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Biafra: at the heart of postcolonial humanitarian ambiguities

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In short, this is where it all began: history and legend, ambiguities and dilemmas, principles and their limits. Drawing on her recent book on Biafra, Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps looks back at what took place in Nigeria fifty years ago. Pierre Micheletti and Bruno-Georges David then discuss how images and representations of humanitarian work have evolved over half a century.

The "without borders" premise was inaugurated with the Biafran war, often considered as a turning point in the history of humanitarianism, or even the beginning of its second century. Undeniably, the Biafran conflict profoundly affected the founders of *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF), an organisation created in 1971 that, in turn, influenced humanitarianism both semantically and ideologically. Yet, as leading authors such as Rony Brauman have shown, the revolutionary and subversive attitude of the French doctors of the time towards the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been greatly overstated[1]. On the one hand, because many organisations and individuals decided to gather their forces to take action, despite international legal restrictions, and, on the other hand, because the witness accounts and the commitment of the French doctors actually formed part of the French government's support strategy for the Biafran cause.

In France, the very close association between the founding of MSF and the Biafran conflict, and then the questioning of this association, have caused controversy that we will not dwell on here[2]. A historiographer has recently pointed out[3] that greater attention should be given to other aspects of the Biafran war in order to apprehend its significance. Modelled on the five themes to which this issue is dedicated, this article examines the specific features of a conflict that helped make humanitarianism a basic factor in the relationship between postcolonial Africa and the West.

Context: civil war or humanitarian crisis?

The context in which relief operations in Nigeria-Biafra were carried out is a major factor in explaining their complexity and the controversy they raised. This conflict, first of all, was a civil war between the Nigerian army and Biafran secessionists, led by General Ojukwu, who declared the southeast region of Nigeria as independent on 30 May 1967, naming it the Republic of Biafra. The Nigerian government imposed a blockade to isolate the province. Hostilities lasted until January 1970. While the Cold War disregarded the conflict, and the United States and the USSR

[1]Rony Brauman, interviews with Catherine Portevin, *Penser dans l'urgence: parcours critique d'un humanitaire*, Le Seuil, 2006, p.87-91; Rony Brauman, "Les liaisons dangereuses du témoignage humanitaire et des propagandes politiques", *in* Marc Le Pape, Johana Siméant and Claudine Vidal (ed.), *Crises extrêmes. Face aux massacres, aux guerres civiles et aux géocides*, La Découverte, 2006, p.188-204.
[2]Denis Maillard, "1968-2008: le Biafra ou le sens de l'humanitaire", *Humanitaire*, n°18, 2008, http://humanitaire.revues.org/182
[3]Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism. Spectacles of Suffering*, Cambridge, CUP, 2017; Lasse Heerten and Dirk Moses (ed.), *Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide: The Nigeria-Biafra War*, 1967-1970, Abingdon, Routledge, 2017.

had little involvement, France and Great Britain re-enacted their old colonial rivalries by supporting Biafra and Nigeria respectively.

Very quickly, humanitarian issues were placed at the heart of the war and its representations. The Biafran authorities justified their struggle for independence, contending that the Igbos in the population would be threatened with extermination if they remained in Nigeria. They based their arguments on the massacres that occurred in 1966 and on the manner in which the Nigerian troops were conducting the hostilities, and they denounced the blockade that was starving the population. In fact, the intransigence of the Biafran leaders was also partly to blame for the desperate situation in which the civilians found themselves, but their responsibility was obscured by their rhetoric of victimisation. In addition, by highlighting the famine that raged in the province, they managed to achieve real visibility on the international scene. Even though the tribulations of civil wars in Africa sparked little interest in the mainstream media at that time, prime-time television broadcasts of emaciated, starving children raised great waves of indignation in the West and led to the intervention of civil society. Fundraising campaigns for equipment and food and public demonstrations on behalf of aid to the Biafrans spread throughout Europe and the United States. While stirring emotions and rendering the conflict apolitical, these images planted in the collective mindset the lasting perception of Africans left passive and dependent on Western aid by the decolonisation process

Humanitarianism: a fresh start or a reconfiguration?

While UN organisations remained quiescent because the conflict was a civil war, NGOs found themselves at the forefront. Members of the international Red Cross movement, Oxfam, Christian Aid, Caritas Internationalis, Save the Children, Das Diakonisches Werk, DanChurchAid, the Order of Malta and Terre des Hommes, landing in the spotlight, raised funds and recruited volunteers in Europe and the United States. Not all NGOs ran field operations, but the conflict gave them a specific role and gradually established them as privileged mediators between Western countries and the former colonial empires[4].

Concretely, relief operations were run in the following way. In areas reconquered by the Nigerian army and controlled by Lagos, the ICRC had the task of coordinating the routing and distribution of humanitarian aid received from abroad. In the Biafran enclave, relief workers and volunteers were airlifted at night to several locations. These operations were organised by the International Committee of the Red Cross with the help of many national Red Cross societies, on the one hand, and by religious mutual-aid organisations, grouped under the name Joint Church Aid (JCA) on the other hand. Dispensaries, hospitals, refugee camps and food centres were scattered across the region and were sent supplies via night-time airlifts. Various distribution networks were set up (Catholic, Protestant, Red Cross) to reach people gripped by famine. Missionaries, with their detailed knowledge of the terrain, were essential relays for these operations. Looking closely, the missionaries, generally less associated with postcolonial humanitarianism than with their colonial "civilising" mission, played a vital role. For them and their supporters, at a time when missionary work was on the decline, the transition to humanitarianism offered them an alternative vocation[5]. The Irish NGO Africa Concern – today Concern Worldwide – was founded during the conflict, partly by missionaries and associates of

[4]Kevin O'Sullivan, "Biafra's Legacy: NGO Humanitarianism and the Nigeria Civil War", *in* Christina Bennett, Matthew Foley and Hanna Krebs (ed.), *Learning from the Past to Shape the Future: Lessons from the History of Humanitarian Action in Africa*, HPG Working Paper, London, Overseas Development Institute, 2016, p.5-13.

[5]Claude Prudhomme, "Mission religieuse et action humanitaire: quelle continuité?", *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest*, vol.112, n°2, 2005, p.11-29.

the Irish branch of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, illustrating the conversions taking place after the fall of the colonial empires.

The multiple facets of the relief operations implemented by non-governmental actors also reflect the diversity of traditions from which contemporary humanitarianism emerges. Though aid for prisoners of war and the search for the missing are primarily part of a process of humanising warfare that is cherished by the Red Cross, medical care for wounded soldiers and civilians can be traced back to combat surgery and colonial medicine, while the delivery of supplies, mainly in the form of food relief, draws on the traditions of Christian charity, aid to refugees and medico-social work.

Professionalisation: chasing down amateurism

The establishment of this type of humanitarian action inevitably raises the question of the professionalism of voluntary organisations. This was especially the case for the ICRC, placed at the head of a vast rescue operation, an activity that was not its central priority at that time. It took on this task more or less willingly, but in the summer of 1968 its management of the operation led to a number of criticisms. These were not expressed so much by the future French doctors, who were yet to officiate in its ranks, but by partner organisations that gradually became competitors (national Red Cross, religious groups, NGOs). Immobility, delays, lack of communication, inefficiency and amateurism were some of the numerous grievances. These reproaches have recurred often in humanitarianism's past, as each organisation justifies its own commitment by highlighting the shortcomings of its peers.

Nevertheless, at the end of the conflict, the ICRC itself drew up its own self-criticism and concluded that such operations had to be better prepared in the future. As one of the most important humanitarian organisations at that time, it was essential to become more operational in more far-flung locations. Measures taken in the early 1970s with this objective in mind included recruiting more permanent officials and establishing training programmes. These reforms, which quickly proved inadequate, point to the professionalisation of humanitarianism that had already been put into motion with varying degrees of success during the Second World War[6]. Admittedly, at the time, it was mainly based on a voluntary commitment, but this does not necessarily translate as amateurism.

Politics: the impact and dilemma of aid

The Biafran war also illustrates the political implications of humanitarian aid, particularly when one of the warring parties has been subjected to a blockade and isolation[7]. Thus, in the eyes of the Biafran leaders, relief operations were of major importance symbolically, economically and militarily. On the one hand, pointing to the interest their cause aroused in the world, the leaders of the Biafran regime were able to convince its people that their struggle was justified and this, in turn, reinforced their intransigence. On the other hand, these operations represented a sizeable economic windfall, which gave them, among other things, the means to buy weapons. Even if discrediting humanitarian workers was also part of the Nigerian camp's strategy, it is undeniable that relief operations fed the Biafran war economy. In addition, airlifts were regularly accused of facilitating or even participating in the transportation of military equipment to Biafra. Some had no qualms in using humanitarian relief as a real tool to support the Biafran regime, as did the

[6]Silvia Salvatici, "*"Help the People to Help Themselves': UNRRA Relief Workers and European Displaced Persons"*, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol.25, n°3, 2012, p.428-451.
[7]Marc-Antoine Pérouse de Montclos, *L'aide humanitaire, aide à la guerre?*, Brussels, Éd. Complexes, 2001.

French government, which set up its own operations led by the French Red Cross for this purpose.

Most humanitarians were fully aware of these issues, but they felt that they had no alternative if they wanted to reach out to the famine-stricken civilian population. For the ICRC, this situation was accommodated by trying, for example, to limit humanitarian workers' expenses on the ground and also by channelling a large part of the aid toward the Nigerian side. By the end of the war, it had sent 20,000 tons of relief to Biafra by airlift, and about 80,000 tons to the Nigerian side in areas reconquered by the federal forces. At Joint Church Aid (JCA), whose airlifts transported most of the direct relief to the secessionist province (61,000 tons), questions were also raised. In the last months of the war, for example, the World Council of Churches expressed its doubts concerning the decision to continue supplying the province without examining the conditions imposed by the Biafran leaders. The end of the conflict in early 1970 put an end to these debates, but since that time they have contributed to discussions on the perverse effects of aid, its misappropriation and the dilemmas of humanitarianism.

Sovereignty: an unavoidable obstacle?

It has sometimes been written in France that the "right to interfere" was tied to the Biafran conflict because of Bernard Kouchner's role in advocating this concept[8]. Yet those who, at the time, violated the sovereignty of Nigeria and forced their way across its borders to impose relief operations were the JCA and the ICRC. This situation did not leave the Nigerian government indifferent, and it raised the often overlooked issue of the reception of humanitarian aid. The Nigerians, forced to tolerate these relief operations at first, particularly because of the pressure exerted by public opinion on British support and because of their weak air defence system, took a series of measures against the ICRC in June 1969 that illustrated their frustration. Firstly, the Commissioner General of Operations was arrested and then declared persona non grata in Lagos. The Nigerian army then shot down an aircraft in the Red Cross airlift, putting an end to this operation. Finally, the government withdrew its role as coordinator of the relief effort in Nigeria. Six months later, when Biafra fell, further measures were taken to ban organisations that had participated in the airlifts. Overall, these decisions were received positively, and even enthusiastically, in the Nigerian press and by the people, some of whom held that the honour of the country had been flouted, not only because the airlifts had helped prolong the war, but also because Western humanitarians had given little consideration to their African interlocutors. In a postcolonial context, in which the Nation-State had become the symbol of emancipation, the Nigerian government had to reaffirm its sovereignty. The case was all the more sensitive, since the International Red Cross Movement had not so far been recognised on the African continent for its interventions in favour of Africans, but rather for its association with white domination.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the way in which the relief effort took place in the areas under federal control reveals some ambiguities. Initially, a firm approach was required and a State agency had to be responsible for managing aid. But soon, financial and material realities made the leaders reconsider their position, and they finally entrusted aid management to the Nigerian Red Cross. Though it was a local organisation, it was a member of an international network and could thus reap the benefit of international mobilisation and donations from abroad, while still retaining a national stamp. Similar flexibility was noted for foreign volunteers working for the

[8]To usefully clarify the notions of "without borders", "the right to interfere" and "the obligation to protect", and the complex relationships between them, see Eleanor Davey's, "The Language of *Ingérence* in France: Interventionist Debates in France 1970s-1990s", *in* Norbert Frei, Daniel Stahl and Annette Weinke (ed.), *Human Rights and Humanitarian Intervention: Legitimizing the Use of Force since the 1970s*, Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag, 2017, p.46-63.

ICRC. Contrary to what the government's intransigence might suggest, these workers were not systematically dismissed, and some simply passed under the authority of the Nigerian Red Cross.

More generally, it was probably by finding a place in the gaps left by the uncertainties typical of the postcolonial times that humanitarians and their actions continued to flourish. Paradoxically, while the Biafran conflict symbolised the beginnings of a more enterprising and perhaps more restrictive type of humanitarianism, it already pointed to its limits. A review of the specific features of this civil war underlines the diversity of the origins and traditions that have shaped contemporary humanitarianism, reminds us of some of the past issues that still apply in this sector today and warns us against a sometimes too linear reading of humanitarianism's past.

Translated from the French by Alain Johnson

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Marie-Luce Desgrandchamps earned her PhD in history from Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and the University of Geneva, where she now works as a lecturer. A recipient of the Swiss National Fund for Scientific Research, Marie-Luce has also been a visiting scholar at the Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute at the University of Manchester, New York University, and King's College London. Her research focuses on the history of humanitarian aid, NGOs and international organisations, especially in their dealings with the Africa. Her book on the war of Biafra has recently been published by Rennes University Press: *L'Humanitaire en guerre civile. La crise du Biafra (1967-1970)*, Rennes, PUR, 2018.

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