

# **Beyond the 'French Doctors'**

## **The evolution and interpretation of humanitarian action in France**

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## **About the author**

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# Contents

<b>Acronyms and translations</b>	iii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
<b>Chapter 1 Concepts and foundations</b>	3
1.1 The literature and language of humanitarian action in France	3
1.2 Structures and concepts of the current French system	4
1.3 Precursors and influences upon modern humanitarian action	5
<b>Chapter 2 Humanitarian action up to 1945</b>	7
2.1 The French Red Cross and the First World War	7
2.2 International ambitions in the interwar period	8
2.3 Left-wing solidarity and the influence of the Soviet Union	9
2.4 Aid under occupation during the Second World War	10
<b>Chapter 3 The Cold War and shifting paradigms</b>	13
3.1 Aid in the development decades	13
3.2 Technological change and social evolution	15
3.3 Biafra, Bangladesh, and the birth of <i>sans-frontiérisme</i>	16
3.4 Shifts in the social and political landscape	18
<b>Chapter 4 The ascendancy of the ‘French doctors’</b>	21
4.1 Crusading humanitarianism in the 1970s and 1980s	21
4.2 Legitimacy and illegitimacy in the late twentieth century	23
4.3 Professionalisation, diversification and norm development	26
<b>Chapter 5 Recent dynamics and debates</b>	29
5.1 A snapshot of French humanitarianism since 9/11	29
5.2 France, international humanitarian law, and the <i>droit d’ingérence</i>	30
<b>Conclusion</b>	33
<b>Bibliography</b>	35



# Acronyms and translations

<b>ACF</b>	Action contre la faim (Action against Hunger)
<b>ACP</b>	Antenne chirurgicale parachutiste (surgical parachutist unit)
<b>ACTED</b>	Agence d'aide à la coopération technique et au développement (Agency for Aid for Technical Cooperation and Development)
<b>ADF</b>	Association des dames françaises (Association of French Gentlewomen)
<b>AFD</b>	Agence française de développement (French Development Agency)
<b>AFVP</b>	Association française des volontaires du progrès (French Association of Volunteers for Progress, now called France Volontaires)
<b>AICF</b>	Action internationale contre la faim (Action International against Hunger; became ACF)
<b>ALNAP</b>	Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action
<b>AMI</b>	Aide médicale internationale (International Medical Aid)
<b>ARA</b>	American Relief Administration
<b>BMP</b>	Bataillon des marins-pompiers de Marseille (Marseille naval firemen battalion)
<b>BSPP</b>	Brigade des sapeurs-pompiers de Paris (Paris fire-fighters brigade)
<b>CAS</b>	Centre américain de secours (American Relief Centre)
<b>CCA</b>	Certificat de capacité ambulancière (Ambulance capability certificate)
<b>CCCF</b>	Comité catholique contre la faim (Catholic Committee against Hunger; became CCFD)
<b>CCFD</b>	Comité catholique contre la faim et pour le développement (Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development)
<b>CIEDEL</b>	Centre international d'études pour le développement local (International Study Centre for Local Development)
<b>Cimade</b>	Service œcuménique d'entraide (Ecumenical Mutual Aid Service)
<b>COFA</b>	Collectif des ONG françaises travaillant en Afghanistan (collective of French NGOs Working in Afghanistan)
<b>COSI</b>	Comité de Secours Internationaux (International Relief Committee)
<b>CRASH</b>	Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires (Centre for Reflection on Humanitarian Action and Knowledge)
<b>CRF</b>	Croix-Rouge française (French Red Cross)
<b>DAC</b>	Development Assistance Committee
<b>DAH</b>	Délégation à l'action humanitaire (Delegation for Humanitarian Action)
<b>ECHO</b>	European Community Humanitarian Office
<b>Ecole 3A</b>	Ecole supérieure de commerce et de développement 3A: Afrique, Asie, Amérique latine (Higher School for Commerce and Development 3A: Africa, Asia, Latin America)

<b>ECOSOC</b>	United Nations Economic and Social Council
<b>EMMIR</b>	Elément médical militaire d'intervention rapide (Rapid intervention medical military unit)
<b>ERC</b>	Emergency Rescue Committee
<b>FAO</b>	Food and Agriculture Organisation
<b>FDH</b>	Frères des hommes (Brothers of Men/Mankind)
<b>FFHC</b>	Freedom from Hunger Campaign
<b>FFL</b>	Forces françaises libres (Free French Forces)
<b>FLN</b>	Front de libération nationale (National Liberation Front)
<b>GIMCU</b>	Groupe d'intervention médico-chirurgicale d'urgence (Emergency medico-surgical intervention group)
<b>GNI</b>	Gross national income
<b>Groupe URD</b>	Group Urgence-Réhabilitation-Développement (Emergency-Rehabilitation-Development Group)
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>ICVA</b>	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
<b>IFAID</b>	Institut de formation et d'appui aux initiatives de développement (Institute for Training and Support for Development Initiatives)
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation
<b>IRFED</b>	Institut international de recherche et de formation en vue du développement harmonisé (International Institute for Research and Training towards Coordinated Development)
<b>IRU</b>	International Relief Union
<b>ISTOM</b>	Ecole supérieure d'agro-développement international (Higher School for International Agro-development)
<b>HCR</b>	High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>HMC</b>	Hôpital mobile chirurgical (Mobile surgical hospital)
<b>LDH</b>	Ligue des droits de l'homme (Human Rights League)
<b>LON</b>	League of Nations
<b>LRCS</b>	League of Red Cross Societies
<b>LSF</b>	Fondation Liberté sans frontières (Freedom without Borders Foundation)
<b>MDM</b>	Médecins du monde (Doctors of the World)
<b>MILONG</b>	Mission de liaison des organisations non-gouvernementales (Liaison Mission for NGOs)
<b>MOPR</b>	International Red Aid
<b>NPA</b>	Norwegian People's Aid
<b>ODA</b>	Official development assistance
<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

<b>PCF</b>	Parti communiste français (French Communist Party)
<b>RAF</b>	Rapid Action Force
<b>RPF</b>	Rwandan Patriotic Front
<b>SAH</b>	Service de l'action humanitaire (Humanitarian action service)
<b>SAMU</b>	Services d'aide médicale d'urgence (Emergency Medical Aid Services)
<b>SCF</b>	Save the Children Fund
<b>SMF</b>	Secours médical français (French medical relief/aid)
<b>SR</b>	Secours rouge (Red Relief)
<b>SPF</b>	Secours populaire français (French popular relief/aid)
<b>SSBM</b>	Société des secours aux blessés militaires (Society for Aid to the Military Wounded)
<b>TDH</b>	Terre des hommes (Land of Men/Mankind)
<b>Triangle GH</b>	Triangle Génération Humanitaire
<b>UFF</b>	Union des femmes de France (French Women's Union)
<b>UNCHR</b>	United Nations Commission on Human Rights
<b>UNESCO</b>	United Nations Economic, Scientific and Cultural Organisation
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	United Nations Children's Fund
<b>UNPROFOR</b>	UN Protection Force
<b>VOICE</b>	Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies
<b>WIR</b>	Workers International Relief



# Introduction

The importance of the French contribution to international humanitarian action has been clearly and consciously asserted since the emergence of the 'French doctors' or *sans-frontiériste* movement, spearheaded by Médecins sans frontières (MSF), in the 1970s and especially 1980s. The strong, albeit contested, use of advocacy by French organisations of this type places them in a long history of human rights engagement in France, arguably harking back to the emblematic Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen during the 1789 Revolution. The particularity and significance of the French contribution to contemporary humanitarian action has also been recognised outside France (Benthall, 1991; Allen and Styan, 2001). Yet at the same time scholars of French humanitarian action have sought to offset the tendency to focus on *sans-frontiériste* engagement at the expense of earlier examples of French humanitarian action.

The most recent literature proposes that French humanitarian action in the twenty-first century is more aligned with the Anglo-Saxon part of the sector than has previously been the case. The impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the 9/11 attacks a decade later was similar in France as elsewhere, inspiring or reinforcing human rights campaigns, the fight against impunity, the rise of ecological movements and campaigns against the use of land mines and HIV/AIDS, for instance (Ryfman, 2011: 12). It has been argued that the key division is no longer, as it may once have been, between militant, vocal French non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and more discreet and bureaucratic Anglo-Saxon organisations, but between the different positions that NGOs adopt when faced with political choices (Sondorp, 2011: 47), or between those that have the means to enter international forums and influence decisions and those that do not (Pouliny, 2001: 165). For many, this remains a key division, further highlighted by the recognition of Southern actors and their increasing presence, if not necessarily influence, in international forums (see for example Mercier, 2002: 22). Differences between French and Anglo-Saxon actors, therefore, are now seen as less decisive than other geopolitically-derived divisions.

Nonetheless, a stronger appreciation of the way that humanitarian history has been characterised and interpreted in French debates will be of use to those seeking to understand the forces that have shaped today's aid architecture and practice. This Working Paper therefore provides a review of the French experience of humanitarian action over the twentieth century, and of the Francophone literature about this history. It does not seek to be definitive or exhaustive in either of these two areas, instead aiming to provide an introduction and a frame of reference for consideration. In so doing, it seeks to

illustrate the importance of national contexts in shaping ideas and discourses about humanitarian affairs – even when a case can be made for considering these ideas as global rather than particular to one nation.

The Working Paper focuses on events over the course of the twentieth century, but places these in the context of older traditions as well as the current French humanitarian landscape. It draws mostly upon French-language literature, but also includes some English-language studies. In particular, it concentrates upon literature produced over the last three decades, corresponding to the period in which emergency relief practices achieved a renewed prominence in France, after a lull in interest during the earlier Cold War period. As the review will indicate, some of the narratives about humanitarian history that have been produced since 1980 reflect the context of their own production almost as much as the events they purport to describe. A greater awareness of this dynamic may help to promote reflection on the ways in which understandings of humanitarian action are influenced by the historical, cultural and political context out of which they arise.

Chapter 1 outlines some of the key concepts, current structures and historical foundations of relevance to the French context. It begins with a general discussion of the literature, its sources and characteristics. It continues with an overview of the present structure of humanitarian aid in France, before concluding with a survey of some of the historical forces that shaped the emergence of humanitarian sentiments in France, and in European culture more broadly. The remaining chapters will proceed chronologically through some of the key developments that emerge from French historical studies of humanitarian action, drawing attention to significant events as well as the way they have been portrayed.

The periodisation proposed is a pragmatic one, rather than an explicitly original interpretation. Some overviews of the history of humanitarian action have chosen not to operate by periods at all, instead emphasising key interpretative themes: cultures of war, natural disasters, religion, politics and international culture (Brodiez and Dumons, 2009). One useful way of considering the developmental phases of humanitarian action – though this review seeks neither to confirm nor contest it – was proposed by Christophe Rufin, a diplomat and former member of MSF. Rufin (1996: 54) portrayed the history of aid in geological terms: 'each era has deposited its strata, and the humanitarian terrain resembles a geological stack'. In this view, the oldest era is composed of state actors and religious missions; above this lies the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement; then come the organisations born of the

two world wars, followed by international organisations, the development-influenced agencies of the 1960s and finally the advocates of interventionist humanitarianism. Some moments, notably Biafra, are identified as stimulating entirely new strata, while also impacting upon the presentation or form of the pre-existing layers (see also Chouaïd, 1994: 68). However, most authors – including Rufin – have been reluctant to see the evolution of humanitarian action as a constant or even forward-moving progression. This concern

is reflected in the titles of humanitarian histories, which evoke its ‘two hundred years of ambiguity’; the ‘crabwalk’ of its journey as ‘arbiter of contradictions’; humanitarian action as a ‘trap’, a ‘dilemma’, as ‘dangerous pity’, as ‘the tragedy of democracy’.<sup>1</sup> This Working Paper aims to place these portrayals in context.

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<sup>1</sup> Titles of works and names of agencies have been retained in the original French, with translations of the latter given in the list of acronyms. All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are by the author for the purposes of this review.

# Chapter 1

## Concepts and foundations

### 1.1 The literature and language of humanitarian action in France

France is the source of a large body of scholarship and analysis. Along with that of other Francophone countries, this literature is often neglected by Anglophone researchers. The French humanitarian sector is the source of much of the reflection on its own history and some of the most important analyses have emerged from practitioners or former practitioners. Many humanitarian actors have produced memoirs, the best of which offer substantial insights, and some have also written historical accounts or other analyses of humanitarian action internationally. The humanitarian sector in France has therefore been recognised as having a particularly literary and reflective bent (Taithe, 2004). In addition, there is a significant body of academic experts writing on aid-related issues from a variety of disciplinary approaches, including history, international relations, anthropology, sociology and the law. Finally, centres of applied research such as the Centre de reflexion sur l’action et les savoirs humanitaires (CRASH) and the Group Urgence-Réhabilitation-Développement (Groupe URD) have contributed significantly to the body of work on humanitarian issues and operations.

As in the Anglophone case, the language of humanitarian action in France has evolved over time. One account places the origins of the word *humanitaire* (humanitarian) in eighteenth-century philanthropic enterprises, with the word *humanisme* proposed in the mid-1760s to describe the ‘general love of humanity’ motivating philanthropic deeds (Seeber, 1934: 521). One of the earliest examples of the word *humanitaire*, as an adjective derivative of *humanité* (humanity), was in the work of the writer and politician Alphonse de Lamartine in 1835. If Lamartine’s usage of the word seems to have been more positive – and thus closer to current connotations of *humanitaire* – the dominant way of using the word in the 1830s was ironic and pejorative, to mock the sentiments and style of a vaguely utopian attitude (Valentin, 1997; see Davies, 2012 for a discussion of a similar usage in English). The associated term *humanitarisme* (humanitarianism) has been traced to Honoré de Balzac’s *Les employés* (1838), describing a character whose ‘heart swelled with that dull, collective love which we must call humanitarianism, the eldest son of deceased philanthropy, and which is to the divine catholic charity what system is to art, or reasoning to deed’ (cited in Seeber, 1934: 522).

In contemporary language, *humanitaire* is used as a substantive as well as an adjective, referring to humanitarian action and to the people who practice it. Although the term *humanitarisme* has never been in widespread use, it was explicitly adopted

in 1991 by Rony Brauman, then president of MSF, precisely for the negative connotations it carries. Brauman’s target was state humanitarianism rather than individual philanthropy, but the theme of ill-thought-out sentimentalism provided the link between the two (Brauman, 1991). The term *sans-frontiériste* (as an adjective, or *sans-frontiérisme* as a noun) refers explicitly to interventionist humanitarian action in the period since the Biafra/Nigeria Civil War (1967–70), after which the principles of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) are considered to have been challenged by the future founders of MSF. The *sans-frontiériste* label is directly derived from MSF, the ‘without borders’ epithet referring to the refusal to privilege respect for state sovereignty and discretion as guiding principles. Other organisations of this generation include Aide médicale internationale (AMI), Action internationale contre la faim (AICF, later Action contre la faim), both founded in 1979, and Médecins du Monde (MDM), founded in 1980.

A blurring of distinctions between the terms *humanitaire* and *sans-frontiériste* indicates the degree to which French authors have identified the latter with humanitarian action in general. This is exemplified by the claim that ‘humanitarian action is a recent term, born in the 1980s, but which in fact designates an approach as old as humanity aiming to bring aid or help to the most destitute’ (Brücker, Pierquin and Henry, 1994: 37). The same slippage was evident in Denis Maillard’s claims about the increased usage of the term ‘humanitarian’. Maillard, an alumnus of MDM, argued that ‘from a restricted definition confined to medical aid organisations of the *French Doctors* kind alone, the meaning of the word *humanitaire* expanded to eventually include any act of solidarity or protest intended to defend the victims by the restoration or recognition of their rights’ (Maillard, 2007: 92). Similarly, Axelle Brodiez and Bruno Dumons (2011: 4), in what remains a useful introduction to humanitarian historiography, argued that ‘while [humanitarian action] originally designated acts of assistance to war victims, its meaning has progressively expanded, now able to designate the least action of solidarity at home as abroad’. Although concerns about the dilution of the term ‘humanitarian’ have also been identified in other contexts (see Davies, 2012; Atlani-Duault and Dozon, 2011: 400), such assertions that *humanitaire* initially referred to *sans-frontiériste* organisations indicate the extent to which the latter have dominated recent conceptions of humanitarian action in France.

In this context, French-language literature on humanitarian action has a strong emphasis on the intellectual, conceptual, moral and political frameworks relating to humanitarian affairs. Although there is no lack of celebratory or hagiographic accounts of contemporary humanitarian action and actors

(Deldique and Ninin, 1991; Weber, 1995; Pierrejean, 2007), there are also many serious and substantial critiques, often deriving from within the sector itself. Many authors have grappled with what could be considered the ideological function of humanitarian action, or indeed of ‘humanitarianism’ as an ideology in itself. Writers such as Rufin and Maillard have emphasised what they see as the transformative aims of humanitarianism, indicating its supposedly utopian conception (Rufin, 1986; Maillard, 2007). They have drawn links with other forms of solidarity action which seek the improvement of the world through human endeavour. In contrast, Philippe Mesnard, a professor of literature and director of the Auschwitz Foundation, interpreted humanitarianism not as utopian but rather as a structural reality of capitalism. Mesnard proposed a view of *sans-frontiériste* humanitarianism as part of the contemporary paradigm shift from left/right political codes towards codes based on moral values (Mesnard, 2002).

The notion that humanitarianism represents a revision of the right/left political paradigm rests upon the assumption, frequent in French literature on emergency relief, that modern humanitarian action can be identified with the *sans-frontiériste* approach. Such an assumption does indeed make it possible to view the prevalence of emergency humanitarian action at the end of the 1970s as part of the decline of revolutionary Marxist politics. It also favours the idea of a rupture at the time of Biafra. French accounts of humanitarian history, notably those by Philippe Ryfman and Didier Fassin, have adopted this kind of periodisation. Ryfman, a lawyer by training, has advocated the simplest and most common framework: a first phase of humanitarianism running from the battle of Solferino (1859) to Biafra; then a second phase from Biafra until the present day (Ryfman, 1999: 35). Fassin, a doctor and anthropologist, proposed a different type of ‘dual temporality’ – a first, long-term temporality that relates to the emergence of moral sentiments in philosophical reflection and individual engagement (such as the abolitionist movement or mobilisations for endangered populations in the nineteenth century); and a second, short-term temporality relating to the articulation of these moral sentiments in public space and especially political action during the late twentieth century (Fassin, 2011: 4). The accent on the late twentieth century again corresponds to the ascent of the *sans-frontiériste* approach.

This kind of interpretation can be understood as part of an identity-building process associated with the current prominence of *sans-frontiériste* NGOs and figures in France. It is often accompanied by a focus on the history of institutions and in particular NGOs as a core feature of humanitarian practice. The intent of this Working Paper is not to undermine this claim – for it is clear that this generation of organisations has had a major impact upon French and international humanitarian action – but to contextualise it within a broader history of humanitarian action by other types of actors, with different interests and diverse understandings of what it means to be humanitarian.

## 1.2 Structures and concepts of the current French system

In terms of actors, legal and financial frameworks in France since the beginning of the twentieth century have largely favoured the creation of small organisations. The 1901 law of associations, which decreed that an association could be constituted with only three members, has facilitated the creation of most private humanitarian organisations in France. However, the major increase in the number of organisations did not come until the 1980s, and in the 1990s up to 50,000 organisations were being created per year (Vaccaro, 1994: 85). This proliferation corresponded to an increase in funding from private and individual donors, which rose sevenfold in the 1980s, aided by the adoption of more sophisticated fundraising and marketing techniques. There was almost no regulation of fundraising by NGOs until 1991, when a law was passed requiring organisations to give annual reports about the use of their financial resources (Ferré, 1995: 33). A survey conducted in 2006 found that 40,000 French organisations described themselves as ‘humanitarian’ – double the number reported in a survey six years earlier (Tchernong, 2007). Yet estimates have placed the number of agencies operational in the field at roughly 500, the huge discrepancy in numbers supporting Maillard’s point about the dilution of the meaning of ‘humanitarian’.

According to a 2010 report, a dozen French NGOs were large enough to be active in a minimum of 10–15 countries (Boinet and Mirabel, 2010: 11).<sup>2</sup> Their combined spending power was €550 million, with MSF alone accounting for €180m of that total (Boinet and Mirabel, 2010: 12). During the 2000s, many of these organisations experienced an increase in budgets, both reflecting and encouraging greater professionalisation. They are important members of NGO coordination mechanisms particular to France, such as Coordination SUD – Solidarité Urgence Développement, founded in 1994 with 140 members, and the more recent Collectif des ONG françaises travaillant en Afghanistan (COFA), with 16 members.<sup>3</sup> French NGOs also participate in international forums such as the European body Voluntary Organisations in Cooperation in Emergencies (VOICE) and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). They are international in reach, with national chapters or sections in other countries (for independent NGOs) and religious networks (for faith-based organisations such as Secours catholique, the French component of Caritas Internationalis). According to the 2012 *State of the Humanitarian System* report, 5% of international NGOs in the humanitarian system are from France (55% come from the UK and US together, with 45% and 11% respectively) (ALNAP, 2012: 29).

<sup>2</sup> These were Médecins sans Frontières, Handicap International, Action contre la Faim (ACF), Médecins du Monde, Solidarités International, Agence d’Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement (ACTED), Première Urgence, Aide Médicale Internationale, Care France, Secours Islamique, Triangle and Comité d’Aide Médicale; the report also noted the activities of the French Red Cross chapter, Secours Catholique, and Secours Populaire.

<sup>3</sup> COFA members are ACF, ACTED, Action Droits de l’Homme, Afghanistan-Demain, Afghanistan Libre, AFRANE, La Chaîne de l’Espoir, GERES, Handicap International, MADERA, Mères pour la Paix, MRCA, PU-AMI, Renouveau Afghanistan, Solidarités International and Sport sans Frontières (Boinet et al., 2012).

In terms of individual entry into humanitarian work, as the student career advice website *letudiant.fr* warns its users, there are very few paid positions available in the French humanitarian sector. For instance, MDM currently employs only 248 salaried workers – in its headquarters and in the field – compared to its 1,395 unpaid volunteer staff (MDM, 2012). Although MDM is an extreme case, a longstanding reluctance to remunerate international staff has differentiated French organisations from their British and American counterparts, and French pay rates remain comparatively low (Ryfman, 2011: 20). There are three categories of humanitarian staff in France: unpaid volunteer staff (referred to in French as *bénévoles*), paid staff (*salariés*) and *volontaires*, who receive an allowance and have some legal rights as employees. A law passed in 2005 allows the creation of 'international solidarity volunteer contracts' to govern the situation of *volontaires*. The law limits their maximum total service to six years, even across different missions or for different organisations. The merits and principles of paid and unpaid staff have been the subject of a long-running dispute in the sector, which according to Johanna Siméant (2001) relies upon an expressed division between professionalisation and militancy, albeit without consensus as to the definitions of these terms. Siméant argues that the diversity of the French NGO sector and its personnel no longer corresponds to the 'French doctor' archetype (Siméant and Dauvin, 2002).

On the government side, the aid architecture has been reshuffled multiple times. Successive administrations have had difficulty creating an effective administrative entity for official humanitarian action: a Service de l'action humanitaire (SAH) gave way in 2002 to a Délégation à l'action humanitaire (DAH), which in a 2008 restructuring of the Foreign Ministry was integrated into a crisis management centre. In 2005, the frameworks for *actions civilo-militaires* were revisited and a decision was made to adopt the English-language terminology of 'civil–military cooperation' (Larché, 2008). Public funding is distributed via the Agence française de développement (AFD), which, although more oriented towards development, also facilitates humanitarian aid in post-crisis contexts. According to statistics from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), French official development assistance (ODA) in 2010 accounted for 0.5% of the country's gross national income (GNI) – the highest it has been for a decade. The net total was just under \$13 billion. Of this aid, roughly a third went to Sub-Saharan Africa, with the highest recipient being Côte d'Ivoire (OECD, 2011).

Government funding has thus risen significantly, though designated humanitarian aid constitutes a small part of overall French ODA and of the AFD's work, and is proportionally less significant than that of many countries.<sup>4</sup> As a result, as well as for reasons of independence, humanitarian NGOs in

France have had to look elsewhere for funding. The creation of the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) in 1991 allowed the flourishing of French organisations, which remain amongst ECHO's largest national group of partner organisations (Saslowsky, 2008). Changes to tax legislation in the last decade, originally designed to promote sponsorship of the arts, have created a favourable climate in France for private donations to not-for-profit organisations. However, government funding in the same period has levelled out. At a national level, former President Jacques Chirac had proclaimed a desire to see the amount of French ODA given to NGOs reach the European average of 5%, but the planned intermediate step of 3% in 2007 was not met and the situation froze after Nicolas Sarkozy's presidency began in 2007 (Ryfman, 2011: 18–19). In 2011, funds from private donors still constituted 64% of the financial resources available to NGOs (*ibid.*: 16). Nonetheless, signs of a move towards increased strategic collaboration between state agencies and NGOs emerged with calls for a more clearly defined national humanitarian policy (see Boinet and Miribel, 2010), subsequently reiterated at a National Humanitarian Conference in November 2011.

### 1.3 Precursors and influences upon modern humanitarian action

The origins of humanitarian action are attributed fairly consistently to four main sources of practice and innovation. These are the role of religion and charity; the philosophical influence of the Enlightenment; the attempt to minimise the impact of war; and the practices of colonialism. Most of these, with the partial exception of religious charity, are rooted in the history of Western society. In this sense they are not restricted to France, but are shared by other European and North American societies.

The Christian and especially Catholic traditions are seen as early forces for the development of a charitable practice of relevance to humanitarian action. Two emblematic figures, of different kinds, are the Good Samaritan and the French priest Saint Vincent de Paul (1581–1660). During the Middle Ages, Catholic religious orders operated as structures independent from the governing royalty, and Protestant structures in northern Europe later played a similar role in aiding the poor (Aeberhard, 1994: 3). Religious motivations also influenced the work of colonial missionaries, though in many cases they made medical and health improvements (rather than pure evangelisation) the focus of their work (Ryfman, 2008c: 42).<sup>5</sup>

The philosophical and intellectual origins of humanitarian action are attributed to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. The rationalist and universalist philosophy of this period

<sup>4</sup> For example, according to OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) data for 2009–10, while 'humanitarian aid' constituted less than 1% of French ODA, it accounted for 11% of Australian aid, 13% of Swedish aid and 16% of US aid. The average across all DAC countries was 9%. See <http://www.oecd.org/dac/stats/donorcharts>.

<sup>5</sup> The place of charity in other religions has been recognised in more recent publications on the history of humanitarian action. Thus, *tzedakah* in Judaism and *zakat* in Islam, as well as the relevant texts of Hinduism, have been seen as part of the underpinnings of humanitarian action (Ryfman, 2008c: 8–9). The rise of Islamic organisations in the contemporary humanitarian landscape has been followed by fuller study of their historical, religious and cultural origins (Ghandour, 2002).

produced the idea of ‘humanity’ – paying attention to the condition of man and seeking to improve it. The Enlightenment also saw the emergence of the figure of the philanthropist, a publicly active, philosophically and morally reflective social reformer (Duprat, 1993). While not unconnected to ideas of Christian charity, Enlightenment humanism differed from religious precedents by operating independently of religion and with an idea of progress; humanism was an end in itself, not a gesture to a higher cause (Destexhe, 1993: 15; Ferré, 1995: 6; Rufin, 1986: 23). The Enlightenment also saw advances in attitudes to war, with Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposing a distinction between combatants and non-combatants. However, any humanitarian conduct disappeared from the battlefields during the Revolutionary period (Ryfman: 1999: 31).

Innovation next came with Dominique Jean Larrey, who served as a surgeon in Napoleon’s army. Larrey had his ‘Solferino moment’ in 1792, after which he created teams to evacuate the wounded and ‘flying ambulances’ that operated throughout the Napoleonic Wars (1803–15) (Aeberhard, 1994: 4; see Triare, 1902). Although France had no equivalent of Britain’s Florence Nightingale during the Crimean War (1853–55), in which 95,000 French soldiers died, the vast majority of them from disease, it did begin reforms immediately afterwards based on statistical analysis of mortality rates during the conflict (Fredj, 2010). By the time of the Franco-Prussian War (1870–71), humanitarian mechanisms had advanced and

participation in humanitarian efforts was much greater; this was the first conflict in which both belligerents were equipped with Red Cross national societies. Military medics also played a part in colonial conquest and administration in Africa and Indochina (Fredj, 2007; Van Dormael, 1997).

The colonial territories, as discussed further below, were the site both of early efforts that helped develop techniques of humanitarian action, and of variants of humanitarian action during the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, military campaigns secured French control of significant territories in Africa and Indochina, notably in North Africa. At this time, and in particular during the Third Republic (1870–1940) under the influence of figures such as Jules Ferry, a humanitarian discourse was applied to the management of the colonies. The ‘civilising mission’ that France claimed was its role in colonial territories justified occupation by the supposed improvements in living standards it brought. Major public campaigns occurred in response to awareness of humanitarian needs in the colonies, such as one following a series of crises that placed an estimated 820,000 Algerian people at risk of starvation in the late 1860s (Taithe, 2009: 142). Historical analyses of the earlier colonial period, including Françoise Vergès (2001) on the anti-slavery campaign and Taithe (2009) on drought and famine in Algeria, have drawn attention to the resonances between the civilising mission and the universalising values of contemporary humanitarianism.

# Chapter 2

## Humanitarian action up to 1945

The First World War and the subsequent founding of the League of Nations had important repercussions for the development of humanitarian action in France, as well as internationally. The years of the League of Nations coincided with the period of the greatest extent of the French empire, and colonial management by France and under League auspices shaped the nature of later humanitarian engagement. Meanwhile, the victory of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Civil War in 1923 contributed to the intensification of ideological tensions prior to the Second World War and introduced a new set of ideas about humanitarian action. Finally, the German occupation of France during the Second World War had an impact upon the kinds of humanitarian action that were possible, as it did upon all other aspects of civilian and military life. In contrast with interpretations that downplay the significance of French contributions to humanitarian action before 1945 (see for example Ryfman, 2011: 11), by drawing attention to an earlier period it is possible to see that a variety of contributions predated the formation of mid-century and Cold War NGOs.

### 2.1 The French Red Cross and the First World War

Despite the wealth of French-language literature on the ICRC, much of which comes out of Geneva, English-language scholarship on the ICRC is plentiful enough that its history can be elided here. Instead, the focus is on the French National Society, the Croix-Rouge française (CRF). The account that follows draws heavily on three works that deal specifically with the history of the Red Cross or of its French national society. Unlike the ICRC, the CRF has not been the subject of major research: what is available is either modest in length or lacking the necessary academic and archival rigour. Presumably because of its national status and certain weaknesses in its development, there are few mentions of the CRF in French histories of international humanitarian action.

At the origins of the CRF were three organisations, all founded in the later part of the nineteenth century. France was the first government to ratify the First Geneva Convention, on 22 September 1864, which gave impetus to the creation of local organisations to do its work. The first, and largest, of the three organisations was the Société des secours aux blessés militaires (SSBM), founded in March 1865. A largely Catholic body with some 40% of its membership drawn from the aristocratic class, the SSBM was politically conservative (Le Crom, 2009: 150).

The Franco-Prussian War challenged both the SSBM and the idea of neutral humanitarian action more generally. Respect for the Geneva Convention was limited and the neutral symbols of the fledgling Red Cross were at risk during the

war, with looters using armbands to enter battlefields and steal from the fallen or to evade military service, and houses displaying the cross emblem in a bid to avoid paying war levies (see Taithe, 1998; Taithe, 2001). Only three of ten SSBM committees that existed prior to the war (Paris, Lyon and Compiègne) were actually functional, though 70 more were established during the conflict (Chevallier, 1986: 26). During the brutal civil war set off immediately afterwards by the Paris Commune (1871), SSBM was active on both the Communard and Versaillais sides. At the end of this period of conflict, SSBM claimed that it had treated 340,000 wounded and moved 8,000 men from Paris to the provinces (Chevallier, 1986: 28). However, its conservative social and political outlook was such that 'systematic sabotage, censorship, and betrayal of the Communard war effort was the norm in all Red Cross [SSBM] ambulances' (Taithe, 1998: 26).

The Franco-Prussian War and the Commune uprising provided the terrain for the second of the CRF tributary organisations: the Association des dames françaises (ADF), founded in 1879. Established to address the difficulties women faced in participating in relief efforts, the ADF was innovative in three ways: it created a school for the training of female ambulance officers; set up a training hospital in Paris; and expanded activities aimed at victims of natural disasters (Chevallier, 1986: 29). The location of the hospital, in the wealthy sixteenth *arrondissement* of Paris, was indicative of the role played by the upper bourgeoisie in ADF, as in SSBM, though the former drew on Protestant circles and the latter on Catholic ones. The third organisation, the largely female-run Union des femmes de France (UFF), was set up in 1881. The three organisations collaborated in 1910 when the Seine broke its banks in the Great Flood of Paris (see Pernot, 2010; Chaïb, 2010). However, SSBM remained the only organisation officially mandated as a Red Cross society, as ICRC statutes permitted only one per country (Chauvy, 2000: 29).

Both the ICRC and the three CRF tributary societies were active in France during the First World War. A pioneering study of the ICRC's role by Annette Becker (1998) looked at how the organisation attempted to address the plight of soldiers and civilians caught in camps or under Occupation during the war. Becker argued that ICRC work on behalf of civilians who had been interned for acts of resistance in effect signalled the creation of a new category of political prisoner. Becker characterised government attitudes as pragmatic and militarily-focused, meaning that 'humanitarian efforts are not in vain but must slip into the cracks of political and military goodwill' (Becker, 1998: 228). For its part, SSBM ran infirmaries, operated a floating hospital (the Charles-Roux, at Moudros) and organised evacuations of the wounded. In

1914, ADF was given a mandate to run the Gare de la Chapelle in Paris, which had become the centre from which soldiers in Paris were dispatched to regional hospitals. By the end of the war, the Red Cross organisations had lost 212 members in service (Chevallier, 1986: 29). In addition to Red Cross activities, the French government founded Secours national at the outbreak of the war to help soldiers and civilians alike through a focus on social services (Kulok, 2003).

Despite the creation of the League of Red Cross Societies (LRCS) in Paris on 5 May 1919, the French National Society remained fragmented. The most concrete step towards unity was the formation of the Conseil national de la Croix-Rouge française, with equal representation for SSBM, ADF and UFF, plus delegates from the Ministries of Health and Defence, in 1938 (Chauvy, 2000: 33). The SSBM remained the largest organisation, with 140,000 members and a budget of 42m francs in the late 1930s; the ADF and UFF both had around 80,000 members each and resources to the tune of 7m francs (Le Crom, 2009: 151). It was not until the Second World War that the three organisations were brought together within a single structure.

## 2.2 International ambitions in the interwar period

The importance of French involvement in the League of Nations has been strongly asserted in the literature. At its most far-reaching, this includes the claim that ‘the French stamp has decisively marked the project of a collective peace-building world organisation, from beginning to end’, drawing examples from as far back as 1306 (Bourgeois, 1995: 41). More directly, if the most famous French contributors to the League were Jean Monnet, the advocate of European unity who was its Deputy Secretary-General until 1923, and René Cassin, the jurist and Nobel laureate who was a French League of Nations delegate from 1924–38, it is clear that the engagement of French political and cultural elites with the League of Nations was considerable. Detailing their contributions, Christine Manigand (2003: 7) emphasised the leadership role France played in the League’s agencies: the International Labour Organisation (ILO), headed by the French economist Albert Thomas until his death in 1932, was described as one of the first international agencies to incorporate ex-combatants into its vision of interwar pacifism; after faltering in Geneva, the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation, the forerunner of the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), was established in Paris in 1926 (Manigand, 2003: 7). Manigand argued that French participants in the League’s work fostered ‘an intellectual fermentation based on new international methods and approaches to problems, which would blossom after 1945’ (Manigand, 2003: 211–12). This view is in line with English-language scholarship that has argued for a re-evaluation of the League of Nations’ interwar efforts, building a picture of a newly concerted and constructive humanitarian mindset in this period (Pedersen, 2007; Watenpau, 2010).

One particularity of the French literature on this period is the study of the Russian war relief organisation known as Zemgor (properly the Committee of Russian Zemstvos and Town Councils), founded in 1921. As large numbers of Russian émigrés settled in Paris, the city became host to Zemgor’s headquarters. Zemgor’s programmes included child care, language education and vocational training. The relationship between Zemgor and the League’s High Commissioner for Refugees (HCR), and later with the ILO, has been seen as a forerunner of the consultative role for NGOs provided for by the UN Charter in 1945 (Kévonian, 2005: 756; see also Goussef, 2005).

The League of Nations’ universalising ambitions for an international and benevolent government resonated with the colonial system of the era by virtue of their geographical spread and, more explicitly, by the mandates system. This is not to say that colonialism was constructed as an altruistic exercise – colonies were used as a resource for the empire, and were meant at the very least to be self-sufficient – but that the notion of improvement through colonial management permeated French assumptions about the ‘civilising mission’. That this assumption could dovetail with the ambitions of local elites has been shown in Van Nguyen-Marshall’s work on poverty and charity in French colonial Vietnam (Nguyen-Marshall, 2005). Nguyen-Marshall indicated how Vietnamese thinkers during the French domination of what was then called Indochina linked independence ambitions and modernising goals with philanthropic conceptions of citizenship and Vietnamese forms of charity. Her analysis therefore draws attention to the way that humanitarian ideas have been part of nationalist programmes in colonised countries despite their promotion by Western colonial powers.

Although Nguyen-Marshall analysed famine relief, the archetype most regularly cited in relation to contemporary French humanitarian action is the colonial doctor.<sup>6</sup> Two key figures were Albert Schweitzer (1875–1965), a Franco-German theologian and medical missionary who established a field hospital in Gabon in 1913 and received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize; and Eugène Jamot (1879–1937), a French doctor in colonial West Africa, famous for his eradication of sleeping sickness in Cameroon, and later head of the Institut Pasteur in Brazzaville. Less directly, the influence of colonial figures has been explicitly recognised by key contemporary humanitarian leaders, despite the ambiguity of drawing upon colonial models of ‘the good white doctor, the benefits of science, the modernising ideal’ (Brauman, 2006: 44; see also Emmanuelli, 1991: 126; Kouchner in Cans, 1986). Although they are part of a broader European history, these figures resonate particularly strongly in France, where medical work as epitomised by MSF has been considered the dominant mode of contemporary humanitarian action. The relevance of the work of figures like

<sup>6</sup> Jennings (2008: especially 39) has outlined the case for treating missionary doctors and state-employed, including military, doctors within the single framework of ‘Western bio-medicine practised in the colonies’.

Jamot continues to be cited by current humanitarian actors, for instance due to the re-emergence of sleeping sickness in the mid-1970s as a result of increased conflict and lack of resources (Chappuis and Jochum, 2009; Corty, 2011; Bradol, 2011: *passim*).

The French military played an important part in the development of colonial health practices. Pierre Dufour's hagiographic study of the humanitarian activities of the French armed forces described the Service de santé des colonies (later 'des territoires de la France d'outre-mer') as the 'most impressive of the colonial armies engaged by France' (Dufour, 1993: 39–42). Dufour emphasised that the integration of medical assistance to colonial populations, following the 'pacification phase' of conquest, left a legacy of hospitals, clinics and training centres throughout the former colonies. Another work placed the number of general hospitals established at 41, with some 600 secondary hospitals, 2,000 rural dispensaries and 14 Instituts Pasteur. The number of colonial doctors active between the start of the century and the end of the 1950s has been estimated at roughly 5,000 (Lapeyssonnie, 1988).

A former colonial doctor himself, Léon Lapeyssonnie, researcher, surgeon-general to the French army and World Health Organisation (WHO) expert, wrote at a time of heightened tensions in France around the issue of aid. He asserted that 'the deadlocked, Manichean political discourse that poisons the daily life of our country in all domains explains, albeit without justifying them, the ulterior motives that some hold in relation to colonial medicine' (Lapeyssonnie, 1988: 11–12). Lapeyssonnie's work is another example of the engaged histories that characterise the French humanitarian sector's writing on its own past. Lapeyssonnie's case is also illuminating in its conformity to a knowledge transfer pattern of the middle decades of the twentieth century, by which individuals experienced in colonial settings joined the staff of international organisations. Another example is Louis-Paul Aujoulat, a missionary doctor in Cameroon in the 1930s and 1940s who went on to become France's WHO delegate (Lachenal and Taithe, 2009). The influence of expertise accumulated in colonial settings was therefore felt not only in the League of Nations, but also in the agencies of its successor, the United Nations.

### 2.3 Left-wing solidarity and the influence of the Soviet Union

The left-wing solidarity organisations of the interwar period have had an enduring impact upon French aid. Aid efforts relating to the Soviet Union in the interwar period, especially the Russian famine that peaked in 1921, have often been attributed a very particular significance in the French literature on the history of humanitarian action. This section begins by contextualising the interpretations of the famine that were made in the 1980s and 1990s, before offering a broader discussion of Soviet-sponsored aid and its impact in France.

The famine in the Volga-Ural region was the subject of significant international mobilisation, and has often been given a prominent place in French histories of humanitarian action. This is less because of any notable French contribution – the leading actor being the American Relief Administration (ARA; see Patenaude, 2002) – but because of its place as an early case of the political manipulation of aid. It was, in Rufin's words, the first time that Henry Dunant's 'myth of apoliticism' was confronted with 'bad faith', in which aid was used as 'political blackmail' (Rufin, 1986: 39, 40). Rufin argued that, for the newly established Bolshevik state, controlling humanitarian relief was an opportunity to reinforce its hold on power, both domestically and internationally. It is important to note that Rufin was writing in the wake of a major controversy over the manipulation of humanitarian aid by the Marxist government of Ethiopia.

Similarly loaded interpretations continued to be put forward in the 1990s. Writing after the failed Somalia intervention, Alain Destexhe, a Belgian politician and former secretary-general of MSF International, emphasised the Russian famine as an example of the manipulation of aid. He cited the Ukrainian famine of 1932–33 as proof of the Soviet Union's hypocrisy on humanitarian issues: according to this view, no international appeals were issued for this catastrophe because it met the government's need to control its population (Destexhe, 1993: 47). Other texts produced in the 1990s reinforced this narrative of manipulation, explicitly linking the 1921 famine to Vietnam's call for international aid after it occupied Cambodia in 1979, and the Ethiopian Derg regime's orchestration of aid efforts in the mid-1980s (Brauman and Margolin, 1996; Ferré, 1995). This insistence upon the Russian famine has thus been consciously used as a reminder, to quote Philippe Ryfman, that 'the passage from the humanitarian to the political was not invented (contrary to a tenacious legend) during the 1980s by certain figures of the French humanitarian milieu' (Ryfman, 2008c: 34). However, Ryfman did not recognise that reference to the Russian famine was systematically used precisely by those 'certain figures' to substantiate such claims about the political nature of aid.

Other developments associated with the early years of the Soviet Union have had a more direct impact upon the evolution of French humanitarian action. In 1922, the Communist International created Workers International Relief (WIR) to channel aid donations to international Communist parties and union organisations. WIR was followed the next year by International Red Aid (MOPR, from the Russian acronym), which was intended as an aid organisation for victims of the class struggle (Schilde, 2003). This so-called 'People's Red Cross' manifested an entirely political conception of aid, critiquing the ICRC for its 'immoral' neutrality and 'bourgeois' values (Ryfman, 2008c: 46).

The French section of MOPR, the Secours rouge, was founded in 1923 and officially linked to the Parti communiste français

(PCF). In its first year, Secours rouge did little other than communications work, publishing articles and distributing manifestos. It expanded its capacity from 1927 onwards, responding to the increased repression of French Communists and in order to provide a political alternative to the Red Cross and the Ligue des droits de l'homme (LDH).<sup>7</sup> After changing its name to Secours populaire de France et des colonies in the late 1930s, in 1945 it adopted its present name of Secours populaire français (SPF). This organisation, according to the author of its history, remained subject to the policy vacillations of the PCF for decades and only established greater autonomy towards the end of the century (Brodiez, 2006b). In 2010, SPF's international programmes had a budget of €4.7m, while their programmes in France commanded €47.4m (SPF, 2010: 47). The original parent organisations had a much shorter lifespan: WIR was dissolved in 1935 after being muscled out by MOPR, which in turn fell away after Joseph Stalin's closure of the Communist International in 1943.

One major interwar crisis to have an impact on French humanitarian practice was the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). The conflict pitched France into a state of acute alert: the geographical proximity to Spain, the political sympathy of their two Popular Front governments, the significance of the conflict for both Catholic and Communist intellectuals and the rise in Europe of fascist forces all contributed to deep divisions and heavy lobbying of the French government by adherents of both sides. From the outset, France had an important role in the war – as point of passage for volunteers; as the site of the recruitment office of the International Brigades; and in supplying up to half of the volunteer soldiers. The ICRC was able to negotiate access to Spain, despite its lack of mandate for civil conflicts, and based some of its operations in France with the agreement of the French Red Cross. A comprehensive study of its activities has been given by Pierre Marqués (2000), a journalist, whose extensive archival research was inflected by his childhood experience as a refugee from the war. Left-wing organisations across Europe also included humanitarian operations in their campaign to support the Republican government (Brown, 2002).

For Secours populaire français, the Spanish Civil War was a period of massive expansion (Brodiez, 2006b: 37–39). Engagement on the Republican side began as early as 1934, with the creation of joint SPF/LDH 'popular committees' to collect money, clothes and food. SPF was one of the driving forces of the Commission de solidarité du Rassemblement populaire pour l'aide au peuple espagnol (Solidarity Commission for the Popular Rally for Aid to the Spanish People), which brought together a range of communist, socialist and anti-fascist groups, parties and trade unions. Between August 1936 and February 1939, SPF organised or participated in roughly 21 separate initiatives, a large proportion of which focused on women and children or awareness-raising. This was a period

<sup>7</sup> The LDH is a human rights NGO founded in 1898 to support Captain Alfred Dreyfus, wrongly convicted of treason after a conspiracy within the French military.

of political opening for SPF, and this softening of attitude was paralleled by a series of measures aimed at increasing membership. Intensified recruitment campaigns benefited from the creation of a new system of membership cards in which the cost of joining was linked to the socio-economic position of the member. Membership rose exponentially, going from 40,000 in 1934 to 150,000 in 1936 and 183,000 in 1938. Nonetheless, despite its growth and ideological openness in these years, in 1938 40% of SPF members were also Communist Party cardholders, and only 9.3% were women (Brodiez, 2006b: 34–35). In contrast, SPF now affirms independence from all political affiliations, with a statute that advocates support 'in the spirit of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in material, medical, health, moral, and legal fields, to individuals and their families, victims of the arbitrary nature of social injustice, of natural disasters, poverty, hunger, under-development and armed conflicts' (SPF, 2010: 4).

Despite the multifaceted nature of French efforts pertaining to humanitarian action before the Second World War – within the League of Nations, through solidarity initiatives or in colonial settings – French evaluations of this period have often been negative. For Destexhe (1993: 45), the interwar period exposed the illusory nature of idealistic humanitarianism, given the lie by the Soviet manipulation of famine and the ICRC's weakness when fascist Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935. Moreover, the 1930s is seen as a period of a relative lull in humanitarian philanthropy throughout the world, given the economic impact of the Great Depression from 1929 onwards (Rufin, 1993: 41). Waves of mostly Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi expansion settled throughout Europe, with those who chose France reinforcing the idea of the country as the defender of human rights. Yet these 'foreign Jews' would become the first to be sacrificed by the French state when it was under German occupation. The weakness of official French humanitarianism is understood to have continued into the Second World War, when military defeat and occupation largely prevented France from developing the type of operations that were undertaken in Britain and, especially, the United States in this period (Ryfman, 2011: 11).

## 2.4 Aid under occupation during the Second World War

The French experience of the Second World War had three main phases: defeat, occupation and liberation. Prior to the occupation period, humanitarian activities were minimal. The general uncertainty of the so-called 'phony war' before the German invasion reportedly also affected the French Red Cross, reducing its effectiveness (Chauvy, 2000: 115). After six weeks of fighting, France capitulated to Germany on 22 June 1940. The armistice agreement established zones of German and Italian occupation, as well as a 'free zone' in the south under the control of a reconstituted government based in the spa town of Vichy. When Marshal Philippe Pétain signed the armistice agreement, at least 1,800,000 French soldiers were in German hands. Pétain, a hero of the 1916 Battle of Verdun, headed the collaborationist regime in France,

while General Charles de Gaulle rallied the Forces françaises libres (FFL), drawing heavily upon colonial troops. During the rule of the Vichy regime, nearly 76,000 Jews died or were deported to Eastern Europe, never to return (Klarsfeld, 1978). Another victim group was the mentally ill, 40,000 of whom died during the Vichy regime due to starvation and ill-treatment (Benkimoun et al., 1997: 9). The colonies also suffered during the war, with Guadeloupe and Indochina, for example, experiencing famines caused by a combination of food shortages, trade suspensions or export burdens and military campaigns (Jennings, 2001: 106, 141).

It was during the Vichy period that the three foundational organisations of the Croix-Rouge française were merged into one, by a 1940 government decree. According to CRF figures, from 1942–45 it evacuated 160,000 ill or wounded, delivered 20m parcels, 5m books and 300,000 pieces of leisure or sporting equipment to prisoners of war (POWs), established 70 reception centres for repatriated soldiers and treated thousands in clinics and hospitals (Le Crom, 2009: 151). It trained thousands of new staff during the war, with 154,000 participants in its emergency relief teams and 178,656 first aid workers (*ibid.*: 152). Like other Red Cross sections, it also provided a communication system for POWs and their families and a missing persons service. With the expansion of activities came an increase in budget, as well as professionalisation as personnel became more experienced and began to be remunerated for their time. More broadly, however, coordination of humanitarian efforts was a complicated process, with multiple agencies and organisations competing for funds and territory, as the example of aid to POWs demonstrated (*ibid.*: 154–56). Pétain was the patron of the reactivated Secours national and information relating to its work was used as propaganda to support the Pétainist cause.

Against this backdrop, the lack of independence of the Vichy state with regard to the German occupiers also impacted upon the CRF.<sup>8</sup> The first French choice of CRF president, a former ambassador to Germany, was rejected by the Nazi authorities, and Father Louis Pasteur Vallery-Radot was appointed in his place. Vallery-Radot's successor, in a sequence that remains unclear, was pressured into stepping down by Pierre Laval on behalf of the occupying forces (Le Crom, 2009: 158). There are several instances of personnel being denied access to internment camps in France, and it was impotent in the face of the 'Vél d'Hiv' round-up of 16–17 July 1942, when thousands of Parisian Jews were interned in a stadium for several days before being transported to Auschwitz.

Jean-Pierre Le Crom has explored the question of the CRF's neutrality in relation to the persecution of Jews in occupied

<sup>8</sup> From the 1970s onwards, the historiography of France during the Second World War has challenged the assumption that the French state based in Vichy was a mere puppet under Nazi control (Rousso, 1991). In particular, Robert O. Paxton's highly influential work *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order, 1940–1944* (1972) indicated the extent to which the Vichy regime sought out collaboration with Germany and actively pursued its own agenda. This must be kept in mind in relation to accounts of French policy, including humanitarian action, during the occupation.

France far more than any other author or, as he himself noted, the CRF itself. Although he acknowledged that archival information, particularly when documentation is scarce, may not tell the full picture, Le Crom (2009: 160) concluded that '*a priori* therefore, and in the absence of supplementary information, the Croix-Rouge française did indeed apply Vichy's anti-Semitic legislation'. He identified at least one instance in which the CRF acquired property – specifically, land at Mareille-Guyon slated to become a mothers' and children's retreat – taken under Aryanisation measures. Yet he also pointed to evidence that the CRF had evacuated and hidden Jewish children to save them from deportation. After the Liberation, a new committee of ex-Resistance members took control of the CRF. In 1945, de Gaulle, as post-war president, modified the statutes of the French Red Cross to make it less elitist and more democratic and accessible. Nonetheless, the fact that the CRF, including its youth wing, the Croix-Rouge française de la jeunesse (CRJF), continued to operate throughout the occupation impinged upon its activities in the post-war years, when organisations and individuals deemed to have collaborated with the Germans were officially purged and generally out of favour.

As well as co-opting organisations, the German occupation also had the effect of pushing some aid actors underground. Vallery-Radot, the first president of the unified CRF, resigned from his appointment three months after it was made, and in May–June 1942 he and other medical professionals co-founded a group called the Service de santé nationale de la Résistance (Chauvy, 2000: 142, 145). This group subsequently became the Comité médical de la Résistance (CMR) (Benkimoun, 1997: 16–17; Simonin, 1997). Another clandestine aid service was provided by SPF (as it would become) after it was banned by government decree in 1939. Forced to operate in secret, SPF organised collections, brought parcels to prisoners, supported their families, gave Christmas presents to the children of deportees and *fusillés* (people executed by firing squad) and distributed propaganda. Women were heavily involved and there was also some SFP participation in acts of resistance. As a result of its activities, SPF became the target of government repression and, according to Axelle Brodiez, only one member of the pre-war secretariat survived the war – and only then because he escaped from Oranienburg camp after his deportation; 25 others died after deportation or were shot (Brodiez, 2006b: 42). While their persecution was also related to their ideological stance, the choice to continue operations in the face of such severe repression indicates the level of commitment of SPF's members to humanitarian action, as well as opposition to the regime.

Humanitarian action during the occupation, whether clandestine or open, often took place in regional areas and via provincial cities. The transfer of the seat of the French state to the city of Vichy brought the Red Cross in tow. At the same time, the spread of needs across the country and the situation of occupation contributed to the emergence of informal or illegal forms of aid outside the

important cities of Paris and Vichy. The diverse profiles of the people displaced in this period – Jews, anti-fascists, Socialists, Resistance fighters, members of the Spanish diaspora, residents of conflict zones – were helped by different mechanisms in cities such as Montaubon, Lamalou-les-Bains and Marseille (Guillon, 2001). The latter was the site of an American initiative run by the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC) and headed by Varian Fry, known as the Centre américain de secours (CAS). Between 1940 and 1942 this centre, the initial aim of which was the evacuation of 200 artists and intellectuals from France, helped thousands of refugees to escape Nazi-occupied France for the United States (Duranton-Crabol, 2002). The ERC is still active today as the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

One further point on the significance of the Second World War for French scholarship on humanitarian action bears mention: the prevalence of criticism of the ICRC's position

during the conflict. Most histories that cover the ICRC allude to the work of Jean-Claude Favez (1988), who was given access to the Red Cross archives in order to undertake a study of its response to the Nazi deportation and camp system. The decision of the ICRC not to denounce the camps, more so than its acceptance of the 'Aryanisation' of the German and Polish Red Cross societies, would become a significant point of reference for post-war humanitarians in France. Although criticism of the 'abandonment' of Jews has been challenged on various levels (Novick, 1999: 47–59; Brauman, 2009a), this 'failure' was of particular significance to the first and second generations of *sans-frontiériste* activists in France, many of whom had either lived through the Second World War as young children or had been born immediately afterwards and were implicated in the collective revisions of the French memory of the war in the 1970s and 1980s. Before this, however, the mode of aid itself would undergo a transformation.

# Chapter 3

## The Cold War and shifting paradigms

Several of today's most important international relief organisations were founded during the Second World War and the immediate post-war period. The most prominent examples include Oxfam, created in Britain in 1942, and CARE, created in the US in 1945. France's contribution to this phase of NGO growth was minimal. Nonetheless, as in the English-language literature on this period, the Cold War context is understood to have favoured the growth of civil society organisations that could act where the superpower governments, at least officially, feared to tread. The late colonial years and the decolonisation era were characterised, in aid terms, by the notion of 'development' aid intended to promote progress in the newly independent nations. The Cold War period also saw an escalation in the number of civil wars, which posed problems for 'traditional' aid actors whose programmes were predicated upon respect for sovereignty. It was in this context that MSF and other like-minded organisations were born.

### 3.1 Aid in the development decades

French involvement in international affairs was reasserted following the end of the occupation and as part of the reconstruction process after the Second World War. While France had limited involvement in the early construction of the UN, due to its wartime situation and relationship with the Allies, it has since played a role that many see as considerable despite its lack of superpower status. Eric Pateyron (1998) has described the French contribution to the formulation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), notably through the work of Pierre Mendès France on the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and above all René Cassin, who as member of the UN Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR) was instrumental in the drafting of the Declaration. The first significant attempt to gauge France's relationship with the UN appeared in the late 1970s, focused around the key dilemmas of the time: 'the East-West rivalry, decolonisation, problems of under-development, and the struggle against racial discrimination in southern Africa' (Smouts, 1979: 18). At the time of the fiftieth anniversary of the UN's creation, a collected volume proposed a more celebratory version of France's role in the organisation and its various agencies (Lewin, 1995). The chapter on humanitarian action, by Mario Bettati, suggested that France's initiative for General Assembly Resolution 43/131 of 8 December 1988 ('Humanitarian assistance to victims of natural disasters and similar emergency situations') was fundamental in the UN's subsequent development of humanitarian norms (Bettati, 1995: 270–83; see also Guillot, 1994: 31–34).

The Cold War conflict that posed the greatest difficulty for France within the UN (Couve de Dupuy, 1995: 55; Smouts, 1979: 255–60), and which had perhaps the greatest influence

on the country's history, was the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), at the end of which France lost its most treasured territorial possession. Algeria was the pride of the French colonies and the struggle to retain it was bitter, with torture and terrorism practiced by both sides, though France refused to acknowledge the existence of war and denied the Front de libération nationale (FLN) all legitimacy.

Barely two months after the outbreak of the war, despite its lack of a robust official mandate, the ICRC was granted access by Prime Minister Pierre Mendès France – most probably, according to one study of the ICRC's involvement, due to his desire to head off the worst of likely future excesses (Branche, 1999: 106–107), although it has also been pointed out that the head of the ICRC delegation in Paris, William Michel, was connected to Mendès France through their respective wives, who were cousins (Perret and Bugnion, 2011: 712). The French government gave the ICRC permission to visit Algeria, offer aid to detainees and their families and visit places of detention – but it was not given full lists of those detained or allowed to facilitate correspondence between prisoners and their families. Over the course of the war, the ICRC sent nine missions to Algeria. It became the centre of a controversy in January 1960 when one of its reports was leaked to the French press and published by *Le monde*, the centre-left newspaper. The controversy confronted the French government with its own responsibilities and called on it to restore 'a minimum of order' in the system of detention and interrogation methods in particular (Perret and Bugnion, 2009: 211). However, it also delayed negotiations for the next mission and increased the suspicion with which military actors in Algeria already viewed the ICRC delegations (Branche, 1999). Meanwhile, the Red Crescent societies in Tunisia and Morocco, both independent nations since March 1956, cooperated in relief operations for Algerian refugees in their countries, supported by the ICRC and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Perret and Bugnion, 2011: 723–25).

The political issues at stake in the Algerian War had a debilitating impact upon the ICRC's work in the country. Both parties in the conflict had to be handled with a political care that meant contradiction and compromise. The French government held some two million Algerians in internment camps, to which the ICRC and the CRF were able to distribute aid, as they also did to internally displaced people (IDPs), but had to do so without invoking formal legal provisions which gave rights to civilian prisoners. Dealings between the Red Cross and the FLN leadership were largely used by the Algerian nationalists to bolster their international profile and support their claim to represent an emerging nation. Raphaëlle Branche, a historian of colonial violence, notably in

Algeria, has seen this period as a ‘baptism of fire’ for the ICRC, and judged the organisation’s practical impact to have been very limited (Branche, 1999: 124). While acknowledging these limitations, notably the inability to stop the use of torture by either side, two ICRC researchers argued that ‘the ICRC’s work in the context of [the Algerian] conflict became a model for its commitment in subsequent conflicts’, providing a valuable precedent for the ICRC’s engagement with insurgent groups in subsequent wars of liberation and influencing the shaping of the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions (Perret and Bugnion, 2011: 736–77).

The Algerian War (and French colonialism in general) provoked a significant opposition campaign in France. The denunciation of torture was a central issue in this campaign. Activist groups and journals, both pre-existing ones and new, issue-specific publications, produced dossiers documenting the use of torture and supporting the victims of French repression. French organisations, notably *Secours populaire français*, also ran humanitarian campaigns during the Algerian War. Not in any way attempting to appear neutral, SPF worked throughout the war with victims of French state repression and human rights abuses, sending lawyers to Algeria to observe trials; providing medical, material and legal aid to victims of police violence in France; and campaigning against death sentences for FLN militants. In contrast, particularly at the beginning of the conflict, the PCF cooperated with the government in efforts to deligitimise and ultimately stamp out the Algerian resistance. Brodiez has therefore identified this period as a turning point when SPF broke from the politically-determined control of its parent organisation and began to adopt a more intentionally humanitarian discourse (Brodiez, 2006a).

Aside from such efforts, the French aid sector during these years was dominated by the development push of the 1950s and 1960s. There were multiple factors at work. As post-war Europe found its feet, the idea took hold that solidarity should be directed more towards countries outside of Europe that were not in the same economic position as the West. In 1948, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 198 (III), calling for extra efforts for the ‘economic development of under-developed countries’. In 1961 the UN’s First Decade of Development was declared, and was renewed for a second decade in 1971. The idea of development was supported by W. W. Rostow’s theory of the stages of economic growth, according to which investment would stimulate national development. On a geostrategic level, development was part of a policy of containment adopted by the United States when faced with the expansion of Communism. Finally, it has been suggested that development aid acted as a kind of reparation for colonial exploitation in the period of rising independence movements. It was in this context that the term ‘tiers monde’ (‘third world’) was first used by the demographer Alfred Sauvy, in *L’observateur* in August 1952. Sauvy used it to refer to a body of nations ‘ignored, exploited, scorned like the Third Estate’ that had proclaimed its rights during the French Revolution of 1789.

Contemporary events across the globe seemed to endorse this sense of a new rising bloc. The Chinese Revolution of 1949 remained pertinent throughout the 1960s as Chairman Mao diverged increasingly sharply from his Communist counterparts in the Soviet Union. The Indochinese War (1946–54), during which French troops were offered care by Geneviève de Galard, known as the ‘Angel of Dien Bien Phu’, ended with the victory of the Vietnamese nationalists in May 1954. The following November, the FLN initiated its violent struggle against French colonialism in Algeria. In April 1955, the Bandung Conference brought together ‘non-aligned’ Asian and African countries, and in Cuba in 1959 Fidel Castro’s guerrilla fighters toppled the right-wing, US-allied Batista government.

In France, though not only there, militants responded to these events by turning away from the moribund politics of Europe towards the exciting new movements in the rest of the world. The result was the ‘tiers-mondiste’ (third-worldist) ideology, which saw the Third World as the motor for global revolution. Politically speaking, this movement was on the far left and was highly critical of the Soviet Union and Soviet-aligned Western European Communist parties, as well as of the capitalist powers. Its attitudes converged with the tenets of development work, despite the latter’s being used by US opponents of Marxist ideology. Organisations that emerged in this period were thus focused on development issues and – as would become more evident in the ideologically heightened confrontations of the 1980s – often sympathetic to left-wing, progressive ideas.

One example of this was the *Comité catholique contre la faim* (CCCF), founded in 1960. A coordinating network for a number of Catholic organisations, the CCCF was influenced by the Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC) begun by the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in 1959 and backed by Pope John XXIII. In 1966, it was renamed the *Comité catholique contre la faim et pour le développement* (CCFD), in recognition of the need for the situation of underdeveloped countries to change from within in order for hunger to be addressed. Key leaders of the CCFD have described being attracted to the organisation by a combination of this sense of working towards change – the refusal of global injustice – and the network’s religious underpinnings (Bottazzi, 1980; Marc, 1984). The agenda and programmes of the CCFD were also influenced by the radical liberation theology that came out of Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1972, the CCFD launched its own journal, largely a forum for research and discussion, called *Foi et développement*.

Certain of CCFD’s projects did reflect a radical left-wing ideology, or seemed to. Claims to this effect began in 1973, when it adopted the slogan ‘La terre est à tous’ (‘Land is for all’), seemingly reminiscent of land collectivisation policy. During the Vietnam War, CCFD leaders made regular trips into North Vietnamese territory, and news of the entry of Hanoi’s troops into Saigon in 1975 was celebrated in CCFD’s Paris office (Bergeron, 1988: 24–25). CCFD was allowed to continue operating in Cambodia

after the Vietnamese invasion of 1979, when almost all aid organisations had been barred from the country. Such missions contributed to a hysterical campaign against CCFD during the 1980s, when it was accused by a small cohort of very right-wing commentators of sponsoring rebel guerrilla movements and backing communist states (see Pelletier, 1996). These attacks subsided, however, and by 1990, despite its considerable financial resources, CCFD was not listed among the ten best-known NGOs in France (Lechervy and Ryfman, 1993: 28).

Another French organisation to emerge in the development period was Frères des hommes (FDH), founded in 1966. A secular organisation, FDH was first involved in development projects in India. In 1980 it produced a charter affirming its commitment to challenging the existence of 'maldevelopment' – 'an increasingly unequal distribution of wealth and power' – and to the use of partnerships to achieve this (FDH, 1980). Similar organisations also dating from this period include Terre des hommes (TDH) in Switzerland and Brot Für die Welt in West Germany (Ferré, 1995: 18). This period also saw the creation of the Association française des volontaires du progrès (AFVP, now called France Volontaires) in 1963, a kind of French equivalent of the American Peace Corps.

Recent scholarship has assisted in placing in context the scholarly literature around development, from the viewpoint of the focus on emergency relief that occurred later in the twentieth century. Laëtitia Atlani-Duault and Jean-Pierre Dozon (2011), both anthropologists of development as well as humanitarian action, made this their aim in a review piece on anthropological research relating to aid. Touching on the contributions of earlier groups such as Economie et Humanisme, an antecedent of the Institut international de recherche et de formation en vue du développement harmonisé (IRFED), they described how French development studies moved from a theoretically-driven approach to an empirical one in the 1980s. This transition, as they see it, was seconded by a more recent shift from development aid to emergency relief aid, though on a similarly empirical basis and encouraging 'appeals to compassion and reparation on a case-by-case basis' (Atlani-Duault and Dozon, 2011: 400). They called for greater analysis of this 'extension of an aid that describes and conceives of itself as humanitarian to actions that could have, twenty-five years ago, been considered as part of development aid, whether in the domain of health, reconstruction, governance, human rights, or natural disaster response' (*ibid.*). A similar point was made by Axelle Brodiez and Bruno Dumons (2009: 3), who described this process as 'the partial metamorphosis of the old "social question" into a "humanitarian question"'.

### 3.2 Technological change and social evolution

While it is beyond the scope of this Working Paper to answer Atlani-Duault and Dozon's challenge, it is possible to draw attention to elements in this paradigm shift that are raised in the literature. Technological changes in the 1960s contributed

to the renewal of emergency humanitarian action at the end of the decade. At the same time, the transformation of the French social and political landscape, represented by the events of May–June 1968, changed how engagement with and responses to the suffering of others were understood. Although the role of technology is, in general, not well represented in French literature on humanitarian action, developments in the 1960s are regularly mentioned for their transformative impact on the aid sector in France. First amongst these is the rise of the audiovisual media, considered to have made the experience of history both immediate and universal (Rufin, 1986: 64). The audiovisual *mise en scène* of political and intellectual activities in France in the 1960s and especially 1970s (Rieffel, 1993: 603–11) represented an ideal platform for humanitarian campaigns. Moreover, the rise of the audiovisual media is part of a long history of media use and publicity by the humanitarian sector (see Lavoine, 2002). The humanitarian sentiments of the nineteenth century were related to improvements in telecommunications, and the ICRC was conscious, from the outset, of the importance of public opinion and recognition; for instance, Dunant's book *Un Souvenir de Solferino* (1862), in which he outlined his idea for humanitarian relief during wartime, was distributed without charge for maximum publicity and promoted by the era's cultural nobility like Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens (Ryfman, 1999: 36). In the 1920s, in the context of challenges to its position of international leadership, the organisation sought to use the affective powers of cinema to promote its work (see Natale, 2004). It continues to use cinema today.

A specifically French example of the pioneering use of the media for aid campaigns can be seen in the Emmäus campaign of the mid-1950s. The much-loved Abbé Pierre, real name Henri Grouès, was a Catholic priest and member of the Resistance during the Second World War. In 1949 he founded the Emmaüs charity movement for the poor and homeless, now active in 36 countries (see Brodiez, 2009). In 1954, during a particularly harsh winter, Abbé Pierre used a radio broadcast to appeal for assistance for the homeless; the appeal itself was an expression of urgency and the choice of a populist medium was intended as a way of reaching as many people as possible (Emmanuelli, 1991: 195). The campaign was later recognised by Bernard Kouchner, in a published dialogue with Abbé Pierre, as a 'great discovery' that 'as much as helping, we must speak out' (Abbé Pierre and Kouchner, 1993: 85). Others have also pointed to the significance of his example for subsequent generations of French humanitarians (Backmann in Backmann and Brauman, 1996: 72–77; Taithe, 2009: 155). Two decades later, in 1976, MSF became the first French humanitarian organisation to run an advertising campaign, with the billboards 'Dans leur salle d'attente deux milliards d'hommes ...' ('Two billion people in their waiting room').

The synergy between the audiovisual media and emergency relief has often been commented upon, though rarely without

an element of critique. Two critiques published in the 1990s, despite their divergent approaches (Backmann and Brauman, 1996; Boltanski, 1993), can be understood as part of the heightened attention given to humanitarian action at this time. The importance of this period is also reflected in a later study exploring the dominance of ‘denunciation’ and ‘sensitisation’ as humanitarian tropes in the 1990s (Mesnard, 2002). The accusation that television reporting replaced reasoned analysis with emotive images has been widespread. It has also been charged with skewing the image of beneficiaries towards one of almost complete victimhood, by neglecting contextual information and obscuring the role played by local staff in favour of publicity for expatriate aid workers (Rufin and Ryfman, 2006). Perhaps more positively, the capacity of *sans-frontiériste* organisations to attract media attention has been seen to have nourished the growth and institutionalisation of these organisations by allowing them to attract resources (Juhem, 2001: 17).

Advances in the discipline of emergency medicine also contributed to a change in the frameworks for international aid. Various prototypes for an emergency medical response system operated in France from 1956, until the Services d’aide médicale d’urgence (SAMU), the French ambulance corps, was officially founded in 1972. These can be directly linked to the creation of MSF, for instance through the figure of Xavier Emmanuelli, who was trained in national emergency medicine and has drawn attention to the importance of its emphasis on mobility, technology and communication (Emmanuelli, 1991: 147–51; Emmanuelli, 2005: 17–33). The establishment in 1960 of the Élément médical militaire d’intervention rapide (EMMIR), which provided French army units for international emergencies, and in 1966 of SOS Médecins, a private service of mobile doctors, are part of these developments. The prosperity of France during the *trente glorieuses* (‘30 glorious years’) from the 1950s to the 1970s also played a part in the rise of relief practices amongst medical professionals. At the same time as emergency treatment improved, the strength of the medical employment market and the availability of qualified professionals of the ‘baby boom’ generation meant that it was possible to take time off work for international placements without sacrificing employment prospects on return (Ryfman, 2008a: 737).

Although few details are generally given, the increased ease of transport in the 1960s has also been cited as a factor in the emergence of *sans-frontiérisme*. In a practical sense, cheaper air transport in particular made international engagement increasingly possible, particularly when rapid response was important. In a sociological sense, the late 1960s generation of young people enjoyed greater mobility throughout Europe, and as a result developed an identity less defined by national borders. Many of the key leaders of *sans-frontiérisme* were part of this generation. The convergence of internationalism, emergency action and media savvy identified with the *sans-frontiériste* movement was thus shaped by technological changes in the 1950s and 1960s.

### 3.3 Biafra, Bangladesh and the birth of *sans-frontiérisme*

The Biafra/Nigeria Civil War has been recognised as a foundational moment for modern humanitarianism. One of the earliest systematic histories of humanitarian aid during the Nigerian civil war, Thierry Hentsch’s study of the role of the ICRC, described itself simply, albeit modestly, as ‘the history of an airlift’ (Hentsch, 1973: xi). However, even at the time the great achievement of the airlift into Biafra – for a period Uli airstrip in Biafra was the busiest airport in Africa – could not disguise the political manoeuvring that accompanied it. In effect, the humanitarian effort as a whole was used by the Biafran rebels to sustain their military campaign. This is, of course, well documented in the English-language literature (see for example de Waal, 1997: 72–77). Intrinsic to this strategy was the conscious promotion of a genocide narrative, to which end the Biafran leadership employed a public relations firm, Markpress, whose outputs on the famine ran to three volumes by the end of the war. From June 1968, Markpress and the Biafran leadership began to base this genocide narrative on the existence of famine in the secessionist territory (Hentsch, 1973: 94). Although the Biafran leadership forbade the delivery of aid overland, the intent of genocidal starvation was attributed to the federal government. Money raised through taxation or inflated exchange rates charged to aid agencies was then channelled into the Biafran war effort.

France backed the Biafran secessionists against the federal government, essentially as a way of undermining British post-colonial influence in the region. However, France did not go as far as officially recognising the self-declared Republic of Biafra after its independence assertion at the end of May 1967. Instead, de Gaulle instigated French Red Cross missions in Biafra. Between September 1968 and January 1970, some 50 French volunteers travelled to Biafra on behalf of the Red Cross (Tanguy, 1993: 228). It ran a hospital in Awo Omama, 15km from the front, with five buildings treating 450 people a day (Vallaey, 2004: 60–62). However, CRF flights also provided cover for the delivery of small arms. This has been demonstrated through subsequent historical research (Vallaey, 2004; Péan, 2009, 41–44), but was also reported in press coverage at the time (Pellissier, 1968; Decraene, 1970). Tellingly, the Biafran war also prompted the creation of France’s first government body for humanitarian action, the Mission de liaison des organisations non-gouvernementales (MILONG), formed in 1968.

French humanitarian volunteers reacted strongly against the suffering they saw in Biafra. Kouchner volunteered in Biafra several times, first in September–October 1968, then in December of the same year and finally in October–November 1969. He has vividly described the basic conditions and extreme pressure in which the volunteer doctors worked; patients would be treated only to return again injured or emaciated within weeks or even days of their discharge (Kouchner, 1986: 213).

At the end of September 1968, two Yugoslavian doctors, Red Cross volunteers at another mission at Okigwi, were killed by Nigerian federalist forces. This incident was crucial in ending the reticence of the French doctors, who had already begun to consider public statements about the ravages of the war on the Biafran people (Aeberhard, 1994: 6). In November, Kouchner and a colleague, Max Récamier, published an article in *Le monde* describing the suffering in Biafra and calling for an international intervention (see discussion in Lavoine, 2005: 118–20). Evidently supporters of the Biafrans as a people distinct from the Nigerians opposing them, the doctors concluded with a call for political action: 'what is being done now allows the children to survive. Their future depends on political solutions' (Récamier and Kouchner, 1968: 15). The 'creation myth' of MSF is bound up in this witnessing and denunciation. It has since, however, been questioned by research on the extent to which the 'French doctors' actually asserted themselves against the ICRC during the conflict (Desgrandchamps, 2011–12). The 'creation myth' is likewise challenged by interpretations that emphasise the extent to which the humanitarian effort was manipulated during the conflict.

In the French context, the impression that Nigeria was committing genocide against the Biafran people was of particular importance given the place that the Holocaust occupied in post-war French life. The generation to which Kouchner and his colleagues belonged was one whose political experience was profoundly shaped by the rise of Holocaust memory (see Auron, 1998). It was therefore not simply the fact that they believed themselves to be witnessing genocide in Biafra that was significant, but that they believed that the silence of the ICRC in the Biafra conflict constituted a repetition of its failures during the Second World War. Their response was part of what Ryfman described as French humanitarianism's 'hyper-reactivity to all that resembles ... mass massacres' (Ryfman, 2008a: 742; see also Kouchner, 2004; Brauman, 2006a). That the memory of the Holocaust has become perhaps the defining moral feature of the current era helps to explain the success of the humanitarian model based upon sensitivity to its memory.

However, although there is clear consensus about the significance and impact of the model pioneered by MSF, interpretations of the Biafran conflict within the circles of French humanitarian activism do not merely differ but stand in opposition to each other (see Maillard, 2008). The dividing line essentially lies between the original founding doctors (spearheaded by Kouchner) and the newcomers (around the younger Rony Brauman, MSF president in 1988–94), with each man incarnating a different vision of the Biafran conflict and a different characterisation of the humanitarian project. Their disagreement on this issue has been public and explicit. In basic terms, Kouchner's account privileges the existence of genocide, magnifies the significance of the act of *témoignage* (speaking out) by which the French doctors responded, in contradiction with Red Cross principles, and thus ascribes

the essence of MSF to this seminal moment (see for example Kouchner, 1994: xiii). By contrast Brauman refuses to accept that genocide occurred, sees the *témoignage* as feeble and in any case manipulated, and emphasises the development of *témoignage* practices in later years during his presidency of the organisation (see for example Brauman, 2006: 93). Each point of view has its supporters. Despite being based on the moment of genesis of *sans-frontiérisme*, it is in fact equally if not more so a dispute about the evolution of the movement, as described further below.

The remainder of the history relating to the creation of MSF is less contentious. The first step towards a new organisation had been the creation of the Groupe d'intervention médico-chirurgicale d'urgence (GIMCU). Bringing together approximately 50 doctors, GIMCU put its members at the service of pre-existing organisations whilst harbouring ambitions for a different style of humanitarian intervention. Doctors and nurses who had signed up to GIMCU contributed to missions in 1970: in Jordan during the Black September massacres and in Peru following an earthquake, though the French contingent arrived too late to provide assistance. With the advent of flooding in East Pakistan, shortly followed by the brutal repression of uprisings as the region asserted itself as the independent state of Bangladesh, GIMCU doctors responded to a preliminary call for help from the Red Cross. However, they found themselves awaiting an authorisation which became increasingly hypothetical as the political violence intensified. The attitude of the volunteers, as Jacques Bérès remembered it, was that 'we will kill two birds with one stone: we will intervene alongside the survivors of the tidal wave and, if necessary, in aid of the victims of war' (quoted in Vallaeys, 2004: 104–05). The Red Cross would not give them the opportunity and this aborted mission has been recorded in accounts of the *sans-frontiériste* movement as a failure (see for example Brauman, 2006: 91; Pierrejean, 2007: 98; Vallaeys, 2004: 105; Weber, 1995: 95). In contrast, the more established SPF did send a mission to East Pakistan at the time of the flooding and was one of the first organisations active in the refugee camps in India (Brodiez, 2006: 160).

The crisis had a longer-lasting effect by bringing the GIMCU group into contact with the medical newspaper *Tonus*. To the medical expertise and militant experience of the GIMCU group, the *Tonus* journalists brought resources (both financial and material), a media vehicle and publicity savvy. The *Tonus* group had an embryonic organisation with the name of Secours médical français (SMF); both this and the inelegant GIMCU were abandoned in favour of 'Médecins sans frontières'. The organisation's 13 founding members approved its charter at Clichy, on the periphery of Paris, in December 1971; the first president was Marcel Delcourt. Of the memoirs written by veterans of this period, only one came out of the *Tonus* circles, by Philippe Bernier. Bernier's account provides some engaging descriptions of the various personalities and draws attention to another dispute over *témoignage*: the original charter, which

he wrote, explicitly ruled against taking a public stand of any kind about events, forces or people related to the organisation's humanitarian work (Bernier, 1980: 49–50). This was a source of tension at the time and has subsequently been alluded to during debates about Biafra and *témoignage* more generally.

Taking the creation of MSF as its reference point, French literature on humanitarian action has often emphasised that, although the field itself is not new, in its current form it dates only from the 1970s. The celebratory study *Globe Doctors* described the foundation of MSF as 'the beginning of a very beautiful story' and the launch of 'an original action led by French doctors bearing the values of human rights' (Deldique and Ninin, 1991: 13). More usefully, Rufin described the *sans-frontiériste* innovation as a response to the blockages that were paralysing classic humanitarian aid, in light of the newly assertive Third World and Cold War antagonisms (Rufin, 1986: 62). He argued that it was an attempt to break the dependence of humanitarian aid on bureaucracy and state structures. Over two decades later, Ryfman summarised their contribution: 'this new type of NGO on the humanitarian scene charged itself with acting in the South, but with the aim of offering assistance qualified as "emergency" to people who were victims of natural disasters and especially of armed conflict (particularly those said to be "non-international," in other words civil wars), which would rapidly engulf various newly independent countries' (Ryfman, 2008c: 52).

However, Ryfman and others have criticised the tendency to place too great an emphasis on the rupture achieved with *sans-frontiériste*. For Ryfman, this habit conveys a greater problem in studies of humanitarian history, in which understandings are limited by their isolation within the experience of a particular nation. In the French case, 'the long-standing historical and cultural weakness of private charitable action confronted with the State leads too many [French] decision-makers, journalists, or analysts to believe that humanitarianism was born in France, after 1968, with the so-called "*sans-frontiériste*" organisations' (Ryfman, 2008c: 5). Lachenal and Taithe have also criticised what they see as the prevailing tendency to focus on the late 1960s as a turning point, arguing that this approach is too reliant on institutional histories and neglects ideological continuities, the careers of important actors and the roles of older caritative organisations (Lachenal and Taithe, 2009: 46). They also argue that the related tendency to downplay colonial missionary action as religious exceptions in a secularising era underplays the great importance of religious humanitarian organisations in the later part of the twentieth century.

### 3.4 Shifts in the social and political landscape

Any discussion of French volunteer or solidarity action in the 1970s must take account of one major event at the end of the previous decade: the May 1968 protests. The student and workers' revolt, which attracted millions to strikes and protests, was one of the most significant events of the second

half of the twentieth century in France. Ryfman (2008a) has asked the question whether humanitarianism was a 'child of May', to which his answer is a partial 'yes'. To the extent that the 1968 events can be considered a revision of largely left-wing militancy, *sans-frontiériste* sits alongside the emergence of social movements such as feminism, gay rights or ecological activism in the years after 1968. However, Ryfman has argued that the direct influence of the politics of May 1968 (particularly its libertarian and extreme left elements) upon humanitarian action has not been long-lived, and while some figures amongst the 'sixty-eighters' adopted humanitarianism, many more went into journalism or other liberal professions.

Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise how the rise of humanitarian action after Biafra has been part of the broader shift towards morally, rather than ideologically, oriented politics. Central to this moral shift is the memory and legacy of the Holocaust, which has had a powerful impact upon humanitarian action in the French context. Collective consciousness of the Holocaust dates not from the immediate post-war years but, rather, gained momentum after the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in 1961. In France, Holocaust memory is bound up in attitudes towards the Vichy regime and the associated issues of collaboration and complicity. A series of events in the 1970s, beginning with the landmark documentary *Le chagrin et la pitié* (Ophüls, 1971), later followed by, for instance, the publication of a list of all Jews deported from France (Klarsfeld, 1978), encouraged this process. Another landmark came with Claude Lanzmann's epic documentary *Shoah* (1985), and French trials of occupation-era war criminals ensured the topicality of this issue throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Scholars have emphasised how the rise of Holocaust memory, in combination with the decline in Marxism's appeal, contributed to the emergence in France of a set of humanitarian principles based on intervention, denunciation and action (Maillard, 2007; Dachy, 2004). The work of Kouchner in particular is littered with references to the lessons of the Holocaust, and the memory of the Holocaust was a key motif during the Cambodian and Vietnamese crises (Davey, 2011b).

Before returning to the history of humanitarian action proper, the founding of the French wing of Amnesty International is worth considering as another facet of the shift in styles of activism and the emphasis on human rights in this period. Although there were reportedly individual members of Amnesty in France from the early 1960s, there were no moves to consolidate them until 1969; the first 'group' was established in 1970, and the French section of Amnesty International was founded in 1971. The first edition of its publication, *La chronique*, had only seven copies (Guillou, 2001). A key early step in the growth of the section was a public controversy in 1973 when UNESCO refused to host a planned Amnesty International event because of Amnesty France's criticism of the practice of torture by some UNESCO member states. After Amnesty International was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in

1977, membership of the French section doubled (to reach 11,000) within the space of a year (Guillou, 2001). A further landmark achievement was the abolition of the death penalty in France in 1981, when Justice Minister Robert Badinter acknowledged Amnesty's work on the issue (Protais, 1991). Although membership continued to grow in the 1980s and public awareness of the organisation was high, the historian of the section, Jean-Paul Besset, has described a decline in the influence of the Amnesty model in this period relative to the ascent of the 'charity business' approach of the humanitarian sector (Besset, 1991: 73). Amnesty France's membership in 2010 was approximately 20,000 – a figure that it first reached during the 1980s (Amnesty International France, 2010: 3).

Amnesty France has had some difficulties in its relationship with the international secretariat. According to Besset, in London it was nicknamed the 'no section' because of its resistance to change, for instance in the field of marketing and publicity. As Besset (1991: 188) indicated, 'despite having climbed on the bandwagon because it was born ten years after the principal sections of North America and Europe, Amnesty France forged itself an image as the trustee of hard-line orthodoxy, a bit doctrinarian, a touch fundamentalist'. Jonathan Power, in his history of Amnesty International, agreed that the French section was the 'most meticulously respectful of the mandate' (Power, 1981: 40). In the 1970s, it opposed a series of reform measures proposed by the Dutch and German sections that were designed to increase flexibility and facilitate topical campaigns; Amnesty France argued that they were a deviation from the grass-roots foundation of the organisation, and the international secretariat agreed.

Amnesty France, particularly in its early years, has confronted challenges relating to the transposition of its Anglo-Saxon origins into a French setting. The decision to retain the English-language name was partly related to a wish to keep international coherence across sections. However, it was also related to the resonance of the French term *amnistie* at the time, which was associated with a campaign for pardons for occupation-era collaborators (Protais, 1991). A direct French translation of 'prisoners of conscience' not having much meaning, Amnesty France first adopted *prisonniers pour délit d'opinion* ('prisoners for the crime of opinion') then *prisonniers d'opinion*. More generally, Amnesty France also had to navigate a Cold War political context in which, as one reporter put it, 'everyone knows that, if it's not left-wing, it's fascist and if it's not right-wing, it's collectivist' (Guetta,

1977: 52). In such a context, the English term 'apolitical' had a different connotation and was taken as signifying a right-wing alignment (Guillou, 2001). Nonetheless, in the 1980s Amnesty France faced public criticism – alongside CCFD – for its supposed left-wing bias (Bergeron, 1988).

These ideologically-driven attacks, and the evolution of humanitarian thinking in France during the Cold War, can only be understood in the context of the changes in the decades after May 1968. If the emergence of identity politics and an emphasis on Holocaust memory were two parts of this, another was the revision of revolutionary left-wing paradigms. This revolutionary tradition, particularly strong in France due to a tendency to see a connecting thread between the French Revolution, the Paris Commune and the Russian Revolution, was confronted in the 1970s and 1980s with a series of abusive regimes that were seen as a challenge to Marxist beliefs. The concept of 'totalitarianism' provided a way of drawing comparisons between Marxist and fascist regimes – a comparison most damaging for Marxism, which unlike fascism had hitherto been spared the hostility of most intellectuals and activists on the left. Disillusionment with the turn taken in places like China, Vietnam, Cuba and Cambodia, which had been the leading lights of the radical, revolutionary *tiers-mondiste* movement, not to mention the Soviet Union, contributed to this process. These ideological dynamics shaped the way that humanitarian action was understood in the era of *sans-frontiériste* dominance.

Through a series of campaigns, humanitarian action became part of the anti-totalitarian movement and, indeed, many of the leading *sans-frontiériste* figures in this period came to international politics through the revolutionary left paradigm. They had this in common with one of the most high-profile – though not necessarily most respected or most enduring – components of the anti-totalitarian movement, the so-called 'New Philosophers'. This loose and controversial group, including philosophers like Bernard-Henri Lévy and André Glucksmann, had close connections with the *sans-frontiériste* activists and have often participated in public campaigns or written about humanitarian issues (see for example Glucksmann and Wolton, 1986; Lévy, 1996). In this context, *sans-frontiérisme* provided a way of engaging in a world filled with victims of ideological politics, as 'human rights rapidly combine[d] with the principles of humanitarian action, adopt[ed] them and then wr[o]te together the glorious story of emergency aid and anti-totalitarianism' (Maillard, 2007: 40).



# Chapter 4

## The ascendancy of the ‘French Doctors’

In the final decades of the Cold War, and in the French-language literature on humanitarian action in this period, the *sans-frontiériste* organisations, and above all MSF, occupy a central position. Despite recognising the importance of a broader perspective, this Working Paper will nonetheless replicate that emphasis, in the interests of reflecting the trends of scholarship and describing some of the most important elements in that narrative.

### 4.1 Crusading humanitarianism in the 1970s and 1980s

MSF’s expansion during the 1970s, from a tiny organisation with innovative ambitions to a major influence on French political debate, was representative of the growth of emergency humanitarianism in France. This growth was related to the increase in refugee numbers in the global South in the mid- and late 1970s. MSF’s work in Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand from the mid-1970s onwards prompted perhaps the first decisive example of *témoignage*, when in 1977 Claude Malhuret and Xavier Emmanuelli denounced the crimes of the Khmer Rouge based on what they had heard from refugees (see Malhuret, 2003: 9–10). It was also vital in the refinement and professionalisation of emergency operations: if Biafra represented the origins of *sans-frontiérisme*, the Thai camps were the source of its logistical innovation.

The two men largely responsible for these logistical advances – organising and labelling stocks of medicines, establishing inventory and ordering protocols, designating roles – were Vincent Faveaux and especially Jacques Pinel, a pharmacologist who happened to be in Bangkok when UNHCR appealed for volunteers (Vallaëys, 2004: 327). In this period MSF first established its ‘kit’ system, with pre-packed selections of supplies: the ‘semi-mobile allocation’ from which staff would collect their pack before doing their rounds; the ‘10,000 people-three months kit’ of medical supplies; and the ‘hospital-kit’ with beds and surgical equipment, functional within two days. These were later expanded to a large catalogue of options based on the requirements of different situations, some of which were also sold to other NGOs or UN agencies with fewer logistical resources of their own. The professionalisation of logistics continued with the establishment of MSF Logistique in 1986 (Payet, 1996: 14–15).

Other French organisations were also working to address the needs of Cambodians in this period. Organisations that wished to work inside Cambodia following the Vietnamese invasion could do so only by joining the Comité français d’aide médicale et sanitaire à la population cambodgienne, whose actions were directed by the occupying authorities. The committee was created in May 1979, and participating organisations

included SPF, CCFD, Secours catholique, Service œcuménique d’entraide (Cimade) and TDH. The division between those inside and those outside Cambodia held not only for French organisations but also internationally, with access permits granted, tellingly, for organisations such as the Polish and Soviet Red Cross, medical delegations from the Soviet bloc countries and Cuba, as well as the Quakers and Oxfam. MSF and the recently founded Action internationale contre la faim were refused permission to work inside Cambodia, resulting in some disputes between French organisations on either side of the divide, as well as a public protest called the ‘Marche pour la Survie du Cambodge’ (‘March for the Survival of Cambodia’), held by MSF, AICF and the IRC in February 1980 (Davey, 2011a). How much the public or donors paid attention to the politics within the humanitarian movement is not clear, though; certainly the organisations that accepted Vietnamese conditions were not seen as overly compromised. For instance, the Cambodian campaign saw SPF receive its first major European donation, 1.62m francs in September 1979 (Brodiez, 2006b: 257). Separately from these controversies, Handicap International was founded in 1982 to offer care to amputees amongst the Cambodian refugee population.

Subsequently, the relief mobilisation for Cambodia has been widely criticised by French authors. They recognise the debt to British journalist William Shawcross for this critique (see Shawcross, 1984, French version published 1985). Rufin emphasised how the Vietnamese used international aid to consolidate their hold on Cambodia, while outside the country the Khmer Rouge were able to rebuild due to their control of some of the refugee camps (Rufin, 1986: 206–18; see also Terry, 2002: 114–54). Destexhe was particularly critical of Oxfam’s decision to accept the conditions Phnom Penh imposed upon aid deliveries, which reduced the bargaining power of the ICRC and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (Destexhe, 1993: 99). Rony Brauman, whose first experience with MSF was in the Thai camps in the mid-1970s, and who was instrumental in MSF’s public protests, later recognised that they had been taken in by the exaggerated claims regarding needs made by the Vietnamese authorities. Brauman concluded pointedly that ‘like our predecessors in Biafra, and as sincerely as them, we rushed into a short-sighted strategy based on victimhood’ (Brauman, 2006: 99).

As this quote suggests, this period saw the emergence of two distinct generations of activists within MSF. Differences over the role of logistics and the need for professionalisation after extended operations in the Thai camps fed into personal disputes within the organisation. Along with associated differences regarding the use of the media, they were at the heart of the vituperative conflicts in 1979 that saw the

departure of Kouchner and his clique from MSF and the consolidation of the group based around Malhuret, Brauman and Emmanuelli. The catalyst for the split came during an extremely high-profile campaign for refugees fleeing Vietnam by sea in 1978–79. The ‘boat people’ were a very prominent issue in the French press generally, and Kouchner captured much of this attention with his ‘Comité un Bateau pour le Vietnam’ (‘Boat for Vietnam Committee’), aimed at sending a boat to collect refugees in the South China Sea (see Vallaey, 2004: 280–301). This idea had been considered by MSF and rejected for practical reasons, but Kouchner’s ongoing membership of the organisation meant that the Boat for Vietnam campaign was often taken as an MSF mission. Eventually, forced to revise their project, Kouchner’s group converted a boat into a floating medical centre, which was moored at the Malaysian island of Pulau Bidong for three months from April 1979. After a public attack on the mission by Emmanuelli and a highly volatile MSF General Assembly in May, Kouchner and his supporters left. They went on to found MDM in December 1980 (see Fox, 1999).

There is no consensus about the ideological significance of the Boat for Vietnam campaign. On one level, the mobilisation on behalf of the Vietnamese ‘boat people’ is cited by historians of French activism and indeed politics in general – not only experts on humanitarianism – as the symbolic moment when the ideological divisions that had structured the majority of the twentieth century ceased to be of relevance (see for example Hamon and Rotman, 1988: 634). The transcendence of ideological divisions is symbolised by the joint participation of Raymond Aron and Jean-Paul Sartre, two intellectual heavyweights whose politics had been in opposition for decades. Kouchner himself has always asserted the campaign’s impartiality (Kouchner, 1986: 174; Kouchner, 1991: 185). By the same token, however, the implicit condemnation of the Vietnamese government can be seen as a critique of left-wing dictatorships and as vindication of Aron’s liberal politics. This is the oft-repeated view, formulated by Brauman, that the Boat for Vietnam initiative was a ‘floating critique of totalitarianism’ (Vallaey, 2004: 293; see also Brauman, 2006: 73–74). Regardless of which view is taken, this moment was both significant and symbolic in terms of the changing place that humanitarian ideas have occupied in the intellectual landscape in France.

If there remains some doubt about the ideological intent of the Bateau pour le Vietnam campaign, there is no doubt that, by the mid-1980s, anti-communism was something of a crusade amongst parts of the *sans-frontiériste* sector. The March for the Survival of Cambodia in 1980 was one of the first headed by Brauman and Malhuret, who had both by this time revised their earlier far-left politics. The two then drove the creation of the Fondation Liberté sans frontières (LSF), nominally a think-tank but in fact intended to support a crusade against *tiers-mondiste* ideological influences upon humanitarian and development thinking (see Vallaey, 2004: 461–509). The first

conference LSF held was highly controversial and provoked a series of responses from other parts of the aid sector, *tiers-mondiste* or supposedly *tiers-mondiste* circles and others who had a professional interest in the issues being debated (for the conference proceedings, see Brauman, 1986; for responses see for example the special issue of *Le monde diplomatique*, May 1985; Lacoste, 1986).

Another ideologically relevant context of humanitarian engagement in this period was Afghanistan, suffering a brutal war in the wake of the 1979 Soviet invasion. *Sans-frontiériste* missions in Afghanistan provided more impetus for the expansion of the sector and reinforced the ideological orientation of those who had adopted an anti-communist stance. Engagement in Afghanistan was significant because it was one of the few instances in which the idea of unauthorised access – conceptually and rhetorically so important to *sans-frontiérisme* – was put into practice. All operations inside Afghanistan were against the will of the Afghan and Soviet authorities and were achieved with the assistance of the *mujahideen*. Because of their unauthorised presence and proximity to the *mujahideen*, international aid workers became the subject of military attacks by the Soviet army, and a humanitarian worker was arrested and tried for espionage in 1983. After confessing to aiding ‘counter-revolutionaries’ and being threatened with the death penalty, Philippe Augoyard was sentenced to eight years’ prison, provoking a major support campaign in France (Girardet, 1985: 221–22). He was released after five months following diplomatic pressure from the French government (see Augoyard, 1985; also Malhuret 1983–84). Along with the arrest of two French humanitarian workers in Turkey in 1981, this has been seen as the beginning of a series of events showing the troubling nature of humanitarian action for some governments (Aeberhard, 1994: 7).

Several organisations were involved in clandestine missions inside Afghanistan. AICF was founded in 1979 by a group of intellectuals, journalists and doctors, with a focus on hunger from a relief rather than development perspective. AICF also had a presence in camps in Thailand in 1980 and was co-organiser of the protest march for access to Cambodia; it also worked with Afghan refugees in Pakistan. Another, small, organisation, Aide médicale internationale (AMI), was also founded in this period. Although its first mission was in Laos, AMI was also involved in Afghanistan, Cambodia and Lebanon in the early 1980s. It emphasised the training of local populations. By 1985, AMI, AICF and MSF combined had sent nearly 400 volunteers to Afghanistan, with 20–30 in place at any given time, for periods of 3–8 months (Girardet, 1985: 216). Women played an important role in these missions as Western NGOs learned to manage the demands of working amongst Muslim populations (*ibid.*: 218). This period was a crucial one for the formation of NGOs in France, with AICF and AMI founded in this period, as well as Solidarités, a conflict and natural disaster response organisation that focuses on needs relating to water, food and shelter.

The high-profile work in Afghanistan was surpassed in both media attention and scale in the mid-1980s by the mobilisation for Ethiopia. France was no exception to the story of the West's discovery of famine in Ethiopia after the screening of a BBC report in October 1984. The Live Aid concerts of July 1985, despite receiving widespread coverage, were criticised by French commentators uneasy at the role of the media and the rise of commodified versions of humanitarian and development aid (including French equivalents of the famous song 'Do They Know It's Christmas?' released by Bob Geldof and his colleagues, or celebrity-driven initiatives like the French actor Coluche's Restos du Cœur). Aggressive awareness-raising campaigns in France were accompanied with increasing controversies over the politicisation of aid. The Fondation Liberté sans Frontières was an important focal point of these disputes, which shaped the way the Ethiopian famine was understood; as a side-effect, MSF was excluded from Live Aid funds apparently because of its political position and its earlier criticism of the Ethiopian government (Haski, 1985).

Issues came to a head when MSF was expelled from Ethiopia in December 1985 (see Davey, 2011a). Unlike almost all other agencies in the country, MSF had publicly criticised the government's manipulation and abuse of the aid effort. Its claims that aid was being used in a way that not only undermined but directly contradicted the aims and spirit of the relief effort resulted in the closure of all MSF missions, the freezing of its assets in Ethiopia and the expulsion of all its international staff. This episode, fed by other controversies related to humanitarian action, contributed to an explosion of critical studies about the history, ethics and realities of humanitarian action. These included a significant number of reflective and analytical texts emanating from aid circles (Jean, 1986; Kouchner, 1986; Rufin, 1986), as well as work by other commentators (Glucksmann and Wolton, 1986; Liauzu, 1987). Historians have since echoed the conclusion MSF had drawn, that 'once again humanitarians [were] the accomplices of evil: no longer through their silence as in 1942 but through their poorly thought out compassionate fever' (Dachy, 2004: 29). Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos (2001: 12) argued that 'emergency humanitarian aid feeds war, that experts do not know its real impact upon the eventual beneficiaries "after diversion," that we do not know how many lives it saves in the long term, nor at what price, and above all that we are powerless to turn off the "humanitarian tap" because the dynamics at stake are removed from the interest of the populations concerned and are subject to the administrative inertia of those operating the system'. The stance MSF took has thus become less controversial in retrospect than it was at the time.

For different reasons, this period was also problematic for the French National Society. During the Southeast Asian refugee crisis, the CRF was criticised for bias in its placement of refugee children: it was accused of preferring placements in schools and institutions rather than with families who had

offered their services, because of supposed financial benefits (Chevallier, 1986: 40). It responded with a special issue of its journal, *Présence Croix-Rouge*, in January 1980.<sup>9</sup> Shortly beforehand, at the end of 1978, one of its regional presidents was arrested for embezzlement of the organisation's money. It was criticised in an article in *Le monde* that asserted that 'the Croix-Rouge française is an old, infirm lady' (cited in Chevallier, 1986: 59). The arrival of a new president, Jean-Marie Soutou, in 1979 resulted in reforms of the CRF and the rehabilitation of its public image during the 1980s.

#### 4.2 Legitimacy and illegitimacy in the late twentieth century

From a French humanitarian point of view, the 1980s has been seen by some commentators as a 'golden age of humanitarianism' (Bortolotti, 2004: 14–15; see also Maillard, 2007: 76), a time when funds were plentiful and awareness of the ambiguities of aid was not strong enough to interfere with the sense of progress. As Destexhe put it: 'forgetful of the difficulties – now almost idealised – of a still recent past, many humanitarian volunteers nostalgically regard the period 1980–1990 as a kind of golden age, that of the "ten glorious years" when they were advancing within a stable framework, with fixed markers, whose rules they knew' (Destexhe, 1993: 127).

The presence of humanitarian actors in government from this period onwards was one sign of humanitarianism's ascendancy. The first instance of this trend was Claude Malhuret's entry into national politics in the position of Secretary of State for Human Rights in 1986. Two years later, Kouchner was appointed to the new position of Secretary of State for Humanitarian Action. The post was upgraded to Minister of Health and Humanitarian Action in 1992. In 1995, Emmanuelli became Secretary of State for Humanitarian Relief Action in the government of Alain Juppé. For the decade that a human rights or humanitarian position existed, three out of the four post-holders came from MSF; only Lucette Michaux-Chevry (who served from 1993–95) had previously had a career in politics. The position was abolished in 1997 when Lionel Jospin became Prime Minister.

Aside from those who were appointed as ministers and secretaries of state, there are many other examples of individual trajectories combining humanitarianism and politics. Marcel Delcourt, the first president of MSF, resigned from the post in 1973 in order to run for parliament; he became a ministerial advisor and participated in government decisions regarding aid programmes. Jean-Christophe Rufin, a veteran of both MSF and ACF, has had a successful political and diplomatic career. Starting in politics as an advisor to Malhuret, Rufin worked as a special advisor on North–South relations and cooperation, later serving as ambassador to Senegal and Gambia. Destexhe, secretary-general of MSF International from

<sup>9</sup> This journal is not available in the UK so it has not been possible to verify this claim from Chevallier or see the content of the issue.

1991–95, later became a senator in the Belgian parliament. In effect, as recent career guidebooks show, humanitarian and development careers are considered to be related to diplomatic service (Ghelim, Ingres and Moreau, 2009).

Another sign of the impact of humanitarianism upon French society was the creation of the ‘fourth world’ missions for marginalised populations within France. The nation’s decline in prosperity in the 1980s exposed higher numbers of people to vulnerability and, as a result, contributed to growing gaps in the public healthcare system (Brücker, Pierquin and Henry, 1994: 41). MDM opened its first Mission France in Paris in 1986 – intended to last only a few months, by 1994 the programme had 27 sites across the country (Ferré, 1995: 42). A 1993 report found that the Missions France had performed 400,000 consultations; 60% of people treated were without a permanent place of residence and 75% were educated only to high school or primary school level (Brücker, Pierquin and Henry, 1994: 44). MSF’s equivalent programme, Solidarité France, was established in 1987. SPF and Secours catholique both undertook similar work, and new organisations like Les restos du cœur sprang up to help address the needs of the French poor. Despite recognition of the contributions of ‘fourth world’ programmes, they have been challenged on the grounds that ‘the permanence of this type of solution risks eventually leading to a lack of government accountability by offering pseudo-solutions’ (Brücker, Pierquin and Henry, 1994: 45).

Perhaps unexpectedly, humanitarian operations within France overlap with another theme of humanitarian action in this period – the role of the military. Missions in France constitute an important part of the military’s humanitarian work, either through the role of standing units like the Brigade des sapeurs-pompiers de Paris (BSPP) and the Bataillon des marins-pompiers de Marseille (BMP) or through short-term mobilisations during emergencies (Dufour, 1993: 17). French experiences of natural or industrial disasters – such as fires in the Nouvelles Galeries in Marseille (1938), a dam breach at Malpasset (1959) and an oil spill after the shipwreck of the *Amoco Cadiz* off the Breton coast (1978) – have all required military mobilisation. The French military has also engaged in international interventions, evacuations, relief missions and peacekeeping efforts. From 1990 to 1992, the French military undertook roughly a dozen major military humanitarian operations; polls at the end of this period suggested that nearly 75% of French people supported the use of the military for peacekeeping or humanitarian missions (Dufour, 1993: 14; 44). International missions have involved the deployment of specialised medical teams, such as the Antenne chirurgicale parachutiste (ACP) or Hôpital mobile chirurgical (HMC; the EMMIR team active in the 1960s was dismantled in 1980). They have also included demining missions, including at the site of the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia. This range of activities inspired Pierre Dufour’s controversial assertion that ‘even if they do not have the monopoly, armies are, in a situation of priority, the natural resource for humanitarian action, adapted to all the forms that it can take’ (Dufour, 1993: 17).

This might well have seemed the case to those like Dufour writing about humanitarianism in the early 1990s. The Gulf War (1990–91) is seen as the beginning of the era of the *intervention militaro-humanitaire* (‘military–humanitarian intervention’). The Gulf War has a mixed place in French historiography. France was, of course, part of the UN coalition and supplied 19,000 soldiers and related hardware under the banner of Opération Daguet. However, most of the discussion of this period focuses on Operation Provide Comfort, the intervention authorised by Security Council Resolution 688 on 5 April 1991, to protect Kurdish populations threatened by Iraqi forces. Focusing on the operational side, Marc Payet described Operation Provide Comfort as the period when logistics and sanitation came into their own in MSF. According to his account, MSF’s logistical wing chartered a full plane every day for a month: a phone call with the field team at 6pm would determine the cargo that went into the plane, which would depart at about 1am and arrive in Turkey in the early hours of the morning (Payet, 1996: 61). French humanitarian staff helped coordinate and direct French and American soldiers who had been seconded to the relief effort. Kouchner, who was at this time the government member responsible for humanitarian action, celebrated the intervention as the first application of the ‘*droit d’ingérence*’ or ‘right of intervention’ by states (Kouchner, 1991: 13, 229–30; see below). ‘Acting on the internal and international level,’ he wrote, ‘France, faithful to its tradition of offering asylum and defending human rights, perpetuates what is an integral part of its history’ (Kouchner, 1991: 143).

Other experienced humanitarians who later wrote memoirs or histories of humanitarian action were more circumspect about the episode. In a reflection on his career, Bernard Holzer (1994: 134) of CCFD described the questions raised by the Gulf War experience: ‘is this “right of humanitarian intervention” really a new emerging right or is it the expression of bad conscience? Does it convey the law or is it a new avatar of colonialism?’. Destexhe was more severe about what he considered President François Mitterrand’s hypocritical evocation of international law in Iraqi Kurdistan, while ignoring it completely when dealing with the former Yugoslavia. He was scathing too about the exaggerated celebrations in France, in which ‘Bernard Kouchner, [Foreign Minister] Roland Dumas and the President of the Republic warmly congratulate each other on the triumph of this “French idea” that is the right of intervention’ (Destexhe, 1993: 153). The intervention, he claimed, came too late, its legal foundation was questionable and its effects were short-lived. The one enduring effect of Operation Provide Comfort, Destexhe believed, was that it taught Western states the publicity value of humanitarian action.

This lesson was applied to the point of absurdity during the famine in Somalia in 1992. Setting aside discussion of the US-led Operation Restore Hope that began in December 1992, the particular interest of this period for French history derives from the *Du riz pour la Somalie* (‘Rice for Somalia’) campaign jointly organised by Kouchner and Education Minister Jack Lang. Once

again, Destexhe (1993: 136–37) was scathing and his criticisms sum up the contradictions of the campaign. Children in France were encouraged to bring a 'bag of rice for Somalia' to their schools, which was then collected and delivered by the state. The initiative resulted in 6,000 tonnes of rice being delivered at a cost of an estimated 90m francs; if that sum of money had been collected in schools and used to purchase rice in bulk on the international market, Destexhe suggests, up to 15 times more rice could have been procured. It was this that provoked Destexhe to describe the episode as a 'costly aberration', while suggesting that it was always more focused on the West than on Somalia: 'in sum, the campaign was more of a spectacular gesture that benefited its instigators as much – indeed more – than the beneficiaries' (Destexhe, 1993: 137). Or, in Brauman's words, there was little practical value in 'the three grains of rice that Kouchner took to Somalia in 1992, explaining that it had saved tens of millions of lives' (Brauman, 2008: 123).

The media-oriented humanitarianism of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is crystallised by the self-image Kouchner attempted to convey through this campaign. In France, Somalia has become synonymous with the notion of 'spectacular' humanitarianism – 'spectacular' in the sense of Guy Debord's analysis of *La société du spectacle* (1967), in which he presented a critique of consumer society and the role of the media and images in determining social relationships. This idea is encapsulated by images of Kouchner on the shore at Mogadishu with a bag of rice slung over his shoulder, highly contrived and often betraying the presence of the press pack that surrounded Kouchner's supposedly spontaneous act of solidarity. The positive reception that the image enjoyed in France at the time has gradually faded and it has come to represent 'the typical figure of the mediatico-humanitarian productions regulating the great crises' (Ryfman, 2008c: 58).

The French response to conflict in the former Yugoslavia during the first half of the 1990s also bore the mark of the 'Kouchner effect'. Humanitarian action was at the centre of French policy towards the region and France was the largest contributor of troops to the UN Protection Force in the former Yugoslavia (UNPROFOR). As a member of the French government, Kouchner lobbied UN officials to fast-track aid deliveries, and on 23 April 1992 he personally escorted 25 tons of food and medical supplies to Sarajevo (Agence France Presse, 23 April 1992). More than this, however, it was Kouchner's ushering of Mitterrand into the besieged and isolated Bosnian capital in June 1992 that has come to represent France's humanitarian policy and its centrality in media coverage of the conflict. Mitterrand was hailed as the 'president without borders' and applauded for his 'noble deed' (Agence France Presse, 29 June 1992; Marian, 1992: 178). However, Mitterrand's policy towards the former Yugoslavia, characterised by a reliance on humanitarian aid and a refusal to name an aggressor (Macleod 1997: 246), was heavily criticised by French *sans-frontiériste* activists.

Shortly afterwards, journalist René Backmann argued that describing the crisis as 'humanitarian' was akin to characterising the cause by one of its effects (Backmann, 1996: 46). For Patrick Aeberhard, it was part of a list of 'failures' – including responses to the Khmer Rouge, crises in Francophone Africa, the Gulf War and transfusions of HIV-infected blood in France – during which attention did nothing to mitigate hardship (Aeberhard, 1996: 42). For Brauman this list also included Somalia, Kurdistan and Chechnya, all of which showed that 'grand declarations of humanitarian intentions flourished in the international presses and in the UN forums, but State practices and logics remained' (Brauman, 2002: 78). Indeed, Brauman was one of the first to denounce the negative effects of the governmental preference for humanitarianism in the former Yugoslavia, in a robust article in December 1991 entitled 'Contre l'humanitarisme'. Brauman (1991: 80) condemned governments that 'no longer seem to find anything in their diplomatic catalogue besides medical teams, deliveries of medicines, hospital-boats, fireman-sailors or boxes of corned beef!'. When MSF received the European Prize for Human Rights on 5 October 1992, Brauman used his acceptance speech to denounce Europe's message to 'budding dictators' that 'as long as you allow humanitarian aid through, let a few supply planes land, you will be able to do what you want' (Franceschi, 1992).

Such criticisms were part of a wider campaign against state humanitarianism during the Bosnian crisis, with the denunciations of the French intelligentsia paralleled by a grass-roots mobilisation of over 300 groups dedicated to the Bosnian crisis (Martel 1994: 149). However, at least as far as MSF and similarly aligned groups were concerned, the calls for military action against ethnic cleansing were also in tune with the crusading anti-communist positions key figures in the organisation had adopted in the late phases of the Cold War. As Fabrice Weissman (2011b: 186) put it, 'by demanding that western governments make war against oppressive regimes, rather than protect relief operations, MSF entered the public debate alongside neo-conservatives and liberal internationalists'. Although this stance was far from shared by all French humanitarian actors, it did, as Weissman made clear, impact significantly upon French public debates about humanitarianism and its relationship to other forms of international affairs and democratic politics. Challenged by the experiences in Somalia and the Great Lakes region, eventually 'the post-Cold War euphoria fuelling hope for a "new world order based on human rights" gave way to somewhat bitter caution' (*ibid.*: 189).

Like other events in this period, French understandings of the Rwandan genocide correspond in many ways to what might be considered the Western consensus. This is not to say that all Western commentators agree, but that there is a kind of internationalised set of ways in which a given humanitarian context may be discussed. Alongside this, there is also a

national perspective. In the Rwandan case, French accounts are shaped by the country's role as a former colonial power in Africa (though not in Rwanda specifically) and the complacent stance it adopted towards the Habyarimana government prior to the massacres. Destexhe, in an outraged, almost tormented book published two years after the massacres, described how France's assistance to the government was maintained in the face of discriminatory policies and human rights abuses. Although Belgium had ended military cooperation and reduced its non-military assistance, France tripled its aid to Rwanda from 1990 onwards, stepping up arms deliveries and increasing the number of French Rapid Action Force (RAF) troops stationed in the country; in 1993 Rwanda received the equivalent of \$10m in military aid from France (Destexhe, 1996: 52).

Jean-Hervé Bradol, who was working for MSF, recalled the 'extremely shocking' nature of the French military presence in Rwanda: 'I saw French soldiers perform identity checks at the exits from Kigali, side by side with the Rwandan army of Habyarimana. I saw them patrol Kigali airport and ensure its interior security using arms ... The impression was one of a real intermingling of Rwandan forces and French troops, while the regime was radicalising in a genocidal direction' (Bradol and Mamou, 2004: 14). The French government's inaction during two months of massacres following Habyarimana's assassination was lambasted by MSF, which issued an open letter to Mitterrand appealing for action and asserting that 'genocide cannot be stopped by doctors'. After the killings, according to Destexhe, French soldiers failed to apprehend former allies implicated in the violence. Against this background, the French intervention in June 1994, known as Operation Turquoise, has been seen as an attempt to atone for France's prior policy. Destexhe concluded that 'France used the cover of a very limited but successful intervention to disguise the fact that, although it is one of the most powerful countries in the world, it was contributing nothing more than any other country towards finding a real political solution to this crisis' (Destexhe, 1996: 55).

The return of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) prompted the flight of those who feared retaliation for the killings, and refugee camps in neighbouring countries became host to some 2m people. French literature, like its English-language counterpart, is critical of the way in which the camps were used by government-allied forces to regroup militarily and to consolidate their hold over the civilian population. This was the 'humanitarian trap' first denounced by Rufin in the mid-1980s. The logistical and operational achievements of treating such a vast number of refugees – for instance in managing to provide more than 1,000 cubic metres of chlorinated water per day – have thus been afforded less significance than the ethical dilemmas raised by providing aid in such a situation (Payet, 1996: 54). MSF withdrew from the refugee camps in Goma in protest at abuses in December 1994. At the time of the ten-year anniversary of the massacres, a special issue of *Humanitaire* (entitled 'Le génocide des Tutsis du

Rwanda: une abjection pour l'Humanité, un échec pour les humanitaires') examined both the humanitarian dilemmas and the political failures. Other initiatives in this period, including a Commission d'enquête citoyenne sur l'implication de France au Rwanda, focused on the role of the French government and military. There is now a journal – *La nuit rwandaise* – devoted solely to France's role in the Rwandan genocide; since 2007 it has been published annually on 7 April, the anniversary of the start of the genocide.

French scholarship is also heavily critical of the international response in general. France was, of course, not the only country to apply a humanitarian discourse to the genocide of the Tutsi people. The US policy banning the use of the word 'genocide' is seen as emblematic of the refusal to address the violence, following on from the unsuccessful experience of the intervention in Somalia.<sup>10</sup> The failure of humanitarian agencies, both UN and NGOs, to protect national staff has been roundly condemned (Bradol and Mamou, 2004: 27–28). Bradol suggested that 90% of the organisations present in Rwanda at the time would not have been able to compile a list of their own staff who died in the massacres, an indicator of how little was done to protect them. Criticism has also been levelled at the failure to stop further massacres in Zaire in 1996, when Rwandan refugees were attacked by Rwandan and Congolese forces allied with the new regime in Kigali.

#### 4.3 Professionalisation, diversification and norm development

Despite these challenges, the last two decades of the twentieth century saw major movement on the issues of professionalisation and norm development. As with other elements of humanitarian action, there were historical precedents for the changes seen in this period. For instance, military doctors had been trained by various schools since the first institution of its kind was established in 1720 (Dufour, 1993: 39). In 1939, an initiative involving female ambulance drivers led to the creation of a training programme; 1,200 certificates for this programme were awarded in 1941 alone, and it later provided the basis of the Ministry of Health's Certificat de capacité ambulancière (CCA), set up in 1973 (Chevallier, 1986: 86). Training and education initiatives by development-oriented actors also have a long history, as seen in the creation of IRFED in 1958.

In recent years the number of professional accreditations has increased markedly. The website of the French Foreign Ministry lists roughly 40 courses at various universities at postgraduate level alone. The Bioforce school was established in Vénissieux in 1983, with a three-year training course for logisticians and administrators working in the humanitarian and development sectors; ten years later the first career

<sup>10</sup> This interpretation of the US use or avoidance of the term 'genocide' has been challenged by recent scholarship on the formation of American interventionist policy (see Wertheim, 2010).

handbook for those interested in humanitarian action was published. Bioforce's courses have since been supplemented by others: at the Ecole supérieure de commerce et de développement 3A: Afrique, Asie, Amérique latine (Ecole 3A) in Lyon, created in 1984; the Institut de formation et d'appui aux initiatives de développement (IFAID) in Bordeaux; the Centre international d'études pour le développement local (CIEDEL) within the Université catholique de Lyon since 1990; and the Ecole supérieure d'agro-développement international (ISTOM) in Cergy-Pontoise, with its foundations in a training school for colonial engineers created in 1908. There are also specialised courses at regular universities, such as the Diplôme universitaire humanitaire et développement at the Université Michel de Montaigne in Bordeaux, as well as associations outside of the education system that offer training for humanitarian practitioners, such as Humacoop, active since 1993. In light of such developments, humanitarian organisations some time ago began to show a preference for applicants with university qualifications (Payet, 1996: 19).

Research centres originating from within the sector have played an important role in the French humanitarian practice of self-criticism and analysis. One key institution in this context is Groupe URD, established in 1993. By their own account, Groupe URD was founded by members of French humanitarian and development NGOs, then opened up to include other organisations, university researchers and partner institutions outside France (Grünwald, 1999: I–II). The first phase of reflection led the group towards further research on humanitarian and development action in situations of conflict. Groupe URD also engaged with issues surrounding codes of conduct, evaluation methods and training programmes. In 1997 it published a collection based on the work it had done to date, from rehabilitation in north Mali to partnerships within the Red Cross movement, crisis prevention and humanitarian action in Shining Path territory in Peru (Pirrotte, Husson and Grünwald, 1999). After this round of research, from 1997 onwards Groupe URD expanded its work to cover issues specific to particular types of action (nutrition, sanitation, protection), as well as cross-cutting themes (such as the quality of aid and risk reduction). The group has published several books, including regional studies and work on issues such as urban action, evaluation and the role of beneficiaries. Since December 2008 it has also published the journal *Humanitaires en mouvement* in French, English and Spanish.

Research centres have also come directly out of particular organisations. MSF alone has founded two. The first, Epicentre, was created in 1987 to provide scientific support to MSF. The organisation, the board of which is largely composed of MSF-France members, undertakes clinical research on disease and public health and provides field epidemiology training. A second research centre – the MSF Foundation – was founded in the late 1980s, giving rise to the 'Populations en danger' series from 1992 (Jean, 1992). In 1999, the Foundation became

the Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires (CRASH). It studies MSF's actions in the field as well as the challenges facing humanitarian actors more generally (see for example Weissman, 2003). Groupe URD and CRASH both make many of their publications available online (often in English translation) and also organise conferences and other events. Although MDM does not have a research centre as such, it also publishes a journal – *Humanitaire*, which replaced *Ingérences* in 2000 – as well as practical guides to humanitarian action.

NGOs have consistently published journals or bulletins for their members; their evolution is indicative of their increasing professionalisation and the greater attention paid to knowledge transfer. Websites have become an integral part of the public presence of humanitarian organisations. For several years MDM was also associated with the 'Médecins de l'impossible' series of non-fiction books launched in 1994 by Editions Hachette-Jeunesse. They tell the story of a young doctor, Ludovic, and a photographer, Prune, in various situations of crisis captured by the titles: *SOS Guatemala*, *Zone interdite en Bosnie* and *Terrain miné au Cambodge* (Deloche and Granjon, 1994; 1996; Deloche, Granjon and Verspieren-Coupré, 1994). The self-legitimising and promotional elements of the books were eventually seen as potentially compromising and MDM ended its affiliation with the series, which was picked up by La chaîne de l'espoir (Le Bart, 2001: 98). Specialised in the care of children, La chaîne de l'espoir was created in 1988 as a programme within MDM under the initiative of Alain Deloche, the then president; it was established as an independent organisation in 1995 and Deloche left MDM to continue its work. Other communications initiatives, including the magazine *Là-bas*, the first issue of which came out in March 2012, are more independent of the NGO sector.

Codes of conduct have also been developed to monitor and regulate the humanitarian sector. Many are international, though there are some specifically French examples, such as a 'Comité de déontologie' (Deontology Committee) created in 1989 (Ferré, 1995: 33). Regulations have been placed on fundraising arrangements, requiring organisations to declare their fundraising campaign to the local police prefecture before undertaking it (Guenoun, 1994: 97). Following the 9/11 attacks, the ICRC sponsored the creation of an informal 'Comité de veille humanitaire' (Humanitarian Oversight Committee) in 2001, bringing together the main French NGOs, representatives of the ICRC and key humanitarian thinkers including Brauman, Rufin and Ryfman, in order to discuss current events from a humanitarian perspective.

The particularity of the French contribution to the debates around standards and accountability, which arose following the crises of the 1990s and especially those of the Great Lakes region, must also be underlined. Most notably, during the formulation of the Sphere Project and its *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, French

agencies expressed concern about the terms and likely impact of the Sphere approach. A document known as the ‘French letter’, addressed to the Sphere steering committee, raised concerns with some of the approaches adopted by the Sphere draft and expressed the view that ‘pre-set standards will never replace real professionalism which requires, in addition to the mastering of one or more disciplines, vision, intuition, adaptability, imagination and flexibility’ (Bodin et al., 1998).<sup>11</sup> Their concerns had three principal axes: technical issues; the failure to place adequate emphasis on context when establishing practice standards; and larger issues relating to questions such as the attitudes of beneficiaries, the place of development practices, the neglect of NGOs from the global South, and how the principle of ‘do no harm’ should be viewed. Subsequently, despite revisions to the Sphere framework, these concerns have been restated and extended (Dufour et al., 2004). They are part of a broader push, strong in France though not exclusive to it, for an emphasis on ‘quality’ rather than ‘standards’. This agenda is reflected in the *Projet Qualité*, a research initiative launched by Groupe URD in 1999, which led to the quality control method COMPAS Qualité in 2004. It has also driven the formulation of the *Guide Synergie Qualité* (Coordination SUD, 2005) and the humanitarian information and document management system SIGMAH, established in

<sup>11</sup> The signatories and their affiliations at the time were Jean-Luc Bodin (ACF), Claire Boulanger (Institut de l’Humanitaire), Jean-Hervé Bradol (MSF), Michel Brughière (MDM), Marc Gastellou (MSF), François Grünewald (Groupe URD), Bernard Jacquemard (MDM), François Jean (MSF Fondation), Dr Jacques Lebas (Institut de l’Humanitaire), Karim Laouhabdia (MSF), Pierre Micheletti (MDM) and Claire Pirote (Groupe URD).

2011 by ten humanitarian NGOs, with facilitation and research support by Groupe URD.<sup>12</sup>

More broadly, operational elements are harder to draw from the secondary literature. They are in many cases either raised only briefly or simply overlooked. One resource, however, is the 1994 volume on *Médecine humanitaire* edited by Jacques Lebas, Florence Veber and Gilles Brücker. It is divided into three sections, each made up of multiple contributions by various authors including academics, other researchers and practitioners. The first section examines ‘concepts of humanitarian action’ and features historical, normative and disciplinary perspectives on humanitarianism (international law, public health, finance and communications, state humanitarianism and so on). The second section deals with humanitarian action in the field, and has a series of short chapters on issues such as the management of epidemics, transfusions, treatment of women and children and mental health. The final two sections have a series of ‘practical cards’ and ‘technical cards’ with concrete guidelines, advice or information – how to conduct an exploratory mission, useful documents for travel, management of supplies, treating cholera and leprosy, vaccinations, chlorination, nutrition and hygiene. Although these operational sections of the book do not have a historical perspective, they provide a useful gauge of practice standards in the mid-1990s.

<sup>12</sup> The NGOs in the SIGMAH Steering Cooperative are Acting for Life, ACF, Comité de Secours Internationaux (COSI), CRF, Handicap International, MDM, AMI, Secours Islamique, Solidarités International and Triangle Génération Humanitaire (Triangle GH).

# Chapter 5

## Recent dynamics and debates

### 5.1 A snapshot of French humanitarianism since 9/11

The challenges that the twenty-first century has posed for humanitarian action have, it appears, largely been shared by Western NGOs and international agencies. Themes raised by the French literature include the threat that state humanitarianism represents to the independence or credibility of humanitarian organisations; the difficulties of operating alongside the military or in militarised contexts; complexities in the management of the media and public responses to high-profile crises; problems created by the expansion of the sector; and the perpetual issue of the politicisation of aid.

In the immediate post-9/11 period this convergence was not as clear-cut. Weissman (2011b: 190) has argued that, with the exception of the Iraq War that began in 2003, MSF's decision to assert its independence from the stabilisation agenda set it apart from many Western NGOs. Although he was far from uncritical about MSF's stance regarding its coherence, foundation or consequences, it is important to remember that this commentary emerged from MSF's *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed* project, marking 40 years of the organisation's existence. Moreover, as editor of an earlier volume on the humanitarian ramifications of military interventions (Weissman, 2003), Weissman had been instrumental in efforts to provide an empirical foundation for MSF's claims to independence from the stabilisation agenda.

Many of the issues that are prevalent today were crystallised by the Iraq War, which was opposed by France. According to Michèle Mercier, an ICRC delegation had been present in Iraq since 1980, including throughout the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) and the first Gulf War. However, due to the high level of insecurity following the US-led invasion, the ICRC was forced to scale down its operations and presence in Baghdad and Basra (Mercier, 2004: 50). MSF withdrew from Iraq in 2004 after a heated debate about its responsibilities to affected populations as against the potential risks of choosing to remain and work (Fassin, 2011: 223–42), including direct and intentional attacks on NGOs (MSF, 2008). MSF resumed activities in Iraq in 2008, after the security situation had improved.

The Indian Ocean tsunami of December 2004 is largely discussed according to two main issues. The first was the role of the internet and the impact that it had upon the popular response to the tsunami. The emotional impact of amateur footage of the tsunami intensified the rate of individual giving, and the internet facilitated these donations. In general, the place of the internet in marketing and communications operations has become central, though scholars have cautioned against simplistic views of the internet as an unqualified good.

Writing prior to the tsunami, Béatrice Pouligny (2001) drew attention to inequalities in access to the internet and noted that the decline in hard-copy publications represented a loss of information for people without access; she also suggested that the internet had had a relatively limited impact on how NGOs organised their work, allowing the rapid diffusion of information between individuals that already had access to such information, without replacing the traditional modes of coordination or lobbying based on personal relationships within small groups.

The second issue raised by the tsunami related to the appropriateness of aid. The main driver of debate was MSF's declaration a few days after the tsunami that it would no longer be accepting funds for relief work as there was not sufficient demand for the continued presence of emergency medical NGOs. Brauman has repeatedly criticised the assumption that an event that causes a large number of deaths will, by the very presence of dead bodies, automatically increase the risk of disease amongst survivors. These are, he has claimed, 'unfounded fears, based on an incorrect belief in the infecting power of decomposing bodies: epidemics create corpses, certainly, but corpses do not cause epidemics' (Brauman, 2009b). MSF was accused of jeopardising the humanitarian response by undermining the goodwill and generosity that donors had shown following the tsunami.

A similar dispute occurred after Cyclone Nargis in Burma in 2008. In the aftermath of the cyclone, the Burmese government denied international organisations and NGOs access to affected areas, while simultaneously refusing to deploy any of its own resources. For Brauman, predictions about the threat of disease and the need for mass humanitarian intervention ignored the substantial work being done by local actors and international associations present in Burma prior to the cyclone; it also played into the 'scaremongering' of Western governments, which had begun to speak about intervention on humanitarian grounds (Brauman, 2011).<sup>13</sup> Longer studies have since examined the political positions adopted by various actors following Cyclone Nargis, including the military junta, the Burmese people (who went to a referendum on the constitution eight days after the cyclone struck), foreign governments, NGOs and international agencies (Brac de la Perrière, 2010).

During this period, one controversy arose that was particular to the French experience. In 2007, members of the small group Arche de Zoé were convicted of child abduction after attempting to fly 103 children out of Chad (see Troubé, 2007). Brauman acknowledged that the World Health Organisation had posted comments on its website saying that the dead posed no health threat to survivors and that there was no risk of an epidemic, but complained that this advice was not heeded by others.

2008). They were allowed to serve their sentences – initially eight years of forced labour, commuted to prison sentences – in France and were pardoned by the Chadian president the following year. The actions of this group, founded by members of the French 4x4 Federation, have provoked debate in France about the effects of the rapid proliferation of humanitarian NGOs. In a special issue of *Humanitaire* on the episode, Pierre Micheletti (2008) of MDM reflected on the various questions raised by the Arche de Zoé affair: ‘the interpretation put forward of the humanitarian situation in Darfur and the analysis of its determinants, the issue of the modalities of the military presence in Chad, the political management of this dossier by the French government and, more globally, the issue of the crosscutting representations of French humanitarian intervention in Africa as of the perception, amongst Africans, of our modalities of working on the continent’. For Ryfman, commenting in the same forum, a key question raised was why, ‘in today’s France, at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, individuals are convinced that they can act as humanitarians simply because they adhere to a cause’ (Ryfman, 2008b). The answer, he speculated, lay in the bias with which humanitarian action is represented in France, notably ignorance of the evolution of humanitarianism and an excessive emphasis on *sans-frontiérisme*, contributing to a kind of confident cavaliering that has little to do with the behaviour and complexity of the current humanitarian sector.

The response to the 2010 earthquake in Haiti illustrated this complexity. Studies have begun to examine the effects of earthquakes on the local population (Jabouin, 2010), but grey literature still seems to make up a large part of the French material on the response to Haiti. Groupe URD has undertaken several studies, both real-time evaluations and subsequent research. France played a strong role, with its first aid team arriving from the French Antilles the day after the earthquake. The French military contributed significantly, with emergency response teams from the BSPP and the Unité de sécurité civile (USC) (Pierre, 2010). According to the French government, roughly 1,170 French staff went to Haiti, and nearly 2,000 tonnes of humanitarian aid were delivered. French medics provided 17,000 consultations, 2,550 hospital referrals and performed 1,300 operations at a field hospital that operated from 18 January until 22 February (Report from France à l’ONU, no date). However, Didier Fassin was critical of what he saw as the French and American rivalry over generosity in Haiti, drawing attention to the fact that only 6% of Haitian asylum-seekers are granted refugee status in France and that there are 30,000 Haitians on the US deportation list (Fassin, 2011: x).

## 5.2 France, international humanitarian law and the *droit d’ingérence*

No discussion of French attitudes to humanitarian action would be complete without addressing, albeit briefly, the question of international humanitarian law, and in particular the so-called *droit d’ingérence*. Since the 1980s, this issue

has had a significant profile in France, though never clear consensus. Moreover, despite the prominence of certain debates about *ingérence*, some authors have complained of the confusion deriving from the fact that ‘in most of the analyses of humanitarian action, law does not seem to play a central role’ (Eberwein, 2005: 11).

The undisputed expert in this field is Mario Bettati, now emeritus professor at the Université de Paris II, where he was based from 1988 until 2006. Bettati has published numerous works on the *droit d’ingérence* and other elements of international humanitarian law (see Bettati, 1987; 1996; 2000). The main proponent of the *droit d’ingérence* from an activist and political point of view has been Bernard Kouchner. The pair co-authored a book entitled *Le devoir d’ingérence*, following a conference in January 1987 that articulated the principle of access to populations in need (Bettati and Kouchner, 1987). From this time onwards, according to Bettati, France has been a driving force in UN resolutions expressing the principle of free humanitarian access (Bettati, 1994: 32; see also Herlemont-Zoritchak, 2009). He saw a link between these international documents and the *sans-frontiériste* movement – ‘practising the *devoir d’ingérence* before it became the *droit d’ingérence*, they opened the pathway for this new mindset’ (Bettati, 1994: 30). More circumspect, Philippe Truze of AVICEN, writing in the wake of NATO’s intervention in Kosovo, warned that ‘the risk of a distortion [*dérive*] by State humanitarian action exists today because health, food, logistical and emergency medical assistance are justifiable in the name of the *droit* (and *devoir*) *d’ingérence*, a notion invented by the French and formalised by the United Nations’ (Truze, 2000: 189).

There is a certain fluidity in the language used to discuss these ideas. *Devoir* is translated as ‘duty’, and seems to be used mostly to refer to the humanitarian impulse; a *droit* is a right, though it is also the word used to refer to a body of law, which creates some ambiguity when it is followed by the word *ingérence*, meaning ‘interference’ or ‘intervention’. Kouchner has recognised this in the doctrine of the ‘responsibility to protect’ (Kouchner, 2004: 21), although at the time of Cyclone Nargis he criticised the limitations of the responsibility to protect as it excludes situations of natural disaster (Kouchner, 2008). Bettati (1995: 284–85) has suggested that humanitarian intervention (which he characterised as above all support for the relief and protection work of affected societies) be distinguished from the *intervention d’humanité* (which referred to a state intervening militarily across borders to address an immediate threat to nationals of another country).

The international military intervention in Libya in 2011 represented, for French proponents of the *droit d’ingérence*, another step in the progression of international law towards the safeguarding of civilians. Prior to the interventions, a group of high-profile intellectuals led by Bernard-Henri Lévy had signed a public call for ‘the French government and its partners to do all it can so that the UN respects its

commitment to the “responsibility to protect” and that Europe shoulders its responsibilities and proves that its desire to see the Libyan dictator depart is not just wishful thinking’ (*Le monde*, 17 March 2011). Their appeal evoked the bombing of Guernica by fascist forces and the genocide in Rwanda. After the air strikes, Kouchner called for further systematisation of Europe’s legal and military frameworks responding to the use of violence by states, and referred to his satisfaction that ‘France and the UK have together mapped out a preliminary response to this essential question’ (Kouchner, 2011).

Others were much more critical of the Libyan intervention. Indeed, there is a significant group of critics of the *droit d’ingérence* in France, both humanitarians and analysts. Perhaps inevitably, some of these have emanated from CRASH, which has argued that the aim of humanitarian action is ‘to “civilise” wars, not to legitimise “wars of civilisation”’ (Weissman, 2011a). A stronger critique on the level of values came from Jean Bricmont, a Belgian theoretical physicist and anti-imperialist commentator, who argued that ‘a certain discourse of human rights and democracy, combined with a particular representation of the Second World War’ was being used to ‘justify Western interventions in the third world’ according to a system that he described as ‘humanitarian

imperialism’ (Bricmont, 2005: 17; compare with Rieff’s allusion to colonialism, 2002: 61). For his part, Ryfman saw Cyclone Nargis as evidence of the ‘inanity’ of the *droit d’ingérence* – faced with the opposition of China and Russia, the UN Security Council did not even examine a proposed French resolution aiming to force the Burmese government to allow aid through (Ryfman, 2008c: 79). These are part of a much broader field of studies than it has been possible to cover in this review, including for instance the work of Philippe Moreau Defarges (2006a; 2006b), and various edited volumes bringing together different perspectives on international law and humanitarian action (see for example *Cultures et conflits* special issue, 2005; Andréani and Hassner, 2008).

Alongside debates in the discipline of international law, international relations and other fields already discussed, such as anthropology and history, humanitarian action has also been the subject of attention in the classic milieu of French intellectual activity. Special issues on humanitarianism have been published by *Le débat* (1995, 1999), *Les temps modernes* (2004) and *Esprit* (2008). It is therefore clear that humanitarian action is perceived as an essential subject for historical and philosophical reflection as well as contemporary analysis.



# Conclusion

By drawing attention to the context in which interpretations of history are produced, this Working Paper has sought to show how different narratives of humanitarian action are shaped by the aims and perspectives of their authors. At times, authors concerned with present-day events turned to historical analysis because they perceived an 'apparent inability to relate the present to the past' (Destexhe, 1996: 2), and felt that 'nations and the men that govern them are unaware of History and perpetuate the same errors' (Marqués, 2000: 377). At other times, the importance of the contemporary context as a factor in historical study has been less clearly identified, though it is still relevant.

As part of a broader project on the global history of humanitarianism, this Working Paper provides an overview of French experiences of humanitarian action, as well as an introduction to the French literature about this history. Adopting an inclusive framework in terms of its conception of 'humanitarian' work, the review highlights a range of activities and stakeholders that are sometimes neglected in French histories of humanitarianism. It argues that this tendency is related to the identity-building function of many accounts of French humanitarian action, which identify their subject closely with the *sans-frontiériste* movement embodied by MSF.

This discussion of French humanitarian action during the twentieth century hence also serves as a reminder that the French experience is neither monolithic nor one-dimensional, nor is it as different from Anglo-Saxon humanitarian practice (equally one-dimensionally conceived) as it is often presented. For instance, French contributions to the League of Nations were a significant part of interwar work to improve the plight of others; while these contributions followed a French agenda, they were also part of collective efforts in a period of increased international cooperation. When looking at NGO histories, examples such as SPF and CCFD indicate that notable humanitarian players have emerged at different times throughout the twentieth century. Their institutional identities have the capacity for change, as the case of the SPF, which went from a Communist Party satellite to an independent actor, indicates especially clearly. Government-sponsored initiatives have also evolved over time, from Secours national founded during the First World War to the volunteer programme established in the 1960s. Even amongst the *sans-frontiériste* generation of organisations there have been considerable differences of opinion and ethics.

The question that remains after undertaking such a review is that of the French exception: to what extent is the narrative here specifically French, and to what extent can it be understood as part of a broader, shared, international history? As Benthall noted in his primer on *sans-frontiérisme*, characterisations of

aid actors according to national tendencies may carry some weight, but they must be approached with caution: 'French *gasconnade*, British empiricism and Swiss discretion – these are all clichés regularly contradicted by the behaviour of individuals, but they have some pertinence and they lend colour and variety to the work of NGOs' (Benthall, 1991: 2). It is possible to identify a number of distinctive elements in the French case, while also noting that it shares many points of contact with narratives about aid in other countries.

Although, as the Working Paper has argued, it should not be assumed that humanitarian action in France is and has been synonymous with *sans-frontiérisme*, the renovation of humanitarian action that occurred after Biafra nonetheless remains one of the most striking features of the history of French aid. It is reflected in the language used to describe aid, in the profile of the most influential French NGOs and in the scholarly and literary production that has grown up around the provision of emergency relief. The ability of pivotal individuals within the *sans-frontiériste* movement – most obviously Bernard Kouchner and Rony Brauman, but also Claude Malhuret, Jean-Christophe Rufin and Jacky Mamou – to attract and make use of press attention has encouraged the expansion of the sector. The creation of a ministerial position for humanitarian action indicated the power that *sans-frontiériste* ideas wielded in France, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, when the field was expanding rapidly. Associated with this model, there has been a tendency for French organisations to specialise their practice rather than pursue the so-called 'multi-mandate' approach; specialisation in medical relief is particularly strong (for instance in MSF, MDM, AMI and to a certain extent Handicap International).

Another particularity of the French case is the emphasis on the Holocaust, which is integral to the advocacy of *témoignage* by organisations and individuals of the *sans-frontiériste* generation. Kouchner in particular has referred to the 'failure' of the ICRC during the Second World War as justification for the rejection of the principle of neutrality in favour of impartiality (Kouchner, 2004: 12). For this reason, MSF (and by extension other French organisations that favour *témoignage*) has been seen as a kind of "'counter" ICRC' (Weiss, 1999: 3). While references to the Holocaust have also been an important part of comparable debates in the United States (Novick, 1999), they have had a particular significance for humanitarianism and human rights in France as a result of the experience of occupation during the Second World War.

Other elements of 'French exceptionalism' are less clear-cut. Colonial relief practices are a good illustration. If France's experience of empire allowed it to develop practical knowledge

in areas such as famine relief, disease control, public health and conflict response, it was by no means the only European power to develop such knowledge or foster the notion of ‘benevolent rule’ through the ‘improvement’ of colonial populations. European countries that did not control an empire have also contributed to the colonial dimension of humanitarian history, as seen in the work of Nordic missionaries in the Middle East. Similarly, the difficulties that decolonisation posed for humanitarian action were highly evident in, but not exclusive to, the French case. Both the Nigerian Civil War and the East Pakistan Crisis, so symbolic in French accounts, were also catalytic experiences for humanitarian actors from other countries and international agencies.

Attention to the networks through which aid has operated also suggests that the French case is not unique. The Communist experiment with WIR and MOPR in the interwar period was expressly designed as an international movement. Other organisations such as Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA), founded in 1939, show that SPF-style engagement on the basis of left-wing solidarity was shared by others. The Croix-Rouge française has faced several challenges related specifically to its relationship

with the French government, notably when the latter was subjugated to foreign control during the Second World War. Yet National Societies from other countries have also confronted the question of government interference. The French sections of religious networks – Secours islamique or Secours catholique – can also be understood as part of a global phenomenon of care based on religious affiliation. Moreover, French NGOs have followed a common pattern of ‘internationalisation’ through the creation of national chapters, first seen with Save the Children Fund (SCF), founded in Britain in 1919.

The French experience of humanitarian action in the twentieth century thus coincides in many ways with an international history shared by other European and North American countries that have contributed to the emergence of the Western system. Of course, the precise nature of the evolution of humanitarian action in France can only be understood by reference to the political, cultural and social context within which that evolution occurred. However, it is also through analysis of the context that we are able to identify which characteristics have been shared with others and which, conversely, are truly unique.

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