Abstracts

“Armed with nothing more than “the two hands, the smile, and the trust in God:” UNRRA Efforts to Aid Holocaust Survivors in the Immediate Postwar Period in Germany”

Kierra Crago-Schneider (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum)

At the end of World War II, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) took charge of millions of postwar refugees, including approximately 36,000 Holocaust survivors. UNRRA worked tirelessly to register, house, supply, and provide medical care to refugees awaiting repatriation or resettlement abroad. However, the scale of the task in the spring of 1945 was much higher than UNRRA had anticipated or was prepared to tackle. Refugees and an understaffed UNRRA endured undersupplied relief convoys, inadequate housing, and underprepared employees. The lack of material and human resources affected all Displaced Persons (DPs) in Germany, but were especially harmful to Holocaust survivors whose experiences left them physically and emotionally vulnerable. Postwar housing, food, and clothing shortages were life-threatening for many Jewish DPs who had lived in disease-ridden conditions where they had been physically abused, overworked, and starved by their captors.

This paper will argue that, for Jewish DPs, the experiences of survival, relief, and resettlement were as much a product of their relationships with military authorities and international aid organizations, as were their relationships with UNRRA. This historical reality requires a reordering of our understanding of the functionalities and interconnected nature of international aid that required Allied assistance, the care and resources of international private Jewish organizations, as well as the official capacity of UNRRA and the supplies and aid it provided. This paper will look at how postwar shortages of personnel and resources impacted the physical and mental care provided to Holocaust survivors unable or unwilling to return to their prewar homes and who remained in UNRRA centers throughout the American zone of occupied Germany. It will analyze the ways the postwar reality forced numerous international teams, including UNRRA, to work together to help survivors recover from their war experiences and begin rebuilding their shattered lives.

“UNRRA and the Unaccompanied Children: Child Search in the American Zone of Occupied Germany (1945-1947)”

Widy Novantyo Susanto (Bilkent University)

In the early years after the Second World War, the tasks of UNRRA’s Child Search Branch included locating and identifying unaccompanied children in Germany. Once identified as non-German, they were processed to be reunited with their families and/or repatriated to their original homelands. As historian Tara Zahra explains, welfare workers in UNRRA defined the “best interests of the child” in terms of psychological rehabilitation. This was to be achieved through renationalization and repatriation in order to reverse the effects of Germanization. Only through these methods could the children grow up to be healthy individuals. Nevertheless, determining the nationality of Central and Eastern European children was not as clear cut as the welfare workers may have anticipated. The question of nationality also raised the issue of who would have the final say in the fate of the children. To have an understanding of the difficulties the welfare workers faced, the relationship between UNRRA and other governing bodies such
as OMGUS (Office of Military Government, United States), German authorities and Eastern European governments need to be explored as the objectives of each party did not necessarily align with each other. While the US military was reluctant to remove and repatriate these children due to protests from German authorities, Eastern European governments were eager for the return of the unaccompanied children. UNRRA typically sided with the Eastern European governments for repatriation but the actions they could take were limited as they operated under the authority of the US military. Based on the digital archives of the International Tracing Service (ITS), this paper explores the ambiguity of nationality within groups of unaccompanied children and UNRRA’s response to this issue in order to show that these competing objectives, while not fatal, nevertheless inhibited UNRRA’s mission in ways that are not fully understood.

“Feeding Europe under British Rationing: Relief Efforts for the Continent after the Second World War”

Kelly Spring (Sassoon Visiting Fellow, University of Oxford)

The conclusion of the Second World War brought fresh challenges for Britain as it sought to recover from the conflict, reconfigure its relationship with the United States, and provide financial and material support, including food, to the UNRRA to help feed Europe. However, The Council for British Societies for Relief Abroad (COBSRA), a group of British based volunteer organisations, argued that the consumption needs of vulnerable individuals in Europe, including women, children, the elderly and infirm were not being adequately met by the UNRRA, and persuaded British officials to provide COBSRA with food resources to help sustain the consumption needs of these groups. In carrying out its relief efforts, COBSRA walked a tightrope between the British public, other volunteer societies working in Europe such as the Quaker Friends and the Salvation Army, and the British government. These food relief efforts were not only shaped by national and local British considerations such as public opinion and government funding, but they were also influenced by international concerns, including Britain’s commitments to the UNRRA, the UK’s use of Lend-Lease aid, and its joint occupation of Germany and Austria with the United States. Taking COBSRA’s activities in 1945-1947 as a focal point, this paper, entitled ‘Feeding Europe under British Rationing: Relief Efforts for the Continent after the Second World War’, examines the complexities of Britain’s post-war position through the lens of its food relief to Europe. It demonstrates how relief initiatives shifted overtime in the contexts of domestic considerations, British foreign policies and international relations with Europe and the United States, shedding new light on transatlantic interconnectivity after the Second World War.

“Communists Need to Eat, Too: The UNRRA Missions to Ukraine and Byelorussia”

Amanda Bundy (Columbus Academy)

When UNRRA officials arrived in the Soviet Republics of Ukraine and Byelorussia in 1946, they represented a commitment to internationalism and humanitarianism in the midst of growing tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both missions, headed by Americans and funded primarily with American money, would serve to provide relief to Soviets.

The UNRRA missions to the Ukraine and Byelorussia illustrate a number of important points about the post-war political climate between the United States and the Soviet Union as well as the significance of competent leadership and personnel. These missions offer a glimmer of hope for East-West cooperation in the pursuit of larger humanitarian goals. Ukrainian Mission Chief Richard Scandrett and Byelorussian Mission Chief Marshall MacDuffie forged friendly relationships with local officials who
sought to ensure that UNRRA assistance went to the areas of greatest need despite attempts by Moscow to control distribution centrally. Both mission chiefs made a concerted effort to speak to the international, and particularly American, press about the purpose of the missions, the need of the Ukrainian and Byelorussian peoples for aid, and the sincere gratitude that many average people expressed for the help.

Much to the ire of Scandrett, MacDuffie and Director General Fiorello LaGuardia, those efforts were counterbalanced by a larger number of politicized press reports warning of the “Russian menace.” In particular, several articles and a book written by John Fischer, a member of the Ukrainian mission, stirred controversy with attacks on the Soviet political and economic system. Finally, the threats by the United States Congress to withhold funding for UNRRA based on reports that Moscow censored media reports of relief distribution illustrate the extent to which humanitarian missions operate under precarious political circumstances thereby endangering the flow of supplies to those who need them.

“Machines, Oxen, and the Ghosts of War: UNRRA in China”

Joseph Lawson (Newcastle University)

UNRRA introduced tractors for the first time ever into Chinese agriculture. There was considerable controversy about this, as some of UNRRA’s own staff felt that the tractors were taking away work opportunities from agricultural labourers or inducing landlords to cancel tenancies, and thereby harming exactly the people who needed the most relief. No direct testimonies from peasants survive in the archive, though many reports from UNRRA and China National Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (CNRRA) officials quoted peasants responses, usually as a way of trying to justify or criticize the tractors. This paper compares the theory and practice of aid and development in UNRRA to British colonial practice in Malaya during the same era. It shows that in both cases criticism that tractors would do more harm than good was largely ignored, and no macroeconomic analysis, or serious work to determine whether ordinary farmers wanted tractors was undertaken. This was partly because, in both contexts, decision making happened in an atmosphere of crisis, and partly because UNRRA agents and British colonial officials were well connected with the kinds of wealthier farmers who benefited from mechanization. It was still three decades before agricultural mechanization would fundamentally change rural society in China and Malaysia (and other Asian countries), but the ideas and institutional frameworks developed in the aftermath of the Second World War were important in the formation of later policy for the technological and social transformation of Asian agriculture.

“Paving the way for a new democracy? UNRRA in post-war Italy”

Silvia Salvatici (University of Milan)

As the literature has convincingly argued, the planners of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration aimed to bring about a sea change in the way aid had been traditionally conceived and administered and to turn the practice of humanitarian assistance into the beginning of a more profound transformation of post-war societies.

In Italy one of the key components in this process of transformation was supposed to be the redefinition of social welfare in order to guarantee a fair and effective system of public assistance for all citizens. In the view of the UNRRA officers, the lack of proper structures and policies devoted to people unable to take care of themselves was not just a consequence of the war, it was the evidence of Italy’s failure to construct a fully developed democracy. In the Liberal Age, the state had turned out to be unable
to build a centralised, national welfare system and religious charities had continued to play a large role in relieving the population in need. Under Fascism, welfare had been mainly a means of propaganda, and a way of exercising social control. Given this picture, as sketched out in UNRRA’s assessments, the recognition of social rights was deemed to be necessary for the construction of a democratic Italy and therefore represented one of the core aims of the organization’s humanitarian mission.

In my paper I will try to show first of all how UNRRA (particularly the Welfare Division) developed its own objectives and pursued them concretely through programmes that were implemented in Italy between 1944 and 1947. I also aim to shed light on how Italy’s political class and institutions received, recast and manipulated these programmes in order to understand to what extent UNRRA contributed to reshaping welfare policies and practices in the context of post-war reconstruction and the transition to democracy.

“UNRRA and the Near East Foundation”
Joshua Thew (Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies)

The origins of UNRRA are rooted in the humanitarian needs of the Second World War. The actors that carried out UNRRA’s programs and projects, however, came with previous experiences and contexts that contextualize their roles in UNRRA. These individuals would go on after UNRRA’s short existence to continue working in international organizations performing functions of welfare, health, sanitation, agriculture, and education.

The Near East Foundation (NEF) operated as an American Philanthropic organization having its roots in the Near East Relief organization, performing many of the same functions from WWI through the interwar years and into World War II. UNRRA as an organization profited from NEF’s expertise, and this research seeks to examine the continuity in the domains of child welfare, health, sanitation, agriculture, and education.

First, the study would attempt to establish the US context where many of the individuals gained their early experience and expertise. Then analysis would endeavor to show how several UNRRA employees such as Laird Archer carry their domestic grooming on to work with NEF and UNRRA activities in the Near East context. The research would elaborate the settings these individuals came from as well as their roles and responsibilities in UNRRA including surveys, demonstrations, nurse training, camp functions, and welfare for the disabled. Finally, the investigation of actors would go beyond UNRRA’s existence into the Cold War examining continuity with UN organizations. The inquiry would ultimately seek to provide an understanding of the role that the NEF played in UNRRA’s actions in the Near East.

“Saving Volos: The UNRRA and The Orlando Plan”
Lisa Camichos (Hickory High School)

The decade of the 1940s brought many hardships to Greece. In 1940 Nazi Germany invaded Greece and began a five year occupation of the country. After the occupation, in 1946, Greece became embroiled in a Civil War that pitted the communists against the Greek Nationals. Thousands of Greeks died during this period from starvation, sickness, and murder. It was not until 1947, with the adoption of the Truman Doctrine, that the United States government officially stepped in to assist Greece. However, from 1940-1947 the UNRRA, along with several non-governmental groups, assisted the beleaguered Greeks during this difficult period.
This presentation examines the local impact of the UNRRA on Volos, Greece, as well as, the interaction between the UNRRA and “The Orlando Plan” (an NGO) in terms of material needs. Using primary source documents such as the Orlando Sentinel, the New York Times, and material from the Camichos Family Archives (http://orlandomemory.info/search?combine=camichos), this presentation shows how these two organizations worked together to save over 60,000 people at the end of Nazi Occupation.

After establishing the contributions of both the UNRRA and “The Orlando Plan,” this paper will examine the impact of these organizations on the people they helped to save- the citizens of Volos, Greece. Letters to John P. Camichos provide examples of the appreciation shown by Greek citizens for non-governmental relief efforts.