caught between commitment to emergency relief and short-term efforts and more durable or ‘politicised’ solutions and engagement. For these international organisations, self-presentation as ‘impartial’ and/or ‘non-political’ was central to the management of their ‘humanitarian’ identity. The ‘politics’ of the ‘humanitarian–political’ divide in the case of the NGOs Oxfam and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) presents itself in the fine-grained negotiations of their public image and the goals and principles of their humanitarian action, as can be seen, for example, in their apparent shifting of the centre of gravity of ‘humanitarian’ from ‘neutrality’ to ‘impartiality’.

3.1 A nineteenth century case: Bulgaria

In an August 1876 issue of the London *Pall Mall Gazette*, an editorial entitled ‘Humanitarian Policy in the East’ reviewed an article published in a German periodical on the Bulgarian Atrocities, a series of massacres committed by the Ottoman Turks to quash a nationalist uprising; in one town alone, Batak, around 5,000 people were thought to have been killed, most of them women and children (Bass, 2008). According to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, the German author ‘fully admits that the principle of humanity should be a weighty element in the policy of civilized nations, but he urges that it should not “be made paramount over the highest political interests of one’s own country and of Europe generally ... especially if, as in the present instance, the fulfilment of the demands of the humanitarians would lead to results which would be far from consistent with that very principle of humanity for which they plead”’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 18 August 1876). Thus, foreign policy and national interest took priority over the ‘principle of humanity’ in the context of the Bulgarian massacres.

This editorial was just one of hundreds in the summer of 1876 that reported on the Bulgarian Atrocities. By the beginning of August newspaper correspondents were providing eyewitness testimony. *The Daily News*’ war correspondent witnessed the aftermath of the most brutal of the massacres at Batak, and on 7 August the newspaper published his report of piles of skulls severed from skeletons, unburied bodies and the misery of the survivors. Former Prime Minister William Gladstone responded to the atrocities with his famous pamphlet ‘The Bulgarian Horrors’, ‘wild, unhinged stuff: repetitive and histrionic, a heady mix of over-the-top moralizing, and raw anti-Turkish bigotry’ (Bass, 2008). Christianity and humanitarianism were inextricably linked for many of those involved with the agitation. The Conservative Lord Salisbury (no friend of the Ottoman Empire) spoke of the ‘humanitarian and religious desires of the country’, which he hoped would ‘coincide with the national interest’ (Marsh, 1972).

The British government, led by Benjamin Disraeli, was caught between its treaty commitments to the Ottomans and public pressure to respond to the massacres, fuelled by the press, public rallies, church meetings and petitions. While Disraeli admitted that the Batak atrocity was ‘a horrible event which

no one can think of without emotion’, his primary concern was avoiding British entanglement to preserve national security and Ottoman territorial integrity (Bass, 2008). Once public outrage began to diminish by the end of September, newspapers generally became more supportive of the British government’s position. The task for the public was ‘to winnow the political from the humanitarian aspect, and to ask not merely what wrongs shall be redressed and crimes punished, but what steps are necessary for the general interest of European peace’ (*Huddersfield Daily Chronicle*, 9 October 1876). The ‘humanitarian’ claims for justice for the Bulgarians were deemed subordinate to the ‘political’ quest for peaceful relations between states. As the *Pall Mall Gazette*’s German writer put it, the effects of any intervention would be ‘incompatible both with the highest interests of Europe and those of the Christian populations of European Turkey’; on this basis, the author argues in favour of selecting the ‘lesser evil’ of Ottoman rule. The Times reported a burgeoning ‘counter wave’ to those in favour of intervention in the name of ‘humanity’, and described the latter as ‘mere humanitarian ebullition of feeling, a kind of temporary insanity of an amiable character, something to be patted on the back on condition that it was silent henceforth’ (*The Times*, 10 October 1876). To be ‘humanitarian’ was to be ‘emotional’, ‘excessive’ and ‘unthinking’, only to be granted brief audience before the pragmatic and prudent course of foreign policy took over.

In April 1877, without the backing of Britain, Turkey began a war with Russia. Responses to the unfolding conflict highlight the way in which ‘humanitarian’ increasingly became used as a term of disparagement. With 80,000 Russian soldiers killed, many questioned the purported ‘humanitarian’ impulse of Russia and the ‘humanitarian’ designs of those supportive of intervention. The *Pall Mall Gazette* queried the ostensible ‘humanitarian’ objective of the Russians: ‘What do they think now of the proportion between the gains and losses to humanity of a humanitarian war?’ (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 11 October 1877). This kind of utilitarian argument, which presents itself as ‘rational’ and ‘economical’ against the notion of a ‘humanitarian war’, was extremely common: ‘it might be helpful to make up a debtor and creditor account, showing how much has been so far lost, and how much gained, by a peculiarly Christian and humanitarian war’ (*Western Mail*, 15 October 1877). Strikingly prescient of more recent debates about so-called ‘humanitarian war’, and indeed about the value of the term itself, these late-nineteenth century responses display the disjunction between humanitarian goals, methods and effects.

3.2 The League of Nations

The humanitarian activity of the League of Nations was defined as distinctly ‘non-political’ and was considered to be fundamental to the League’s efforts for international cooperation and world peace. Dame Rachel Crowdy, Chief of the Opium and Social Questions Section of the League

of Nations, specifically highlighted the links between humanitarian efforts and collective security and international community. Crowdy laid particular emphasis on the League's concern with prevention and tackling root causes: 'unless you introduce better economic conditions, better social conditions and better health conditions into the world, you will not be able to maintain peace even if you obtain it' (Crowdy, 1927). In this respect, Crowdy characterised the humanitarian work of the League as a transnational project designed to address the fundamental causes of human suffering.

The Fifth Sub-committee of the League of Nations was given the task of addressing 'Social and Humanitarian Questions'. It included Health Committees to tackle diseases and monitor epidemics; an Advisory Committee on Traffic in Women and Protection of Children; and a Committee on Traffic in Opium and Other Dangerous Drugs. The issues addressed by these committees were enshrined in the Covenant of the League of Nations, and emphasis was placed primarily on enlightening public opinion so as to develop global knowledge. But the League's 'humanitarian' activities were also undertaken on an ad hoc basis depending on the 'needs of the moment' (Crowdy, 1928). Although the Covenant expressly delegated responsibility for emergency relief to the Red Cross Movement and national governments, emergency response did occur, most notably perhaps the repatriation of prisoners of war and refugee work. In 1921, the League appointed Fridtjof Nansen High Commissioner for Refugees to direct the repatriation of Russian refugees fleeing the Russian Revolution and civil war. Nansen had successfully organised a series of prisoner exchanges in 1920, and had directed relief operations in famine-stricken Russia in cooperation with the Red Cross. Crowdy details the League's achievements in the early post-war years: the repatriation of over 400,000 war prisoners of 27 nationalities, provision of assistance to 1.5 million Russian refugees, including food, shelter, passport arrangements and employment, and the Rescue Movement operation on behalf of deported and displaced Armenian women and children.

The League's humanitarian activity primarily involved the provision of immediate relief such as foodstuffs and shelter, with the professed aim of acting 'with strict impartiality without making any distinction between the various races and religions' (League, 1924). Provision of aid to Russian refugees was considered by the League to be a 'moral duty', and yet at the Inter-Governmental Conference in 1921 the League admitted that emergency relief was only a 'palliative' measure and 'also objectionable from the point of view of the refugees' because 'the real solution of the problem, pending repatriation, was to enable the refugees to live by their own work' (League, 1924). Acknowledging the gap between relief and rehabilitation, the League set about providing for continued assistance, such as developing facilities for the education of refugees, finding employment and establishing refuge houses for women and children in which they would be taught trades during their periods of residence. The League thus included a degree of

rehabilitation within the scope of humanitarian action, as well as immediate aid. There was also an element of human rights work. The Rescue Mission for women and children of the Armenian genocides, for example, highlights the confluence of human rights and humanitarianism: 'the Armenian minority entered the orbit of humanitarian discourse and justice claims alongside the suffering of individual Armenian survivors and refugees' (Watenpaugh, 2010). At the same time, the rehabilitation of the Armenians involved the restoration of their 'humanity', which was underpinned by European notions of ethnic, racial and religious superiority over the Ottoman nation: the right to be rescued in practice applied specifically to Armenian and Greek (white/Christian) women and children. This was in contrast with the League's self-proclaimed 'impartiality' in relief in the case of Russia.

3.3 UNRRA

As embodied by the League of Nations, 'humanitarian' implied the 'social-scientific, knowledge-based' management of problems. Such efforts were crystallised and extended in the 'humanitarian' identity of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), created in 1943 (Watenpaugh, 2010; Shephard, 2008). Recognising the 'humanitarian' nature of its task, the UNRRA Agreement, signed by over 40 countries, stipulated that it was to undertake the relief and rehabilitation of victims of war through the provision of food, fuel, clothing, drugs, shelter and medical and other welfare services and to provide supplies and care for the repatriation of Displaced Persons in Europe. UNRRA's mandate was from the beginning limited to providing protection and assistance only to civilian nationals of the Allied nations and to DPs in countries liberated by the Allies (Loescher, 1996).

'The functions of UNRRA reach into every realm of interest. Its basic spirit is humanitarian, as might be expected of the United Nations' "Men of Good Will." One would utterly misinterpret the nature of UNRRA, however, if he were to judge it charitable because it is humanitarian' (Weintraub, 1945). This contemporary appraisal of the objectives and activities of the UNRRA highlights how the organisation sought to distinguish 'humanitarian' action from charity. Indeed, Weintraub honours the UNRRA not as a charity relief body but rather the 'most extensive welfare program in history and an experiment in welfare planning'. The organisation was keen to avoid an image of 'altruism' because its provision of relief was grounded not in 'alms-giving' to individuals, but in a recognition of the interdependence of societies and nations (Reinisch, 2011).

UNRRA framed its action in terms of rehabilitation as well as relief, its mandate being to 'help the liberated peoples to help themselves' (Weintraub, 1945). This project of 'active welfare' involved not only the distribution of the immediate essentials of food, clothing and health care, but also occupational therapy, education, vocational training and employment opportunities (Cohen, 2008). This was humanitarianism directed towards

revivifying and reinstating a life of dignity. Whilst ‘reconstruction’ was excluded from UNRRA’s mandate, Weintraub emphasises its unity of purpose and method: ‘relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction are three successive phases of a single post-war program, each of which conditions and is conditioned by the others’. Humanitarian action referred both to UNRRA’s specific functions of relief and rehabilitation, and more broadly to the post-war order for which it hoped to forge the blueprint. At the same time, however, UNRRA deliberately inserted itself into a humanitarian movement that was identified as such precisely because it insisted on remaining neutral vis-à-vis politics: ‘like every other humanitarian organization, UNRRA is to be politically neutral as nearly as possible’ (Weintraub, 1945). In rendering assistance, Weintraub explicitly notes that UNRRA was ‘impartial, equitable, and non-political’; ‘need’, not identity, was its sole criterion. UNRRA staff guarded their impartiality as a ‘vital asset’ in alleviating human suffering (Harder, 2012).

UNRRA’s activities reveal tensions in its conceptualisation of ‘humanitarian’, specifically with regards to its claim to impartiality. The question of who qualified as a DP highlights that UNRRA was not able to maintain a position of non-discrimination. Former enemy nationals (including ethnic German refugees) were not eligible for UNRRA assistance (Cohen, 2008). More broadly, UNRRA was conceived both as humanitarian and politically expedient. US President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared that ‘it is not only humane and charitable for the United Nations to supply medicine and food and other necessities to the peoples freed from Axis control; it is a clear matter of enlightened self-interest and of military strategic necessity’ (citation, Weintraub, 1945). In Weintraub’s interpretation, ‘what appears to be a matter of good will is no less a demand of good sense’. This contemporary perception of UNRRA illuminates how humanitarian action was seen as compatible with national and security interests.

3.4 UNHCR

After the Second World War, the refugee question was coloured by growing international tension, and became a major political issue within the United Nations. The fundamental dispute was over whether UNRRA was obligated to provide assistance to displaced persons who refused repatriation: whilst the Eastern bloc insisted that assistance should only be given to displaced persons who were repatriated, the West asserted that resettlement or repatriation was a decision to be made by each individual without prejudice to their right to assistance (Loescher, 1996). The creation of the International Refugee Organization⁴ by the US in 1947, which favoured resettlement, clashed directly with UNRRA’s mandate, which privileged repatriation, supported by the Soviet bloc. It was against the backdrop of these tensions that the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951.

⁴ The IRO assumed responsibility for refugees and displaced persons covered by the mandate of UNRRA, as well as new refugees fleeing from Germany, Austria and Italy. The IRO mandate was extended to 31 December 1951 to coincide with the beginning of UNHCR’s mandate in January 1952.

UNHCR’s 1950 Statute set out its core mandate: to ensure refugees’ access to protection by the assurance of certain defined rights and to ensure that refugees would have access to long-lasting solutions, and would either be reintegrated within their country of origin or integrated within a new country. UNHCR was also mandated to be guardian of the refugee regime by monitoring states’ compliance with the norms and rules set out by the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Loescher and Betts, 2011). The terms ‘humanitarian’ and ‘non-political’ were twinned in UNHCR’s Statute: ‘the work of the High Commissioner shall be of an entirely non-political character; it shall be humanitarian and social’ (Sugino, 1998). ‘Humanitarian’ was, by default, deemed to fall outside any activity that set out to intentionally provoke tensions between states or exploit the refugee issue to bolster national interests or wider political ends (Sugino, 1998). But the meaning and scope of ‘humanitarian’ as non-political, defined in the context of the post-war repatriation problem, was historically contingent; meaning was flexible insofar as the same vocabulary could be stretched to encompass a range of different activities. This malleability was facilitated by the General Assembly, which allowed for a ‘progressive broadening of UNHCR’s statutory competence’ (Sugino, 1998). The scope and operational principles of humanitarian action were adaptable to the context; this was a matter of developing its activities to meet its mandate, and expanding its mandate to meet the needs of the situation (Loescher and Betts, 2012). For example, ‘non-political and humanitarian’ was conceived in the 1950s as defining the nature of asylum; the refugee question was a ‘humanitarian’ matter on the premise that ‘humanitarian’ did not imply a desire to address the root causes and conditions of forced displacement, but only to treat the symptoms once refugee movements had taken place. In the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, in the context of the increased need for prevention and in-country activity, UNHCR was compelled to acknowledge its ‘political’ role as a humanitarian actor. Unprecedented military attacks on refugee camps in the 1980s brought into focus for UNHCR the entanglement of humanitarian activity with politics, and as the agency gradually began to seek long-term solutions for refugees by liaising with governments and to absorb the human rights enterprise into its work, it could not ignore the role of political will in its humanitarian mandate. This did not entail a disavowal of the ‘non-political and humanitarian’ clause in its Statute, but there is evidence that UNHCR found this vocabulary inadequate: turning to the ICRC, the UNHCR increasingly came to rely on the terms ‘neutrality’ and ‘impartiality’ to manage its ‘humanitarian’ identity (Sugino, 1998).

3.5 Oxfam

Oxfam was born as a famine relief agency, coordinating fund-raising campaigns for Greece in 1942, and relief remained its primary focus up until the late 1950s. Starting in the 1960s the agency expanded increasingly into development work: by the end of the 1970s over 50% of Oxfam’s budget was devoted to

development issues, with less than 10% going on emergency relief (Chandler, 2001). In his 1970 study of Oxfam's work in the 1960s, Peter Gill observed that it 'is no longer satisfied with a humanitarian role. Increasingly, its efforts are being directed towards relieving the causes of world poverty, and towards propagating solutions' (Gill, 1970). However, the shift from relief to development was not always defined clearly in Oxfam's vocabulary. In an advert run in *The Times* in 1964, Oxfam's mandate appeared to conflate development with humanitarianism: 'Oxfam has long-term projects to grow food, train primitive farmers, provide tools and seed. Will you help to give these humanitarian projects continuity?' (*The Times*, 12 September 1964).

Oxfam's 'humanitarian' identity was, and is, perhaps less determined by a distinction between relief and development and more by a general regard for the dignity and equality of all human beings, a moral commitment beyond the concern only for the 'sanctity of bare human life' (Slim, 1997). This approach underscores Oxfam's difficult relationship with neutrality, and its ultimate rejection in favour of impartiality. From the outset Oxfam prioritised 'need' over 'identity' in the provision of aid, making impartiality an inherent part of Oxfam's identity at an early stage (Barnett, 2011). 'Neutrality' was, however, another matter. Oxfam opposed the Allied blockade of Greece, and its lobbying directly helped to lift the blockade (Barrow and Jennings, 2001).

Oxfam also rejected neutrality in its position on the Biafran war of 1967–70. Biafra was a critical turning point in the development of modern humanitarianism: it was one of the first times that humanitarian aid NGOs had acted against state disapproval; it was the first televised famine; and it was during that war that humanitarian agencies became explicitly aware of the manipulation of aid for political and military ends. Oxfam stressed its neutral and apolitical role (see for example Leslie Kirkley, Director of Oxfam, in *The Observer*, 14 July 1968); its impartial stance was highlighted by its provision of food, medical supplies and relief teams 'on both sides of the fighting lines' (*The Times*, 14 November 1968). However, Oxfam was one of the first NGOs to take an explicitly partisan approach, publicly supporting the rebels and compromising its pretence of neutrality (Barnett, 2011). By claiming to be neutral, Oxfam presented itself as a supporter not of Biafra the political movement, but rather Biafra the 'victims'. By the 1990s, Oxfam had openly shed the language of neutrality. In its 1995 development handbook, the agency defined its 'humanitarian' mission: 'Oxfam is not neutral, in that it is on the side of poor and disadvantaged people in their search for social justice and equitable development' (Eade and Williams, 1995). Individual rights, the capacity for self-determination and the dignity of the human being were the central values of Oxfam's vision in the 1990s.

This move away from the Red Cross principle of 'neutrality' was increasingly common across NGOs in the 1990s. Slim has observed that the winnowing of neutrality from the term

'humanitarian' often stemmed from a misunderstanding of 'neutrality' as an unprincipled position, when in fact those who profess neutrality do so precisely because they have certain ideals by which they stand: 'neutrality is ultimately the operational means to achieve their humanitarian ideals within an environment which is essentially hostile to those ideals' (Slim, 1997). As the ICRC puts it: "It is precisely because the feelings we have towards the suffering of those we seek to assist are not neutral that we must adhere to political, religious and ideological neutrality, for that is what enables us to gain access to them'" (Rieffer-Flannagan, 2009).

3.6 MSF

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), established in 1971, was created as a 'counter-ICRC' by a group of Red Cross personnel who could no longer follow the organisation's principles in the midst of the Biafran war (Weiss, 1998). From the start, the fundamental operational principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence of the Red Cross were questioned and, over time, reconfigured. Whereas the ICRC forbade staff from making public statements about human rights violations and rejected intervention in a country without that country's authorised approval, MSF stresses the imperative to speak out and bear witness (*témoignage*). At the same time, however, there is a long-standing tension within the organisation over the need for advocacy over human rights and the desire to ensure maximum efficiency in the delivery of aid to victims, which may involve cooperation or complicity with unjust actors (DeChaine, 2005).

Weiss's characterisation of MSF as a 'counter-ICRC' appears at odds with the agency's founding Charter of 1971, which explicitly uses the language of neutrality and independence, closely resembling the Red Cross principles: the mandate was to bring aid to 'victims of natural disasters, of collective accidents and situations of conflict, without any political, racial, religious or philosophical discrimination'; members would refrain from 'any interference in States' internal affairs' and abstain from 'passing judgement or publicly expressing an opinion – either positive or negative – regarding events, forces or leaders who accepted their assistance' (Magone, Neuman, Weissman, 2012). During the years 1971–1976, MSF projected and promoted this non-political image. This changed in the late 1970s, however, when the agency was openly critical of the Khmer Rouge and the subsequent pro-Vietnamese regime in Cambodia, which it believed was diverting humanitarian aid in a famine-ravaged country (DeChaine, 2005). 'Humanitarian' was stretched to accommodate condemnation of Communist totalitarianism and genocide.

In an early retrospective on its work, published in 1979, MSF describes its objective as being 'to lead humanitarian action in difficult country situations' (MSF Association, 1979). However, use of 'humanitaire' (humanitarian) by MSF and others to describe the agency only came to prominence with the

Ethiopian famine of 1984–85. In the face of a large-scale relief operation funded by Western nations and private donors, and ‘popularised’ by a media campaign culminating in Bob Geldof’s Live Aid concert, MSF believed that the Ethiopian regime was manipulating aid. It spoke out against the Ethiopian government in September 1985, and was expelled from the country the following month (Magone, Neumann and Weissman, 2012). Rony Brauman, President of MSF at the time, presented the agency as ‘humanitarian’ in defence of its position against public criticism from other NGOs, which argued that it had violated the principle of neutrality by interfering in the domestic concerns of a sovereign state (Kennedy, 2009). In response to this criticism, Brauman observed that there was a noticeable ‘lack of brotherhood between humanitarian movements’. On the one hand, this suggests that the term ‘humanitarian’ could potentially embrace a broad church of emergency aid agencies and practices. On the other, Brauman’s emphasis on ‘brotherhood’ is indicative of MSF’s particular ‘humanitarian’ identity of ‘bearing witness’, a position which arguably led to MSF’s purported exclusion from the ‘brotherhood’.

Weiss has characterised MSF as a ‘solidarist’ agency on a sliding scale of ‘politicisation’ ranging from the ICRC’s classicist approach via minimalists, maximalists and finally to solidarists. By ‘solidarist’ Weiss means that they ‘advocate controversial public policy’, ‘take the side of selected victims’, ‘skew the balance of resource allocation’ and ‘override sovereignty as necessary’ (Weiss, 1999). Weiss’ categorisation of MSF as rejecting the ‘classicist’ approach was explicitly challenged by the agency in 1999, as was the purported political criteria by which Weiss defined the ‘solidarist’ approach. Tanguy and Ferry argue that MSF chose to move away from the ‘silent neutrality’ of the Red Cross precisely because it sought to place the ‘interests of victims ahead of sovereignty considerations’. They claimed that impartiality and neutrality are integral to MSF’s

‘humanitarian’ identity insofar as the organisation provides aid in proportion to need without discrimination, and does not take sides with warring parties. It does, however, take the side of the victims: ‘if neutrality is defined as remaining silent, even when confronted with grave breaches of fundamental humanitarian principles, MSF is not neutral’ (Tanguy and Ferry, 1999). The lens through which MSF sees neutrality is that of absolute respect for human dignity; the principle of humanity means universal rights, established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As Tanguy and Ferry argue, ‘faced with massive human rights violations, misuse of humanitarian assistance, or a totalitarian regime, MSF may exclude working with one party to the conflict but this position is less an expression of political preference than a determination to claim and operate within humanitarian space as well as to maintain accountability to international civil society through testimony (*témoignage*) regarding mass violations of human rights’ (Tanguy and Ferry, 1999).

Claiming to be both a humanitarian actor and an agent of change suggests an implicit recognition on the part of MSF that the provision of aid under the banner of ‘humanitarian’ is an operation distinct from, but not at odds with, its role in calling for states and the international community to recognise their responsibilities. DeChaine has characterised the MSF enterprise as an attempt to bridge ‘the universal discourse of rights’ with a ‘borderless rhetoric of neutrality’, a ‘dance of *témoignage*’ which seeks to balance the ‘humanitarian’ and the ‘political’. Tanguy and Ferry’s observation that MSF ‘upholds a *spirit* of neutrality’ suggests that the agency manages its ‘humanitarian’ identity by harnessing ICRC vocabulary, while at the same time allowing for a degree of flexibility (beyond the meaning of the ICRC) in what neutrality can denote (DeChaine, 2005). The case of MSF is thus particularly illustrative of the way the apparent gap between discourse or narrative and operational practice has given rise to ambiguity in the meaning of the term ‘humanitarian’.

Chapter 4

Distortion, diversification or dissolution of the master-narrative?

Using Google's Ngram Viewer, we can trace the frequency with which the word 'humanitarian' appears in published works in the English language from 1850 to 2008, during which time we see small rises in its use around the periods of both world wars, and then a sharp and substantial increase in the 1990s (see the figures in Annex 1). Notwithstanding the limitations of this tool for tracing a history of 'humanitarian' (for example there can be no direct or easy transition from the raw quantitative data to close qualitative reading of individual uses of 'humanitarian'), the results show that, since the 1990s, 'humanitarian' has been in circulation as never before.⁵ But increasing visibility and usage do not imply that consensus has been reached as to what the term means; quite the reverse, in fact: it is possible to argue that 'humanitarian' has become increasingly imprecise given its various conceptualisations, connotations and implications. Sommaruga, President of the ICRC, expressed his concern in 1997 about 'the indiscriminate use of the term "humanitarian"' given that 'much of today's international response to a conflict is labelled "humanitarian"' (Sommaruga, 1997). Certainly, the ICRC has 'tried to keep the label of humanitarianism for emergency relief and fought against reformers who wanted to expand the concept to include all kinds of activities that might improve the world' (Barnett, 2011).

4.1 'Humanitarian' after the Cold War

Use of the term 'humanitarian' really took off after the end of the Cold War. The 1990s saw a dramatic expansion in the scale of humanitarian assistance: while there were only a few aid agencies in Somalia in 1992, roughly 200 went to Rwanda in 1993, 250 were in Kosovo in 1999 and, after the earthquake in Haiti, 900 agencies were registered (Barnett, 2011). The common explanation for this steep increase in NGO and UN presence in these contexts is that, after the end of the Cold War, Washington and Moscow cut their ties with their Third World clients, leaving many of these regimes exposed to internal collapse; where once external threats or totalitarian regimes had kept conflicts stemming from ethnic, religious or political differences in check, the collapse of the Cold War system left these regimes to their own devices, with conditions ripe for internal conflict and domestic meltdown (Schindler, 1999 and Barnett, 2011). The so-called 'complex humanitarian emergencies' that were unleashed gave rise to new conceptions of international peace-building and security; there was a growing understanding that the state itself was a source of insecurity (Barnett, 2011).

The UN Secretary-General's 1992 *Agenda for Peace* focused on violence within states and the tools for conflict prevention, peacekeeping and peace-building. Asserting that respect for human rights and humanitarian law constitutes an integral element of international security, the Security Council, under Chapter VII of the UN Charter, facilitated military interventions with avowedly 'humanitarian' objectives, first in response to the plight of the Kurds in northern Iraq following the 1991 Gulf War and then in Operation Restore Hope in Somalia 1992–93. With a focus firmly on a concern for failed states and the project of liberal peace-building, the range of actors and activities that fell under the banner of 'humanitarianism' grew rapidly. 'As the category "humanity" takes on greater imaginative power and existence, it attracts people into it, and swells the category itself' (Mazlish, cited Meierhenrich, 2012). In the same vein, the expansion of the humanitarian discourse increasingly rendered myriad forms of assistance to the distant needy as 'humanitarian'. The 'humanitarian' efforts of NGOs and UN agencies now included disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration, economic development, promoting democracy by rebuilding the administrative apparatus and the judicial system and advancing human rights and the rule of law by developing civil society organisations and an independent media (Barnett, 2011). The increase in the use of 'humanitarian' was thus also, in part, a product of NGO and UN agencies dressing their activities in 'humanitarian' garb.

Slim observes that 'most humanitarian language which emerges from the mouths of NGOs and UN forces is in fact little more than the rebounding and frequently distorted echo of the language and principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement' (Slim, 1997). This would imply that any use of the term 'humanitarian' was contingent upon the vocabulary of the Red Cross for meaning. However, whilst some agencies may have adopted the language of the Red Cross to illustrate consistency with 'traditional' humanitarian values and principles, given the political and developmental role of UN agencies and the human rights interests of many NGOs, the adoption of Red Cross language frequently involved distorting and subverting the very principles by which they hoped to be identified. For instance, Slim observes that the meaning of words like 'impartiality' easily collapses when a Red Cross nurse can use the term to describe her medical programme, and a UN commander can use the term to describe air strikes (Slim, 1997). But the question remains as to why there was a concerted effort amongst humanitarian organisations to emulate the ICRC and operate according to its principles (Cutts, 1998). By harnessing Red Cross vocabulary, NGOs were expanding and stretching the definition of 'humanitarian' to

⁵ For an overview of the value of the Google Ngram Viewer, and its limitations, for academic historical research, see <http://www.dancohen.org/2010/12/19/initial-thoughts-on-the-google-books-ngram-viewer>.

suit their own needs. On the one hand, this may have been because of a genuine desire to readdress the principles that underpin humanitarian action in the midst of complex conflict situations; on the other, it may suggest that, in encroaching on the ICRC's territory, there was a need to showcase legitimacy by (pseudo) imitation. In this light, the ICRC master-narrative prevailed as a rhetorical strategy insofar as 'humanitarian' could function as an all-encompassing cloak.

Use of the term 'humanitarian' functioned in part as a broader 'political' strategy on the part of Western powers. Warner argues that 'because "political" organs such as the United Nations General Assembly and the Security Council are unwilling or unable to deal with civil wars and collapse of governments, a political move has been made to call the situations "humanitarian" and to involve relief organizations in political crises' (Warner, 1999). 'Humanitarian' is thus used to describe a crisis and responses to that crisis in order to absolve states of a responsibility to take political action to address them. A 'deepening' and 'broadening' of the term can also be understood as both a cause and consequence of the development of the 'humanitarian condition' whereby humanitarianism has become a 'form of political life' (Meierhenrich, 2012). Humanitarianism is a condition insofar as there has been a crystallisation and normalisation of 'beliefs about the nature of suffering, the practices to relieve suffering, and the institutional forms governing relief' (Meierhenrich, 2012).

4.2 Visibility of politicisation

Debate about the meaning of 'humanitarian' in the context of the post-Cold War and 9/11 world has been largely predicated on the notion that the essential operational humanitarian principles incarnated by the ICRC – neutrality, impartiality and independence, its 'apolitical' badge of identity – have been increasingly compromised, challenged or eroded. Behind this concern lies an assumption that there was an untrammelled 'golden age of humanitarianism' before its politicisation began in the 1990s. However, Donini, amongst others, has argued that there was no 'golden age' of impartial and neutral humanitarianism; in fact, many of the issues facing the humanitarian enterprise today, especially concerns about the challenge to the ICRC's 'core' principles, are not new, only more visible. It is this visibility that will be addressed here.

The forms of politicisation are many – sometimes explicit or transparent, at other times embedded and veiled. They include the securitisation of humanitarian emergencies and 'populations at risk'; states harnessing humanitarian action as an instrument of strategic and foreign policy; the appropriation of 'humanitarian' by relief, rights and development agencies in their efforts to construct legitimate, democratic states in response to 'complex emergencies'; and the shift from state sovereignty to norms of intervention such as the 'Responsibility to Protect' (Barnett, 2005). This list is

by no means exhaustive, but it does point to the different ways in which the term 'humanitarian' has become entangled with and, for some, subsumed within an expanding range of political agendas and power relations. Indeed, Donini argues that the humanitarian enterprise has become an 'integral part of the logic of Empire': humanitarian action is used, sometimes unwittingly, by Northern governments to obscure and distract from fundamental structural issues, and as a way to extend globalisation (Donini, 2010).

4.3 'Humanitarian intervention'

'Humanitarian intervention' has been broadly defined as 'coercive action by States involving the use of armed force in another State without the consent of its government, with or without authorisation from the United Nations Security Council, for the purpose of preventing or putting a halt to gross and massive violations of human rights or international humanitarian law' (citation in Ryniker, 2001). The term came into increasing circulation within the context of a broad shift from a reliance on the Security Council to a 'more amorphous international community' as the 'guarantor' of human rights in an effort to balance state and individual sovereignty (Ryniker, 2001).

This shift by no means signalled the 'birth' of humanitarian intervention. Simms claims that humanitarian intervention is not a recent phenomenon contravening longstanding conventions of sovereignty that have only broken down after the Cold War, but rather it is the historical norm (Simms and Trim, 2011). Russian intervention in Bulgaria in 1877 is a case in point; the British press even used the term 'humanitarian war' to define Russian actions. However, it was not until the late 1980s that the term was popularised under the particular rubric '*droit d'ingérence*' by the legal scholar Mario Bettati and Bernard Kouchner, one of the founders of MSF. Effectively accepting Kouchner's interventionism, many humanitarian organisations joined with the political and military coalitions of UN and Western powers in the interventions in Northern Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo (Rieff, 2000).

Chandler notes that such 'humanitarian militarism' would have been an oxymoron before the 1990s, but has increasingly become a 'tautology' since the Cold War (Chandler, 2001). This is not just a semantic problem: it strikes at the heart of the identity and meaning of 'humanitarian', both in terms of its objectives and its operational principles. For many commentators and agencies, 'humanitarian intervention' and 'humanitarian war' were distortions and corruptions. In the context of IHL it is oxymoronic to speak of 'humanitarian intervention' given that 'humanitarian' is used to describe action intended to alleviate the suffering of the victims (Ryniker, 2001). But others have argued for a developing consensus on the use and enforcement of humanitarian intervention. The UN's decision to appoint Kouchner as Proconsul for the Protectorate of Kosovo is suggestive insofar as the key powers had given their implicit approval to his version of the

humanitarian enterprise (Rieff, 2000). Woodward argues that NATO's intervention in Yugoslavia on behalf of the Albanian population of Kosovo 'represents the final disappearance of the narrowing divide between humanitarianism and politics: a war initiated for humanitarian principles' (Woodward, 2001). According to Rieff, this narrowing damaged the 'humanitarian ethic': NGOs and UNHCR became 'subcontractors in a NATO-led humanitarian effort', and thus inevitably sacrificed the principles of impartiality and neutrality (Rieff, 2000).

The vocabulary of Western leaders, most notably then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, raises questions about the evolving meaning of 'humanitarian'. Speaking in the House of Commons the day before the start of the NATO bombings over Kosovo, Blair justified intervention as a way 'to avert what would otherwise be a humanitarian disaster'. In his 'Doctrine of the International Community', delivered at the Economic Club in Chicago in April 1999, Blair acknowledged that 'war is an imperfect instrument for righting humanitarian distress, but armed force is sometimes the only means of dealing with dictators'. Despite opposition from Russia, China and India to NATO's action, Blair asserted the universal legitimacy of humanitarian intervention on the grounds of human rights. The 'humanitarian' cause transcended the confines of the UN Security Council and state sovereignty, and demanded a response based on the humanity of the international community. On 20 May 1999, Blair addressed a conference at NATO headquarters, presenting the case for a co-existence of strategic and humanitarian interests: 'I can make to you all the arguments about how important it is strategically for NATO that we are engaged, but we have embarked on it for a simple humanitarian reason and cause and we are not going to allow Milosevic to get away with this policy of ethnic cleansing'. Here, Blair expressly privileges the 'humanitarian' imperative in a grammatical play in which he recognises the 'arguments' for strategic 'interests' – intimating a rational, intellectual and quasi-utilitarian basis for them – and the 'cause' of humanitarianism – suggestive of a transcendent ethical or moral obligation.

MSF strongly rejected the 'deceiving and ambiguous slogan' of 'humanitarian intervention' to describe the Kosovo war: '[intervention] should not be labelled humanitarian in our mind or we will see humanitarian action become a flag of convenience for various agendas that have nothing to do with a very clearly defined role of impartial NGOs in conflict that has been codified in the Geneva Conventions' (Tanguy, 1999). The term 'humanitarian' was 'window-dressing', a useful gloss to a range of political and military strategies. MSF was however a lone voice in its explicit rejection of this use of the term, with which most other agencies acquiesced. Woodward considers that 'most humanitarians appear to fall in a middle camp between critics of Operation Allied Force and a defensive NATO. They argue that the operation was "illegal but moral" ... with all other options exhausted ... it was necessary, as NATO officials declared, "to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe"' (Woodward, 2001). In this ambiguous half-way house, the

majority of British NGOs did little to challenge directly the (mis-) use of the term 'humanitarian' in the context of Kosovo, remaining mostly silent or agnostic (Betti, 2010). In part, this may have been because many had played a role in the process by which the meaning of 'humanitarian' had been 'stretched' through an increasing commitment to human rights, which prepared the ground for a default position of sympathy with the plight of the Albanian Kosovars and a desire to redress the crimes against humanity and human rights violations committed by Milosevic's regime. It is also likely that British NGOs were cautious of any explicit denunciation of humanitarian intervention for fear of jeopardising their relations with (and funding from) the British government.

'Humanitarian' intervention in Kosovo thus illustrates how the term had become a tool of legitimisation, and had also accrued a performative capacity. In other words, the use of the term 'humanitarian intervention/humanitarian war' can be understood as a performative act insofar as the very fact of its utterance created the state of affairs it so named: Blair's invocation of 'humanitarian' made the Kosovo war a 'humanitarian' crisis. For critics such as David Reiff 'there was no humanitarian crisis in Kosovo in 1997, 1998 or in most of 1999 in the conventionally understood sense of the term. That is, there was no food crisis or water crisis or shelter crisis or medical crises but rather NGOs were largely engaged in classic development programs' (Rieff, 2000). For Blair, on the contrary, there was no ontological gap between the event and the response: 'humanitarian' for Blair (and NATO) was not a particular pre-existing set of principles and practices to which one must assent, but rather a process, an enactment, by which 'humanitarian' came into existence.⁶

Huysmans argues that 'NATO entered a humanitarian field and was partly transfigured into a humanitarian agency in response to the humanitarian disaster in Kosovo' (Huysmans, 2002). NATO could operate in the humanitarian field by showing that it could play an effective 'humanitarian' role. For example, NATO converted its military capabilities such as logistical technologies and skills into 'humanitarian' capabilities. But NATO also had to put on a symbolic 'performance' to convince its audience that it was a credible humanitarian actor. This proved difficult because military and humanitarian actors view the world differently; the Red Cross, for example, would identify the soldier as a suffering and needy human being before identifying him as a cog in the military machine (Huysmans, 2002). By producing a 'competent performance' as a humanitarian stakeholder, NATO could bolster its political reputation and authority. In particular, NATO identified itself with what Huysmans calls a 'pan-European community of values', at the heart of which lay the Kosovo Albanian refugee as a symbol of the battle for free-market liberal democracy and respect for human rights (Huysmans, 2002).

⁶ In a similar way, Jacques Rancière argues that politics does not correspond to a sphere, realm or potential, but rather to the dynamics of politicisation (Rancière in Schaap, 2011).

Conclusion

Concluding remarks must necessarily be speculative and provisional because the word ‘humanitarian’ is still a work in progress. In broad terms, the word emerged in the early to mid-nineteenth century; although it possessed a number of different meanings, generally it indicated compassion for, and kinship with, mankind, and was associated with a broad array of social welfare efforts. With the creation of the ICRC in 1863, the term took on a more specialised association with efforts to define the limits of war and provide relief, efforts that gradually expanded from concerns with international war and sick and wounded combatants to internal war and civilians. This dual ‘originary’ capacity of ‘humanitarian’ – enshrined in International Humanitarian Law and the ICRC and as a broad movement of concern for human dignity that would later be codified as human rights – underpinned its development across the twentieth century. A rough narrative could refer to relief and emergency response, moving towards rehabilitation, prevention and development through to human rights and protection. But as Slim has argued, what underpinned these different objectives was a fundamental concern for the dignity and equality of the human being (Slim, 1997 and 2000). The word’s relation to the ‘political’ has been especially instructive in tracing its evolving definition: from the purported political–humanitarian divide that rationalised responses to the Bulgarian atrocities through to MSF’s ‘spirit of neutrality’ and its prioritisation of the rights of victims, the ‘political’ has been a marker for what could and could not be ‘humanitarian’.

The word has not developed in any kind of linear fashion over time. Whilst some who go under the banner of ‘humanitarian’ have prioritised relief others, at the same time, have prioritised rights. Moreover, this distinction is often collapsed precisely because a common vocabulary legitimises the claim to a ‘humanitarian’ identity. The word might mean different things to different actors regarding their objectives and principles, but it is striking how its signifying capacity still often relies on the language of neutrality, impartiality and independence. Whether consciously or not, ‘humanitarian’ organisations, agencies and actors have refracted their objectives, principles and actions through the lens of the ICRC model. For Chandler’s politicised and interventionist human rights NGOs, for example, their use of Red Cross language did not reflect a transparent rendering of its principles, but rather legitimised their claim to a ‘humanitarian’ identity, and accentuated the connotative, as opposed to the denotative, qualities of the word.

It has been argued that the term ‘humanitarian’ has practical value now only if there is open and transparent discussion about the particularities of its use, without recourse to supposed ‘essentialist’ meanings. Alongside such self-reflexive efforts, there is a sense in which the term has both expanded, in signifying ever-greater aims and ‘governance’, and contracted, insofar as it can only communicate meaning when it functions as part of a specific and limited vocabulary – a ‘humanitarian vulgate’ (Agier, 2010). In this respect, ‘humanitarian’ is only as valuable as its ‘recognition’ by others.

Annex 1

Figure 1: 'Humanitarian' (English) 1900–1950, Google NGram Viewer

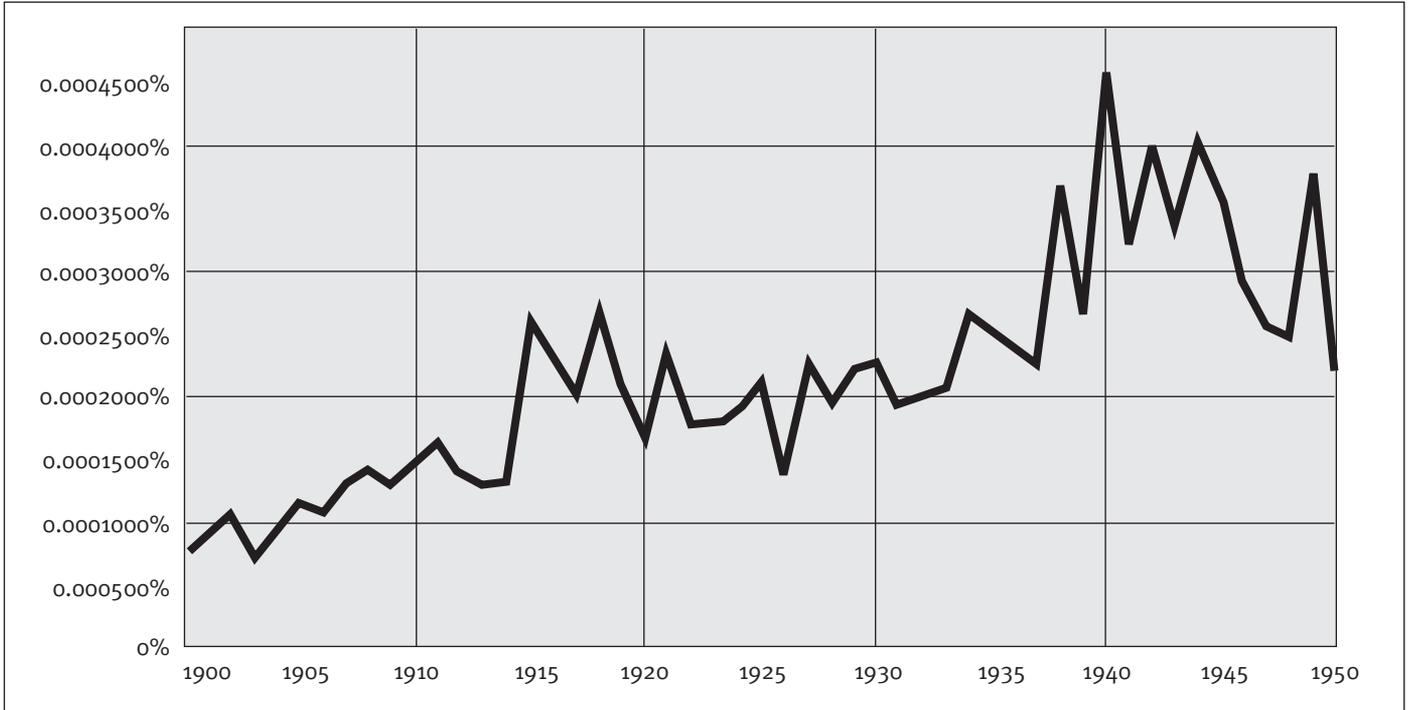
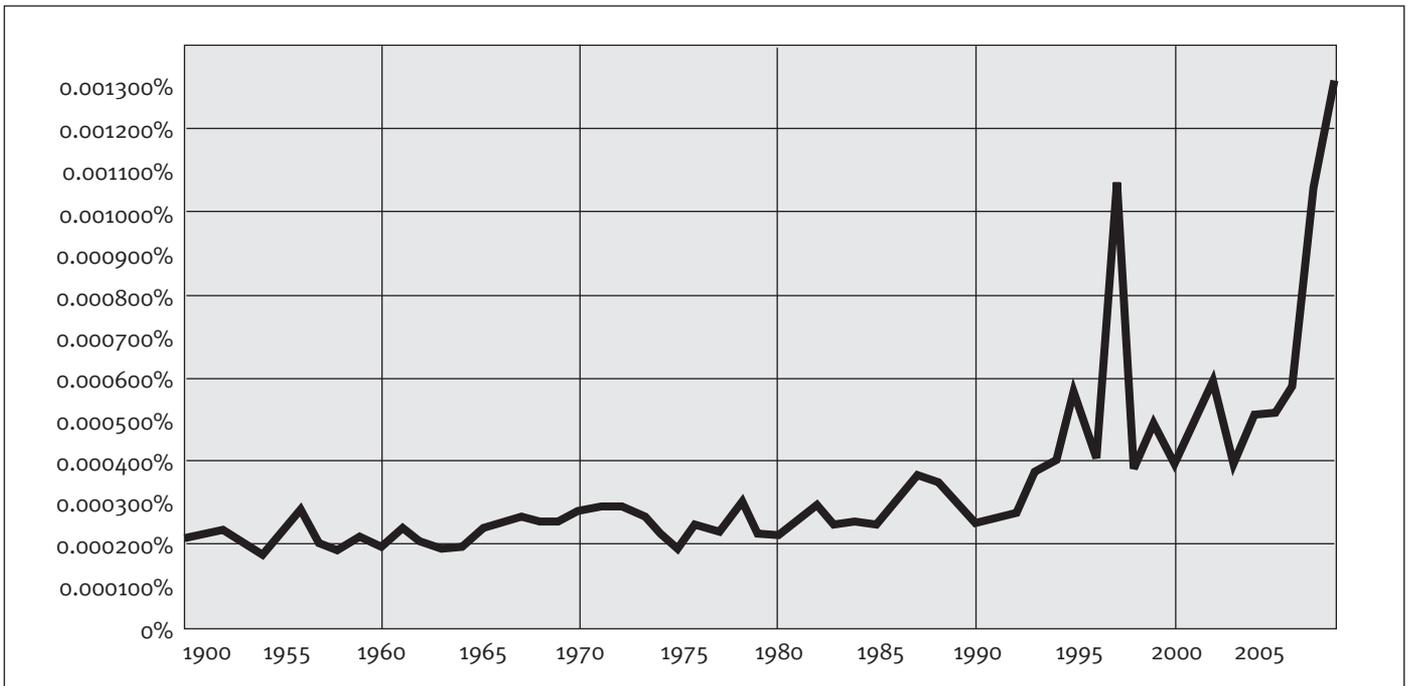


Figure 2: 'Humanitarian' (English) 1950–2008, Google NGram Viewer



References

- Agier, M. (2010) 'Humanity as an Identity and Its Political Effects (A Note on Camps and Humanitarian Government)', *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, vol. 1, no. 1.
- Bacon-Foster, C. (1918) 'Clara Barton, Humanitarian', *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, vol. 21.
- Barnett, M. and T. Weiss (2008) *Humanitarianism in Question*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Barnett, M. (2011) *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Barnett, M. (2005) 'Humanitarianism Transformed', <http://ducis.jhfc.duke.edu>.
- Barrow, O. and M. Jennings (eds) (2001) *The Charitable Impulse: NGOs and Development in East and North-East Africa*. Oxford: James Currey Publishing.
- Bass, G. (2008) *Freedom's Battle: The Origins of Humanitarian Intervention*. New York: Random House.
- Betti, A. (2010) 'Invoking Humanity: The UK and NATO Intervention in Kosovo', paper presented at the 3rd ECPR (European Consortium for Political Research Conference) Conference, Dublin City University, Dublin, 30 August–1 September 2010, <http://www.ecprnet.eu/databases/conferences/papers/220.pdf>
- Blair, T. (1999) 'Doctrine of the International Community', Address to Chicago Economic Club, 22 April, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/international/jan-june99/blair_doctrine4-23.html.
- Blavatsky, H. P. (1884) *The Theosophist*, vol. 5.
- Blondel, J.-L. (1989) 'The Meaning of the Word "Humanitarian" in Relation to the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Crescent', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 29, no. 273.
- Brauman, R. (1986) 'Expulsion de MSF d'Ethiopie: Réponse à la CIMADE', <http://www.msf-crash.org>.
- Carlton, F. T. (1906) 'Humanitarianism, Past and Present', *International Journal of Ethics*, vol. 17, no. 1.
- Chandler, D. G. (2001) 'The Road to Military Humanitarianism: How the Human Rights NGOs Shaped A New Humanitarian Agenda', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 3, August.
- Cohen, G. D. (2008) 'Between Relief and Politics: Refugee Humanitarianism in Occupied Germany 1945–1946', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 43, no. 3.
- Comte, A. (1853) *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte*, trans. Harriet Martineau. London: J. Chapman.
- Comte, A. (1875–77) *System of Positive Polity*. London: Longmans, Green and Co.
- Cook, E. (1913) *The Life of Florence Nightingale 1862–1910*, vol. 2. London: Macmillan.
- Crowdy, R. (1928) 'The League of Nations: Its Social and Humanitarian Work', *The American Journal of Nursing*, vol. 28, no. 4, April.
- Crowdy, R. (1927) 'The Humanitarian Activities of the League of Nations', *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 3, May.
- Cutts, M. (1998) 'Politics and Humanitarianism', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 17, no. 1.
- DeChaine, R. B. (2005) *Global Humanitarianism: NGOs and the Crafting of Community*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
- Donini, A. (2010) 'The Far Side: The Meta Functions of Humanitarianism in a Globalised World', *Disasters*, vol. 34.
- Donini, A. et al. (2008) *Humanitarian Agenda 2015 Final Report: The State of the Humanitarian Enterprise*. Medford, MA: Feinstein International Center.
- Eade, D. and S. Williams (1995) *The Oxfam Handbook of Development and Relief*. Vol. 2. Oxford: Oxfam.
- Fassin, D. (2011) *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Forsythe, D. P. (2005) *The Humanitarians: The International Committee of the Red Cross*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Gill, P. (1970) *Drops in the Ocean: The Work of Oxfam 1960–1970*. London: MacDonald.
- Gittings Reid, E. (1922) *Florence Nightingale: A Drama*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Gladstone, W. E. (1876) *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East*, <http://archive.org/details/bulgarianhorrors01gladuoft>.
- Harder, A. (2012) 'The Politics of Impartiality: The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in the Soviet Union, 1946–7', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 47, no. 2, April.
- Harper, I. D. (1912) 'The Life and Work of Clara Barton', *The North American Review*, vol. 195, no. 678, May.
- Harrison, F. (1879) 'Science and Humanity', *The North American Review*, vol. 129, no. 275, October.
- Huysmans, J. (2002) 'Shape-shifting NATO: Humanitarian Action and the Kosovo Refugee Crisis', *Review of International Studies*, vol. 28.
- Kennedy, D. (2009) 'Advancing the Normative Frame: A Community Approach to Humanitarian Practices of Neutrality', *Journal of Global Change and Governance*, vol. 3, no. 1.
- Leader, N. (2000) *The Politics of Principle: The Principles of Humanitarian Action in Practice*. HPG Report 2. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Leader, N. (1998) 'Proliferating Principles: Or How To Sup with the Devil without Getting Eaten', *Disasters*, vol. 22, no. 4.
- League of Nations Secretariat (1924) 'The League of Nations: Social and Humanitarian Work'. Geneva: League of Nations Information Section.
- Lindsey-Curtet, C., F. Holst-Roness and L. Anderson (2004) *Addressing the Needs of Women Affected by Armed Conflict*. Geneva: ICRC, http://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/ICRC_women_war.pdf.
- Loescher, G. (1996) *Beyond Charity: International Cooperation and the Global Refugee Crisis*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Loescher, G., A. Betts and J. Milner (eds) (2011) *The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR): The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection into the Twenty-first Century*. London: Routledge.

- Loos, C. (2005) *The Convergence and Divergence of International Humanitarian Law and International Human Rights Law*. MA Thesis, University of the Western Cape.
- MacCune-Lindsay, S. (1926) 'The Promotion of Public Health and the Protection of Women and Children', *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York*, vol. 12, no. 1.
- Mackintosh, K. (2000) *The Principles of Humanitarian Action in International Humanitarian Law*. London: Overseas Development Institute.
- Magone, C., M. Neuman and F. Weissman (eds) (2011) *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed: The MSF Experience*. London: C. Hurst and Co.
- Marsh, P. (1972) 'Lord Salisbury and the Ottoman Massacres', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2.
- Meierhenrich, J. (2012) 'The Humanitarian Condition: A Longitudinal Analysis of the Formation and Deformation of International Norms', paper delivered at the workshop on 'Humanitarianism and Human Rights: Borders, Connections, Conflicts', Remarque Institute, New York University, 9–10 March.
- Moreillon, J. (1980) 'The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross, Peace and Human Rights', *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 217.
- MSF Association (1979) *Soins urgents en situations de catastrophe MSF*. Hermann Publishers.
- Parmelee, M. (1915) 'The Rise of Modern Humanitarianism', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 21, no. 3.
- Pickering, M. (1993) *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pickering, M. (2009) *Auguste Comte: An Intellectual Biography*, vol. 3. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pictet, J. (1979) *The Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross: Commentary*, <http://www.icrc.org/eng>
- Pictet, J. (1975) *Humanitarian Law and the Protection of War Victims*. Geneva: Henry Dunant Institute.
- Reinisch, J. (2011) 'Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA', *Past & Present*, vol. 210, no.6.
- Rieffer-Flanagan, B. (2009) 'Is Neutral Humanitarianism Dead? Red Cross Neutrality: Walking the Tightrope of Neutral Humanitarianism', *Human Rights Quarterly*, vol. 31.
- Ryniker, A. (2001) 'The ICRC's Position on "Humanitarian Intervention"', *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 482.
- Salt, H. (1891) 'Aims and Objectives of the Humanitarian League', <http://www.henrysalt.co.uk/humanitarian-league/aims>.
- Schaap, A. (2011) 'Enacting the Right To Have Rights: Jacques Rancière's Critique of Hannah Arendt', *European Journal of Political Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1.
- Schindler, D. (1999) 'Significance of the Geneva Conventions for the Contemporary World: International Humanitarian Law Since the Second World War', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 81, no. 836.
- Seybolt, T. (1996) 'The Myth of Neutrality', *Peace Review* vol. 8, no. 4.
- Simms, B. and D. J. B. Trim (eds) (2011) *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Slim, H. (1997) 'Relief Agencies and Moral Standing in War: Principles of Humanity, Neutrality, Impartiality and Solidarity', *Development in Practice*, vol. 7, no. 4, November.
- Slim, H. (2000) 'Dissolving the Difference between Relief and Development: The Making of a Rights-Based Solution', *Development in Practice*, vol. 10, no. 3.
- Slim, H. (2001) 'Military Intervention To Protect Human Rights: The Humanitarian Agency Perspective', <http://www.ichrp.org>.
- Slim, H. (2003) 'Reply to David Rieff', <http://www.hugoslim.com>.
- Sommaruga, C. (1997) 'Humanitarian Action and Peace-keeping Operations', *International Review of the Red Cross*, no. 317.
- Steane, E. (1852) *The Religious Condition of Christendom*. London: J. F. Shaw.
- Sugino, K. (1998) 'The "Non-Political and Humanitarian" Clause in UNHCR', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, vol. 17, no.1.
- Tanguy, J. and Terry, F. (1999) 'Humanitarian Responsibility and Committed Action', *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 13.
- Tanguy J. (1999) 'Controversies Around Humanitarian Interventions and the Authority to Intervene', Speech delivered to the Travers Conference on Ethics and Post-Cold War Humanitarian Intervention, 6 November, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/publications/article.cfm?id=1355&cat=speech>.
- Tournier, M. (2001) 'Humanitaire, est-il apolitique de naissance?', in P. Dauvin and J. Simeant (eds) 'L'Humanitaire en discours', *Mots*, vol. 65.
- Trall, R. T. (1866) 'Topics of the Month: An International Movement', *Herald of Health*.
- Warner, D. (1999) 'The Politics of the Political/Humanitarian Divide', *International Review of the Red Cross*, vol. 81, no. 833.
- Watenpugh, K. (2010) 'The League of Nations' Rescue of Armenian Genocide Survivors and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism, 1920–1927', *The American Historical Review*, vol. 115, no. 5.
- Weinbren, D. (1994) "'Against All Cruelty": The Humanitarian League, 1891–1919', *The History Workshop Journal*, vol. 36.
- Weintraub, P. (1945) 'UNRRA: An Experiment in International Welfare Planning', *The Journal of Politics*, vol. 7, no. 1, February.
- Weiss, T. (1999) 'Principles, Politics and Humanitarian Action', *Ethics and International Affairs*, vol. 13.
- Wernick, A. (2001) *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-theistic Program of French Social Theory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Woodham-Smith, C. (1951) *Florence Nightingale 1820–1910*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Woodward, S. (2001) 'Humanitarian War: A New Consensus?', *Disasters*, vol. 25, no. 4.
- Ziegler, M. (2008) 'Eugenic Feminism: Mental Hygiene, the Women's Movement, and the Campaign for Eugenic Legal Reform, 1900–1935', *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender*, vol. 31, no. 1.



Overseas Development Institute
111 Westminster Bridge Road
London SE1 7JD
United Kingdom

Tel: +44(0) 20 7922 0300
Fax: +44(0) 20 7922 0399
Website: www.odi.org.uk/hpg
Email: hpgadmin@odi.org.uk