

Humanitarian Mobilization in Central and Eastern Europe during the Twentieth Century

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Humanitarianism has become one of the defining features of our contemporary world, as governments, private associations, and international organizations are increasingly responding to human suffering across the borders of nation states. The twentieth century saw an increased institutionalization, professionalization, and direct intervention on behalf of those in need. Yet this expansion of aid also multiplied the dilemmas of humanitarian engagements.

This workshop tackles humanitarianism in Central and Eastern Europe during the twentieth century, probing the tensions stemming from engagements in nationalist and/or state socialist environments and the dilemmas or misunderstandings that arose from encounters with Western forms of providing aid. Central and Eastern Europe experienced the creation of new nation states and an escalation of nationalism. This region was moreover a site of violence and genocide during the two world wars as well as during the Balkan Wars of the 1990s. Centralization, political control, and persecution under state socialism also shaped but also often limited humanitarian activism through individual and social engagements. Narratives of Western humanitarianism have often treated this region as one of backwardness and of a passive reception of benevolent mobilization for those in need. However, the region was a space of amplified local action to relieve suffering at the same time as humanitarian initiatives from abroad grew in presence and capacity. Studying humanitarianism from below, against a backdrop of complex political and social contexts, is essential to understanding how solidarity was constructed and how aid was provided in this region during the twentieth century.

The workshop aims to engage with diverse facets of providing aid in Central and Eastern Europe, as this area opens up broader questions of local, national, and international scales of humanitarianism. The workshop will focus on domestic forms of humanitarianism and investigate key local actors (e.g. state institutions and their officials, formal associations, activists, and charity workers), their agendas, and practices of providing aid. It will further explore their entanglements and relationships with Western as well as non-Western actors and their relief practices in Central and Eastern Europe. It will investigate how important political, ethnic, or confessional identities were in shaping discourses and practices of solidarity. It will furthermore reflect on the ways in which humanitarians positioned and negotiated the provision of aid within local nationalist and/or state socialist frameworks. Some of the questions we aim to address are: How did local actors interpret the motivations and methods of international humanitarian organizations? How did humanitarian work operate in contexts in which aid was perceived as a tool for reconstructing nations, building a socialist society, or transitioning to democracy?

This event is organized within the ERC Consolidator Grant project “Unlikely Refuge? Refugees and Citizens in East-Central Europe in the 20th Century” at the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Prague. This forms part of a series of workshops that aim to explore this project’s thematic approaches in relation to and beyond the central theme of providing assistance and protection to refugees.

We seek papers pertaining to different disciplines (history, social and cultural anthropology, sociology, political science etc.) that address the following themes related to humanitarianism in twentieth-century Central and Eastern Europe:

- **Institutional and individual actors:** This theme addresses humanitarian practices developed by states, non-governmental organizations, international organizations, activists, and workers on the ground. What were the humanitarians’ main motivations, agendas, and methods? How did political, national, and confessional identities shape humanitarian processes?
- **Discourses of humanitarianism:** How did various actors rhetorically and visually transmit humanitarian agendas and practical efforts within public space? What does the study of discourse tell us about the power relationships between aid providers and recipients, or between transnational and local actors? What entities and identities emerged as a result of these discursive entanglements?
- **Methodological avenues:** How can scholars methodologically engage with local experiences and how can they capture the recipients’ voices and perceptions in the Central and Eastern European context? How was the process of humanitarianism (i.e. the main actors, their agendas, and related practices on the ground) documented? What do archival representations tell us about the relationships between aid providers and their recipients?

The workshop will be conducted in English. Abstracts of up to 300 words along with a short CV should be directed to Nikola Karasová at karasova@mua.cas.cz by January 15, 2021. Applicants will be notified by February 15. Accommodation and travel reimbursement will be provided to active participants.

If the epidemic situation allows, the workshop will take place in person, while including the possibility of virtual participation as well. If this is not possible, it will be conducted in virtual format only.