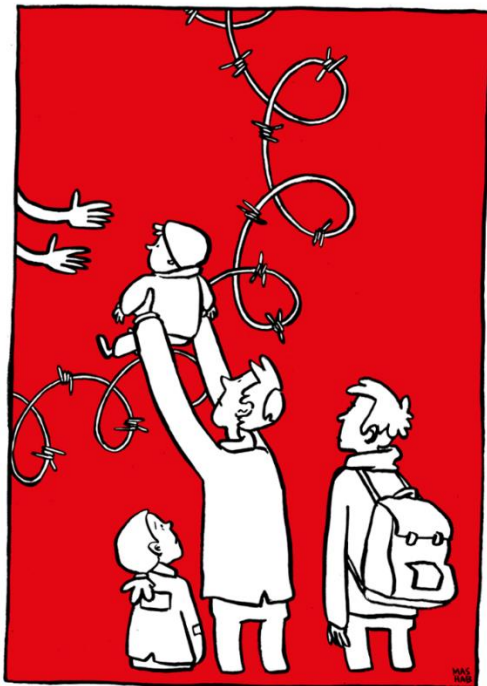


The relevance of the studying and writing of humanitarian history

Side event at the IHSA Conference 2018

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KUNO is an initiative of ten NGOs and five knowledge institutes from the Dutch humanitarian sector. KUNO's goal is to strengthen the humanitarian sector in the Netherlands. KUNO is a platform for joint learning, reflection and debate. We organize expert meetings, working sessions for professionals, webinars, training and public debates. All of our events are cross-sectoral and organized in cooperation with our partners.

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1. Introduction

On August 29, 2018, within the context of the fifth bi-annual IHSA Conference, KUNO organized a side event to explore the relevance of humanitarian history: what can we learn from it and how can it influence current humanitarian action? Four panelists were present: Professor Bertrand Taithe and Dr. Pierre Fuller from Manchester University, Dr. Regina Grüter from the NIOD and Dr. Raymund Schütz from the Netherlands Red Cross. The panel was moderated by Peter Heintze (KUNO) and introduced by Ton Huijzer (KUNO). This paper offers a brief reflection on the introductions and ensuing debate.

“When you study history, you know that nothing is new. We should really learn from the past to be able to properly go forward.”

2. Panellist introductions

Ton Huijzer is consultant and initiator of KUNO. He noticed that there is little knowledge exchange, debate and reflection on humanitarian issues, or on the history of humanitarian aid. In his introduction, he referred to a moment wherein a group of Dutch NGOs needed to submit a proposal to the government, with one page about the history of humanitarian work. In this one-pager, the humanitarian organizations mentioned the humanitarian interventions during the Biafran War (1967-1970) as an example of good practice. Historical publications do have quite a different qualification for these interventions during the Biafran War, where humanitarian aid became an element used politically by the fighting factions. This example highlights the relevance of the permanent and critical study of humanitarian history. Huijzer set up this side event to highlight the little humanitarian history that is being explored in the Netherlands, and to compare this to the amount of research done by Manchester University.

Professor Bertrand Taithe of the University of Manchester is a founding member and executive director of the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute. He argued that historians cannot provide lessons from the past, since there are no

lessons from the past. He sees the value of history in humanitarian work as a halfway house: the value of historians lies in the fact that they can dissect history and highlight issues that arose in the past. As a result, they can put the “right” questions on the table. Its value lies in the joint, collective enterprise with humanitarians, for which space needs to be build. As such, the vitality of humanitarian reflection mirror the humanitarian position in the world. This historical reflection is not booming in the Netherlands. Based on the assumption that self-endeavour precedes historical endeavor, Tai the wonders what the level of reflection is in humanitarian organization in the Netherlands. Only once a certain level is present, they can focus on their history.

Dr. Pierre Fuller is a historian of modern China at Manchester University. He sees each crisis as a constellation of factors, and only from a distance afterwards can certain things come into focus. This perspective and insight into complex events is what history can offer us. (That said, bad history is of course dangerous, for it can provide the easy explanations favoured by politicians and ideologues.) But history is also the study of change. Students of the humanitarian system today have a tendency to ignore the past. In other words, we often privilege the present, seeing the humanitarian system as a recent, almost contemporary phenomenon. Doing so limits our understanding of humanitarian action to a particular global North/South dynamic dominant today: of Western aid agencies assisting peoples in what used to be called the Third World. But if we consider the rise of modern Western humanitarianism in the 19th century, it coincided of course with the age of imperialism. History can reveal how the socially destabilizing effects of colonialism, imperialism, and plantations systems in many places contributed to the weakening or collapse of indigenous mutual aid capacities and poor relief systems, which were in some cases remarkably sophisticated. One of the problems with the humanitarian system today is the tendency again to ignore or overlook indigenous agency and relief activity in afflicted communities around the world. History cautions us that with any humanitarian intervention we should first look out for relief networks and cultures that are already in place in the disaster field.

Dr. Regina Grüter is a historian who focuses on WWII and its aftermath in the Netherlands, especially with regard to the role of the Netherlands Red Cross (where she worked from 2003 to 2012 as head of the Archive and Research Department). During her work there, she noticed the lack of historical knowledge within the Netherlands Red Cross (NRC). The Jewish community was, for instance, rightfully critical of the formal position the NRC had adopted during the war: the NRC did not

want to help political prisoners and Jews that were brought from the Netherlands to German camps, referring to strict neutrality as a guiding principle. After Leo van Bergen's PhD study revealed this dark chapter in 1994, the senior staff of the NRC acknowledged the movement's failure. However, nine years later, when Grüter started working at the NRC, she found that all had been forgotten. The wake-up call was a confrontation between journalist Frits Barend and NRC-director Cees Breederveld in 2005. In 2013 Regina Grüter was asked by the NRC to conduct a proper and thorough research to the role of the NRC during World War II.

Her study not only acknowledged the painful position the board of the NRC had chosen during the war, but it also revealed the supportive and sometimes heroic role local departments of the NRC did play, saving the lives of Jews and others. She argued that, if we want to learn from history, we must look at the successes and failures: how come some local branches were successful in providing humanitarian aid? And why was the board holding back aid from the people who needed it most?

This is where **Dr. Raymund Schütz** entered to the debate. He is an information expert at the Netherlands Red Cross World War II Archives & Research Department and will be project leader Integrity and Behavior at the Netherlands Red Cross (starting in September 2018). He discussed the dynamics within the boardroom during periods of conflict, which in essence entails a turn to a pragmatic stance, in which the classic humanitarian principle of neutrality becomes a safe haven. Furthermore, he argued that the dilemmas that are found in history are found every day: by not looking at history, organizations deny themselves the chance to become a better organization. When humanitarian organizations only focus on successes, they make themselves look better. History should be used to evaluate certain processes.

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3. Debate

a. Apologizing

A representative from ZOA remarked that the focus on humanitarian history is relatively new. You can only learn from successes and failures, but you should also have the courage to admit to certain situations (a link was made with Dutch practices in Indonesia). Organizations should therefore do more than merely consider history. He asked: are we willing to honestly evaluate and take remedial action? How difficult is it to apologize?

Dr. Raymund Schütz argued for one golden solution: do not wait too long. Furthermore, search for oral history that is not written down, for example by interviewing people soon (a few years) after the event.

Schütz added that learning is very important. At the top, the board says that they want their organization to be a learning organization. However, things are going wrong in the field. This learning effect is not present because there is no follow-up or communication. The inherent culture needs to change to an activist approach in order to explain and understand the urgent need for education and reflection. A possible measure that can change this culture is to get people to sessions and discussing that went wrong.

Finally, **professor Bertrand Taithe** made another point about learning: there is so much about innovation, improvement and professionalization, but the sector is very small. History is seen more as a custodian, not as an instrumental factor. There is a gap between training and learning, and this needs to be fixed in order to allow history to play its role in humanitarian organizations.

b. Chewable

An independent scholar asked how history can be used for business case studies. Could it be converted into more bite-sized pieces that can be used in the field to guide people? This question was followed by multiple, related questions. To what extent do humanitarian studies replicate a language in a way they represent humanitarian responses (Save the Children UK)? How can documentation lead to improvement? And what can we do in order to make sure we remember all those things (Global Mentoring Initiative)?

c. The Cheshire Cat

Another participant used the metaphor of the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland, which is known for disappearing almost completely, only leaving a smile. He argued that humanitarian organizations at this moment can make the majority of their work disappear, by only showing some positive aspects. His question was very practical: Is there a solution or are there steps to deal with the body, in order not to be left with a humanitarian smile?

Professor Bertrand Taithe agreed that the Cheshire Cat is a problem. He argued for the need to create an archive and timeline of an organization, in order to make people conscious of the past. What is striking is that we rely mostly on personal archives (like e-mails), which only last the life-time of those people.

Dr. Regina Grüter added another factor to the discussion. When we are talking about the history of an organization, we need to take the funding factor into account. The fact that humanitarian organizations need funding, they need to show the right face in order to get money (both public funds and governmental funds). This could be one of the factors that makes organization withhold from focusing on history, since they are afraid of their own reputation.

d. Archives

A lecturer in Humanitarian and Conflict Response from Manchester University argued that the archives set up by organizations follow the structure of these organizations. In order to have independent archives that are not influenced by organizational practices (like the funding practices discussed above), she wonders whether archives can be set up independently of the related organization. Would it be possible to disconnect from the logic of organizational thinking in a relevant way?

Professor Bertrand Taithe indicated that we currently do not know who keeps stuff. There is a strong need for organizations to structure this, since archives can be destroyed by passive and active neglect. **Dr Pierre Fuller** brought up the opportunities offered by digitalization and Google. While neglect is no issue here, the problem is that not everything is digitalized: what is digitalized is often a very narrow selection that mostly projects cosmopolitan views. In response, **professor Bertrand Taithe** identified the current trend that people put things online themselves. These alternative forms of documentation are hopeful, but there still is a real concern for institutional documents. However, **Dr Pierre Fuller** understood the importance of moving beyond institutional documentation. However, the problem is that many organizations have often participated in relief activities, but they did not last long enough for documentation or they did not have branding (i.e. no name recognition). **Professo Bertrand Taithe** added that most organizations appear in a crisis, are successful and then disappear after a crisis. Since they are often as effective as the Red Cross, these local organizations no longer need to exist and therefore have no structural archives, even though these archives could be incredibly valuable. Furthermore, the archives produced by beneficiaries are useful, but often very individual (like journeys and modes of survival). Furthermore, there are very limited modes of control.