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## To What Extent Were Progressive Politics Before World War Two a Fundamentally Imperial Project? The Case of International Humanitarian Relief in Russia, 1921-1923.

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### Abstract

There is perhaps a pervasive view that empires are at odds with progressive politics, which are, in their own turn, without covert agendas. The case study of the devastating Russian famine of 1921-23 is an opportunity to examine these views in more detail, and to consider the ways in which imperial agendas, and notions of the projection of soft power, were intertwined with the humanitarian agendas of NGOs.

**Keywords:** famine relief, Russian famine 1921-1923, League of Nations (LoN), Fridtof Nansen, American Relief Administration (ARA), Herbert Hoover, humanitarianism, progressive politics, empires, International Committee for Russian Relief (ICRR), Save the Children Fund (SCF), Sir Benjamin Robertson, Joseph Noulens, Eglantyne Jebb, soft power.

### Introduction

In the summer of 1921 the Volga and Ural regions were succumbing to a long-threatened drought-and-Soviet-policy-induced famine, much exacerbated by six years of almost constant war.<sup>1</sup> This famine was killing up to 100,000 people a week<sup>2</sup>, threatening the lives of over thirty-seven million more<sup>3</sup>, and instigating cannibalism and the eating of corpses.<sup>4</sup>

On 13 July 1921<sup>5</sup> an appeal for help was made to the British and American people via League of Nations (LoN) High Commissioner Fridtjof Nansen<sup>6</sup> from a Maxim Gorky-led Soviet endorsed committee, asking for food and medicine.<sup>7</sup> Who but the British and Americans had the kind of financial, administrative and transportation<sup>8</sup> resources at scale that the extremities of the famine demanded? The American Relief Administration (ARA)

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<sup>1</sup> Sasson, T. 'From Empire to Humanity: The Russian Famine and the Imperial Origins of International Humanitarianism' *Journal of British Studies* 55 (July 2016): 523. For a further examination of the causes and context of the famine see: Jennifer Kao and John McCrory *Famine in Russia, 1921-1922*. 'Starvation in Soviet Russia: The social, political, and economic aspects of great famine of 1921.' <http://johnmccrory.com/selected-writings/famine-in-russia-1921-1922/> Last accessed January 10, 2017. The discussion is further broadened by Roman Serbyn where the significance of the drought is downplayed in favour of human causes: <http://www.ukrweekly.com/old/archive/1988/458814.shtml> Last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> *The Great Famine*. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/famine/> 17.50.

<sup>3</sup> Sasson, 523.

<sup>4</sup> Weissman, B.M. *Herbert Hoover and the famine relief to Soviet Russia: 1921-1923* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), 7.

<sup>5</sup> The letter was written on 11 July, dated 13 July and published to the press on 23 July. Fisher, H.H. *The Famine in Soviet Russia 1919-1923*. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1927), 51-52.

<sup>6</sup> Patenaude, B.M. *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 38.

<sup>7</sup> Patenaude, B.M. *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism* (Washington D.C.: Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, 1992), 5.

<sup>8</sup> Even if the Russian railways were central to the transportation issue, shipping on a vast scale was still critical in reaching Russia, and there were often problems with the administration of the railways and the weather within Russia, such that, on occasion, camels were employed. *The Great Famine*. 41.27 – 42.27.

responded, via its founder/president Herbert Hoover, on 23 July, and ultimately various governmental and non-governmental institutions from the USA, Britain, Sweden, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Japan, and Russia would contribute to the famine's relief.<sup>9</sup>

While the famine's eventual death toll, from 1921 to 1923, would range from 2 to 10 million people<sup>10</sup>, this number would beyond doubt have risen considerably without the arrival of vast international relief by October, operating at quantifiably prodigious levels through the next 18 months,<sup>11</sup> feeding millions of people each day.<sup>12</sup> This relief came not only at a time when the inhabitants of the contributing nations were suffering their own pronounced hardships<sup>13</sup>, but also when diplomatic relations between those nations and the Bolshevik rulers of a fragmenting Russia were either immensely strained or all-but openly hostile. After all, mere months earlier the troops of many of those very same nations had departed Russian soil<sup>14</sup> having made militarily insignificant, but diplomatically profound contributions in support of the Bolsheviks' enemies; equally, not more than a few months earlier hostilities in the Polish-Soviet War had come to an end, a war in which the Soviets had sought to ignite Communist revolution across Europe and beyond. This, then, we might surmise, was quite some progressive politics in action to facilitate such a level of relief.

At stake in the headline question, is the quiddity of empires. If empires can be shown to be key drivers of the humanitarian initiatives in Russia might not a re-evaluation of their moral integrity be due? Might not a revisionist view, checking the pervasive liberal narrative of morally superior self-determining nation-states be worthy of re-examination?

What is proposed here is that the progressive politics effected in Russia over the course of the famine were a blend of imperial and other agendas, and that empires, for all the complexity of that blend, were instrumental, but that those politics were not wholly progressive either.

## Materials and Methods

No particular materials and methods – c.f. bibliography.

## Results and Discussion

This paper may help us to better clarify the historical relationship between states and NGOs engaged in humanitarian relief, and the historical role of empires post 1919 in conjunction with progressive politics.

## Main Text

### American Relief

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<sup>9</sup> Sasson, 523-525.

<sup>10</sup> <http://johnmccrory.com/selected-writings/famine-in-russia-1921-1922/> last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> See Fisher Appendices, 553-560. Includes a breakdown of 549,081 metric tons of cocoa, sugar, milk, flour, peas and beans, rice, corn grits, fats, seed wheat, seed corn, seed rye, oats, forage, seed grace, soap, medical supplies, clothing and miscellaneous supplies from September 1921 to June 1923.

<sup>12</sup> Perhaps seven million. See Ó Grád, C. *Famine in Russia, 1891–1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis* (New York: Columbia Press, 1975), 223. This figure is much lower, though in Kurusawa, Fuyuki (3 January 2012). 'The Making of Humanitarian Visual Icons: On the 1921-1923 Russian Famine as Foundational Event'. (Ed.) Alexander, J.C, Bartmanski, D, and Giesen, B. *Iconic Power: Materiality and Meaning in Social Life*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 68.

<sup>13</sup> Economic downturns, demobilised and unemployed veterans, and the effects of the Spanish Flu amongst them.

<sup>14</sup> In the case of Japan, their troops were still in Siberia and would remain there into the summer of 1922 (and in the case of Sakhalin even longer). Harries, Meirion and Susie. *Soldiers of the Sun: the rise and fall of the Imperial Japanese Army 1868-1945* (London: Random House, 2001), 123-124.

By most reckonings, the major contributor to the famine's relief was the US, and within that cocktail the ARA was clearly the dominant fundraising and administrative organisation.<sup>15</sup> While the Nansen-led International Committee for Russian Relief (ICRR), which coordinated most of the European efforts, fed around 2 million people a day, and the Save the Children Fund (SCF) fed 650,000 a day<sup>16</sup>, the ARA fed 10.5 million throughout the famine.<sup>17</sup> Thus American relief levels were at around four times those of all other relief combined. (We should note, amongst those funding the relief were Russians and Ukrainians themselves.<sup>18</sup>) In addressing the headline question, then, much depends on to what extent one considers the ARA to be *fundamentally* governmental, and, in turn, to what extent the USA was *fundamentally* an empire. Certainly, with regards the first issue, the Soviets were never convinced of the ARA's un-official capacity (until 1920 it had been an official US government agency<sup>19</sup>) and negotiations concerning the delivery of aid only commenced after eight US prisoners held in Russia – including at least one who was a US Military Intelligence agent - were released.<sup>20</sup> Of course, it also served Soviet imperial interests to maintain the narrative of deep-rooted US political agendas, as a means to rebut and lessen the projection of US cultural power and maintain the sense of effective Soviet (imperial) governance.

With regards the definition of the US as an empire, this is no small debate, certainly within the US. But with Niall Ferguson's broad definition, where an empire may be defined by its capacity to project itself militarily, culturally, and to effect imperial governance<sup>21</sup>, we can see the US actions having a clear sense of imperial cultural projection. Humanitarian concerns were not merely incidental to cultural projection, they were fundamental to that projection and America's sense of itself, which carried with it deep meanings of implied righteousness. Behind those meanings was rich subtext of the moral and economic potency of American culture in relation to Bolshevism. Whether intended or not, subtext functions all the same. The words of survivor, Zukra Ibragimova: '[p]eople used to call that food 'America'...So we were handed out 'America.'" - could hardly be more on point.<sup>22</sup>

We must also consider the simultaneous occupation and/or assimilation of numerous overseas territories<sup>23</sup> in addition to military bases, such as Guantanamo Bay in Cuba (leased 1903), and the considerable financial investments in these territories and beyond.<sup>24</sup> Amongst these other financial investments was the \$187m the US made to Russia over the course of 1914-1917, which the Soviet government had disavowed on the basis that they were contracted with a different and illegitimate government.<sup>25</sup> US activity in the Russian famine was not detached from US activity in the Allied military intervention of the preceding year, nor from US imperial activity

<sup>15</sup> Around 12% of all American funds were raised by other relief organisations, albeit affiliated with the ARA, such as the American Friends Service Committee (Quakers) and the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Patenaude, *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism*, 2.

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/about-us/history#3> last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> Kurasawa, 68

<sup>18</sup> The Soviets, through Moscow and the Ukraine, agreed to contribute \$12 million and \$2 million respectively in order to secure the other funding. For Moscow funding see Patenaude, *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism*, 2. For Ukrainian funding see Veryha, W. *A Case Study of Genocide and the Ukrainian Famine of 1921-23: famine as a weapon* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), 90.

<sup>19</sup> Patenaude, *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism*, 1

<sup>20</sup> Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, 38-9.

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/interviews/int2004-05-25.htm>, last accessed January 10, 2017. For a full discussion see Ferguson, N. *Colossus: The Rise and Fall of the American Empire* (London: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> See: <http://news.stanford.edu/pr/2011/pr-famine-040411.html> last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Hawaii (since 1893), Puerto Rico, Guam, and The Philippines (since 1898), American Samoa (since 1899), the Canal Zone of Panama (since 1903), Haiti (since 1915), The Virgin Islands and the Dominican Republic (since 1916). See Ferguson, *Colossus* 303.

<sup>24</sup> Ferguson, *Colossus* 303. See also: [http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\\_century/dip\\_cuba002.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/dip_cuba002.asp) last accessed January 10, 2017. This, of course, is to say nothing of westward expansion from the 1780s onwards.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, M. *The Routledge Atlas of the First World War: The Complete History* (London: Routledge, 1994), 157. In addition there are the connected and even more substantial debts of Russia to Britain (£757m) and Britain to the US (\$4,277m). Ibid, 156-157. In 1918 total Russian debts were at \$4.92 billion pre-war and \$3.9 billion since 1914. Tooze, A. *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order 1916-1931* (London: Penguin, 2014), 129.

at large. Actions projecting the moral and economic potency of the US in Russia also projected its potency globally.

It was the sum total of US military, political, and economic activity that generated the federal budget, and it was a federal appropriation that granted the catalysing \$20m - specifically for children<sup>26</sup> - and nearly one third of the final \$61m distributed by the ARA, without which perhaps the remainder may never have been secured and all other aid may never have meaningfully materialised.<sup>27</sup> One may take at face value Fisher's explanation that the grant had as much to do with tackling domestic concerns over a grain surplus and unemployment as with altruism abroad.<sup>28</sup> Yet, although we may admire the deftness of the political and economic strategy that was sufficiently persuasive to pass through Congress, we must also consider Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes' contemporaneous rebuff to Soviet overtures to sign trade agreements (similar to those signed with Britain in March<sup>29</sup>), unless Russia agreed to pay their accumulated debts, including those incurred through the war, settled compensation claims of US nationals for loss of property, and ceased revolutionary propaganda.<sup>30</sup> If we understand the genuine belief within the US that the collapse of the Bolshevik state was inevitable<sup>31</sup>, then can see just how clearly connected US famine relief was to a broader political strategy. As Patenaude says:

*In Hoover's mind there was no conflict between feeding people, giving sort of straightforward humanitarian relief on the one hand, and using food as a political weapon to stop Bolshevism. Bolshevism was wicked. It was evil. Stopping it was humanitarian.*<sup>32</sup>

Famine relief, then, was a potential means of regime change.<sup>33</sup> With the ineptness of Lenin's government exposed, its consequential collapse might reasonably ensure the US got precisely what Evans Hughes had stipulated. This relief, in addition, required governance, and the infiltration of the ARA by the Cheka, the Soviet secret police, in order to control the administrative infrastructure of the relief's governance, could perhaps best be recognisably characterised as the waging of a cold war.<sup>34</sup>

We must also note Herbert Hoover's simultaneous role as the US Secretary of Commerce and the trajectory of a political career that would see him become the 31st US President in 1929. This cannot but additionally colour ARA aid with deep economic and domestic political resonance.

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<sup>26</sup> Fisher, 151.

<sup>27</sup> See Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, 142-145 for the discussion on the appropriation. If this had not passed through Congress it seems likely that the pervasive view of 'Charity begins at home', and the feeling that the US had done its duty abroad, principally in Armenia and Belgium may have won out. Without the ARA funding at the heart of the relief efforts it is hard to see anywhere near the required scale being generated from elsewhere.

<sup>28</sup> 'From his [Hoover's] analysis of the economic situation, he believed that if the Congress would authorize for Russian relief the use of the funds which remained in the hands of the United States Grain Corporation, amounting to about \$20,000,000, and if these funds were used to buy food supplies from the American farmer, the result would be beneficial not only to the Russians, but to American farmers and laborers as well. He estimated that purchases to this amount, while not in themselves a striking total, would, particularly in corn where the greatest trouble lay, sweep the market of distress, liquidate sales, and give the farmers a chance. Moreover, these purchases would convince prospective buyers - especially foreign buyers who had been holding off - that the period of liquidation was over. They would resume purchasing, causing an increase in farm values all along the line. This increase in turn would be reflected in increased purchasing and manufactured articles by the farmers, which would improve the industrial situation and so contribute to the solution of the unemployment problem.' Fisher, 145-146.

<sup>29</sup> And later signed with Germany, Norway, Austria and Italy. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Hoover, H. *American Individualism*, (London: Heinemann, 1923) 35-36.

<sup>32</sup> *The Great Famine*, 15.22 - 15.42. Patenaude's emphasis.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, Joan Hoff: 15.55-16.05. George H. Nash: 16.06-16.26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 22.28 - 24.36. See also Cabanes, B. *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism 1918-1924* (Cambridge: CUP, 2014), 237.

Clearly this is to little more than scratch the surface of a web of motivations of contemporary senior American political figures. Yet it strikes decidedly naive to suggest American relief and its governance were without political subtext or agenda, which we may, without much semantic dexterity, ascribe as imperial in character; subtext and agenda characterised by a limited cultural projection of power in Russia, with the potential to recoup economic investments in the future<sup>35</sup>, and in terms of a legitimising element of a more widespread simultaneous projection of military and cultural power worldwide.

These subtexts and agendas, then, are critical to an analysis of the American contribution to the famine, even if they show us an empire in denial, unconsciously or otherwise acting like an empire beyond its borders, whether incidentally or not, in order to address domestic issues, regardless of being fuelled by a humanitarian motivation to effect regime change. But the irony goes further, for insofar as the US did not recognise itself as an empire any projection of its power was also an expression of its avowedly anti-imperial credentials; it declared it represented a new moral paradigm for international behaviour when this was only highly contestably so.<sup>36</sup> Thus the US was simultaneously an empire in denial, acting like an empire, while it was also asserting its anti-imperial credentials, through which it claimed its very legitimacy to act.

### British Leadership

Financially the British contribution was dwarfed by American funds. The Imperial War Fund raised £100,000 from Canada and New Zealand apiece, and a parliamentary debate asking for £500,000 was declined, with left-over war supplies of bully beef and lime juice worth £50,000 being received instead.<sup>37</sup> The remainder of British funding came from non-governmental organisations.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, there is a case for British contributions, in terms of leadership and expertise, being critical.

At the Paris meeting of the Allied Supreme Council, 10 August 1921, Lloyd George helped drive through the initiative to respond.<sup>39</sup> Lord Curzon, former viceroy of India and veteran of the 1899-1901 Indian famine, suggested the formation of an international committee, and at the Geneva meeting 15 August, out of which the International Committee for Russian Relief (ICRR) emerged.<sup>40</sup> Sir Claude Hill, another veteran of the same Indian famine, and director general of the League of Red Cross Societies, advised voluntary bodies on the essential need to coordinate operations with governments, on the need to control transportation, not only to distribute food, but also to reduce migration from the famine areas and immigration into it (for the food being shipped in) which risked an increase in disease (typhus was a particular problem).<sup>41</sup> These suggestions were implemented by the Comité International Secours à la Russie, an organisation coordinating relief work between various national and voluntary bodies. The suggestions themselves resembled aspects of the 1880 Famine Code, a

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<sup>35</sup> Directly from Russia, as well as indirectly from Russia through Britain and France. Russia owed Britain £756m. Gilbert, 156.

<sup>36</sup> The Monroe Doctrine (1823) and westward expansion into Native American lands prohibited by Westminster prior to 1775 are among the earliest examples of the besmirching of US anti-imperial moral credibility with political expediency. Perhaps there is no more overt (and compromised) a declaration of a moral high ground than Wilson's Fourteen Points.

<sup>37</sup> Baughan, E. 'The Imperial War Relief Fund and the All British Appeal: Commonwealth, Conflict and Conservatism within the British Humanitarian Movement, 1920-25'. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*. Vol.40 (2012) Issue 5: Empire and Humanitarianism.

<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03086534.2012.730838> Last accessed January 10, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Save The Children Fund being the most significant having raised £700,000 in 1922 and £1.86 million in 1924 (in total) Cabanes, Fn 282. This funding was for all relief efforts which were considerable across Europe and the Middle East (see *The Record of The Save The Children Fund* (London: Save the Children Fund, 1920-1922) where Armenia, Austria, France, Germany, Serbia and Russia feature most prominently), but Russia was a particular focus (Cabanes, 287 and The Record).

<sup>39</sup> Sasson, 523.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 523-4.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 526-7.

codified practice of systematised famine relief, devised through British experience in Ireland and India from 1846.<sup>42</sup>

Sir Benjamin Robertson, a former colonial administrator in India was perhaps of particular importance. His January 1922 trip to Russia, as a quasi-inspector, saw him advise persuasively on the organisation of relief centres, and on the vital importance of feeding adults as well as children, to ration daily calorie intake, and help formalise governmental and NGO cooperation, and a report on his return led to the reconfiguration of the food distribution arrangements of the American, Swedish and LoN teams.<sup>43</sup> He gave wide-ranging advice and recommendations to other organisations, such as the International Russian Relief executive team on the accounting of supplies, to the ARA on adapting their supplies to the British system<sup>44</sup>, and to the SCF and the Quakers on large scale operations. While further study may quantify the extent of the British effort, we may surmise that perhaps the majority of the heavily British influenced ICRR's 2 million people and the SCF's 650,000 fed a day and some significant portion of the ARA's 10.5 million – especially the adults – from 1921-23 had reason to thank British imperial expertise, forged from experience in Ireland and India in particular.<sup>45</sup> There does, then, seem some justification in claiming the progressive politics relating to the famine was an imperial project by dint of the provenance of that critical British imperial expertise and the transnational and trans-organisational networks that it was able to coordinate.

Yet we must also register the political subtext behind this British effort. If the British aid was financially limited in relation to the US then the provision of expertise and personnel did something to offset this, and to reassert British cultural power. By demonstrating the prowess of its governance in the Russian famine Britain was also demonstrating its prowess at governance elsewhere, thereby, by extension, reasserting its right to imperial governance, not only in the newly mandated areas of the Middle East and Africa, but also in its longer established empire including India, where the independence movement was fast gathering momentum.<sup>46</sup> Humanitarian relief was political currency in more covert form.

### The League of Nations Legitimacy

Although the LoN, with its European administrative centres, its rather patronising sense of a civilising agenda regarding less developed countries and its close cooperation with and dependency on empires (principally the British and French) to effect its mandate system (which in itself could be seen as a sanctioning of colonialism) shares imperial-like qualities it would be a gross misrepresentation to consider it indistinguishable from empire. Indeed, although it projected cultural influence and conducted governance, it was not a state. Moreover, the very sense that a collection of newly coordinated multinational administrators could even be considered as legitimising the governance of longstanding empires speaks volumes to the advent in a paradigmatic shift in transnational relations. Such an idea could barely have seemed credible to most in 1914. Perhaps the British, in particular, may have felt the idea unnecessary pre-war on the grounds that they were already effecting a form of global governance, albeit one that hinged on British and imperial interests. Regardless, by 1919 the LoN was a factor in international affairs, even if the capstone of its credibility, its validation through Congress and the inclusion of the US ultimately (and fatally) never materialised.

Yet to label the LoN 'anti-imperial' seems equally unsupportable as a claim on its 'imperial' credentials. It may have circumscribed imperial governance, to some extent, yet it was largely funded and staffed by empires<sup>47</sup>, and

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 527.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 535.

<sup>44</sup> Fisher, 103.

<sup>45</sup> We might also note that imperial presence may have been a primary cause for these famines in the first place. See (Ed.) Duffield, M., Hewitt, V. *Empire, Development and Colonialism: The Past and Present* (Oxford: James Currey, 2013), Sheldon, R. 'Development, Poverty and Famine: The Case of British Empire' 74-75.

<sup>46</sup> Darwin, J. *Unfinished Empire: The Global Expansion of Britain* (London: Penguin, 2013), 214. Of course, this was also hot on the heels of Irish independence.

<sup>47</sup> Even if they were empires in transition. See Pedersen, S. *The Guardians: The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*. (Oxford: OUP, 2015).

ultimately relied on the cooperation of empires in order to operate. When empires ceased to work integrally through the LoN in the 1930s the LoN would flounder and functionally, later entirely, disappear. Perhaps 'a-imperial' may be a more appropriate definition of the LoN; neither seeking, directly, to assert power of an imperial quality, nor to directly challenge the power of empires. It legitimised imperial power even as it generated channels (through the appeals system, for example) to challenge it.

All this matters because the LoN made significant contributions to the Russian famine relief. To begin with, Gorky's letter had somewhere to go. Without Nansen the indirect Soviet appeal would surely have found another target address<sup>48</sup>, but Nansen's role diplomatically facilitated the Soviet plea for help (and the organisational negotiations outside of the ARA) as it did the acceptance of any forthcoming promise of help, without which there were more obstacles and more likely delays to famine relief arriving in Russia.<sup>49</sup>

When Joseph Noulens, head of the International Commission of the Russian Famine signed a list of information requested in order to help ('...the extent of migration and epidemic disease; food reserves and the surplus of crops available for utilization in the famine area; and the measures being taken by the Soviet government'<sup>50</sup>) the Soviet government was suspicious. Noulens was a French diplomat known to have worked against the Russian Revolution, so the data request appeared less concerned with humanitarian relief, but rather with anti-Soviet intentions.<sup>51</sup> Here the European efforts might have floundered, were it not for being able to pass them into the administrative control of the LoN (through which, as we have seen, British staff with imperially derived expertise would play a significant role) and to voluntary organisations. In some sense, then, the LoN legitimised and also facilitated the European relief efforts.

Even more profoundly, the philosophy that lay behind the LoN's formation, and the philosophy the LoN in turn did something to propagate, perhaps spoke of a new moral climate.<sup>52</sup> Empires, we may suggest, did not merely carry on as before, they, at least until undermined, governed, at least to some extent in their own mandates, *in conjunction with* the LoN; they behaved differently<sup>53</sup> post-LoN from how they behaved pre-LoN.<sup>54</sup> If this can be meaningfully established then we could say that when empires threw their resources into cooperative transnational humanitarian relief, even if there were clear ulterior motives, then it demonstrates that the LoN contributed to a transformation of the nature of empires themselves. Perhaps, then, the headline question might be recast as: *To what extent was the project of empires fundamentally changed between the World Wars?*

### Non-Imperial

As naive as it is to suggest transnational relief was altruistic, it's surely as blindly cynical to imply humanitarian relief was wholly political and opportunistic. If we ultimately determine American relief imperial (whilst simultaneously affecting anti-imperialism), potentially critical British leadership and codified expertise as forged through imperial experience, with significant Soviet contributions as no less imperial, and administratively (and philosophically) significant LoN relief as, on balance, a-imperial, the case for a non-imperial element in the Russian famine relief can best be made through the various NGOs including, ironically enough, the ARA.

Certainly there was political subtext to all humanitarian relief in the form of a projection of cultural values, and to some extent any NGOs affiliated with the relief effort at large helped work the same political agendas of

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<sup>48</sup> Its ultimate audience was the British and American people, as noted. Such an audience implicitly recognises that ultimately it was those two empires that had the greatest capacity to help.

<sup>49</sup> It should be noted that Lenin's views, as expressed to Molotov, make clear that he had his own concerns over the reality of the political affiliations and allegiances of the LoN too. Veryha, 86.

<sup>50</sup> Sasson, 526

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> A 'newness' that perhaps had as much to do with forgetting as it did reinvention regarding transnationalism. Sluga, G. *Internationalism In The Age of Nationalism*, (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 158.

<sup>53</sup> Or at least wished to be seen to be behaving differently.

<sup>54</sup> A vaster topic in its own right. See Pedersen, S. *The Guardians*.

governmental organisations, consciously or otherwise. Further, NGOs, similarly staffed by personnel forged by imperial experience, need not necessarily see any conflict between their humanitarian aspirations and their sense of what an empire should be, or even was. There was no essential contradiction at the heart of an imperial 'White Man's Burden' and a drive to humanitarianism. For some, humanitarianism was a reconfiguration of imperialism, which transformed and re-legitimised the imperial project at large.<sup>55</sup>

Yet we must, equally, acknowledge the non-political dimension and the humanitarian agenda in its own right. For one thing, at a personal level, for many of those involved in the administering of the relief, whether through the ARA, LoN or one of the smaller NGOs, especially when actually among the many hundreds living in Russia in harsh and dangerous (and sometimes lethal) conditions a humanitarian agenda seems to be the overriding motivation beyond any imperial context.<sup>56</sup>

We may also see something genuinely innovative coming from the SCF. Prior to its 1919 insistence on feeding German children, humanitarian aid operated within the parameters of aid to allies – in one form or another.<sup>57</sup> Yet, through Eglantyne Jebb's focus on children<sup>58</sup>, and the associated sense of innocence, came a culturally pervasive philosophy of giving based on need over identity.<sup>59</sup> The economic/domestic and regime change incentives would still have presented themselves to Hoover, yet it's harder to see the critical \$20 million appropriation passing through Congress<sup>60</sup> without this precedent and the clear understanding the appropriation was for children, and then harder to see Robertson's advice to include adults being heeded.

In addition, there is a practical level of integration that gives a fuller sense of the relationship. The NGOs needed the governmental organisations, not only for scale, but also to ensure their security; the scale, in turn, afforded some measure of security – a large operation was too significant for the Soviets to jeopardise by overt interference.<sup>61</sup> The governmental organisations, in turn, needed the NGOs because of their substantially and ostensibly non-political agendas, which legitimised the whole operation, arguably more so than the LoN, or at least helped ameliorate Soviet suspicions of political agendas of the relief providers at large.<sup>62</sup> This 'mixed economy' of a blend of government and NGO operations would ultimately become the template for future humanitarian initiatives as their interests fused together.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> This issue runs far deeper. Humanitarianism was an aspect of imperial identity at least, in some regard, from the abolition of the slave trade and the Royal Navy patrols in the Atlantic and the Indian Ocean. See Shaw, C. *Britannia's Embrace: modern humanitarianism and the imperial origins of refugee relief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), especially 176-236.

<sup>56</sup> Consider the personal accounts of aid workers such as Frank Golder (Cabanes, 234). Patenaude, in *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism*, cites over 400 Americans in Russia working through the ARA (2). Further personal accounts could be explored relating to Laurence Webster (SCF), and Walter Bell and Harold Blandy (both ARA) amongst many others.

<sup>57</sup> Armenian aid also operated along these lines – although inside the now fractured Ottoman Empire the Armenians were largely Christian.

<sup>58</sup> For which she was fined £5 for 'unpatriotic behaviour'. Muckle, J. 'Saving the Russian Children: Materials in the Archive of the Save The Children Fund Relating to Eastern Europe in 1920-23', *The Slavonic and East European Review* Vol.68, No.4 (July 1990), 507.

<sup>59</sup> Barnett, M.N. *Empire of Humanity: a History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca New York: Cornell University Press, 1960) 83-85.

<sup>60</sup> See Fisher 144-151. The bill (H.R. 9549) was voted on December 17, 1921. 181 yeas, 71 noes, 175 not voting.

<sup>61</sup> Eglantyne Jebb was well aware of how desirous this kind of integration was when she spoke of work that 'transcended but included the state'. She was, after all, good friends with Margaret Keynes, wife of John Maynard. See Barnett, 85.

<sup>62</sup> This amelioration is hard to qualify, however, since even without it, if there was 'only' the ARA's administered \$61 million it is hard to see the Sovnarkom under Lenin's Chairmanship refusing this.

<sup>63</sup> Sasson, 537.

### Progressive Politics?

In three main regards the Russian famine relief was not as progressive as we may wish to perceive it. The political agendas of the US and Britain have already been sketched over. Famine relief afforded the US, in particular, a covert opportunity to attempt regime change<sup>64</sup>, at attempt which failed, and Hoover ultimately came to feel he had '...set the Soviets up in business'.<sup>65</sup> Yet, insofar as it was politics by other means it was not progressive, unless our definition of 'progressive politics' is to be more cynically re-evaluated.

The famine had a political dimension with regards the relationship between Moscow and Ukraine, and was a serious blow to Ukrainian national liberation. There is evidence that Moscow prioritised the movement of grain into Russia, to the detriment of the Ukraine and ensured the famine disproportionately affected it, and so broke the back of Ukrainian political resistance.<sup>66</sup> It is harsh to lay this at the door of those who provided the famine relief by suggesting they permitted it to happen, whether they were aware of it, or even capable of preventing it. Nevertheless, it is as well to qualify the extent to which we consider the famine relief a 'success', and so, in turn, to what extent we might consider the politics under discussion wholly progressive. From the Soviet perspective the famine relief of 1921-23 did nothing to derail its projection of imperial power in Ukraine and, indeed, likely significantly facilitated it.

The circumstances surrounding the curtailment of the famine are not without complications either. At the time the European efforts wrapped up (at the suggestion of Robertson) and the ARA concurred, there was still debate as to whether the famine was, in fact, getting worse.<sup>67</sup> The Soviet decision to recommence grain exports seems to have a clear impact in the decision to cease aid.<sup>68</sup> Again, one could hardly criticise the relief administrators for such a decision, yet, equally, it smacks of conventional politics being played out in a humanitarian arena. The rationale may be wholly understandable, in Washington, as in Westminster, there had been objections to aid heading to Russia in the first place, instead of aiding national communities, yet it serves as another qualifier to the progressiveness of the politics concerned.

### **Conclusions**

The progressive politics of the humanitarian initiative bringing famine relief to Russia in 1921-23 were fundamentally triggered by Soviet desperation and savvy deployment of celebrities, and this appeal had an imperial target audience in the US and Britain, with an a-imperial gloss in the LoN which disseminated it. The response was then shaped by imperial powers with humanitarian agendas blended with covert political ambition and hard-won imperial experience, leaning on the legitimacy of their NGOs (and the LoN) and sought, in the case of the US, to effect covert imperial policy in the form of regime change, and in the case of the US and Britain, in particular, to effect indirect imperial policy through a projection of cultural power (i.e. status), presenting a new kind of imperial identity - one infused with humanitarianism<sup>69</sup>. At the same time, those NGOs, themselves derived from empires, albeit through personnel and some sense of philosophical identity, sought to effect humanitarian relief partially protected by the essential imperial presence under whose auspices they operated. These NGOs needed the scale of those empires, and partially attempted to operate within a non-imperial remit, liberated from their purely national identities, through which they attempted to bring humanitarian relief for the sake of humanitarianism itself, and for the sake of the entirely non-abstract

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<sup>64</sup> Patenaude further defines this as: '...Hoover's plan was to accomplish political ends in Russia not *under the guise of humanitarianism relief*, but rather *by means of it*.' [sic] Patenaude, *Herbert Hoover's Brush with Bolshevism*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> *The Great Famine*, Joan Hoff and Henry Wolf, 49.30 - 49.50.

<sup>66</sup> <http://www.ukrweekly.com/old/archive/1988/458814.shtml> last accessed January 10, 2017, See also Veryha, throughout, especially 293-297.

<sup>67</sup> See Sasson, 536, and Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, 195; at least in the Ukraine: Veryha, 297.

<sup>68</sup> Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand*, 189.

<sup>69</sup> Or perhaps a new kind of humanitarianism.

Russian/Ukrainian people seen in emotive (and financially effective) movie footage brought back from the afflicted regions.

Relief in the Russian famine of 1921-23 could never have operated at the required scale and expertise without imperial resources. But without a largely a-imperial LoN it would likely have been slower in coming (at least from outside the US). Moreover, without the child focused-innocence-over-guilt-need-over-identity-precedent set by the non-imperial SCF in Germany the catalysing \$20 million for the ARA, which ensured the whole enterprise operated at the scale and speed demanded, may never have passed through Congress in the first place.

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**Images?**



Camels on the Volga, still from PBS film *The Great Famine*.