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## History, memory and 'lessons learnt' for humanitarian practitioners

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### ABSTRACT

This article concludes the special issue on the history of humanitarian aid by reflecting on the role of memory and history in relation to humanitarian aid. To address a special issue as a conclusion is to embrace the opportunity to reflect on its papers, aims and ambitions. It is also for us an opportunity to reflect on the role history has for a community of practice often forging ahead in response to the latest demands and emergencies. Historical thinking is now coming into greater salience for the world of humanitarian aid because, we argue, the 'humanitarian sector' has grown and aged – and professionalized and institutionalized.

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To address a special issue as a conclusion is to embrace the opportunity to reflect on its articles, aims and ambitions. It is also for us an opportunity to reflect on the role history has for a community of practice often forging ahead in response to the latest demands and emergencies. Historical thinking is now coming into greater salience for the world of humanitarian aid because, we argue, the 'humanitarian sector' has grown and aged<sup>1</sup> – and professionalized and institutionalized. As the chapters of this special issue have shown, the history of humanitarian aid can be written for a variety of purposes and some, the agency of historians themselves, often remain undeclared. Historians have sought to inscribe the history of humanitarian aid in a variety of grander narratives: the history of internationalism, a history of financial transfers – a form of institutional remittance – the history of charity, the history of post-imperial agencies to control the world, the history of tropical medicine or missionary work.<sup>2</sup> Many historians are currently working on this field of study which, until 15 years ago, remained the interest of a handful of historians and NGO workers. This explosion in volume of research presents challenges and opportunities. Some of these challenges are simply the distance between the preoccupations of the historians and that of their subjects: humanitarian workers and their 'beneficiaries'. While much traction was given to the relative position of such and such NGO on a spectrum going from Dunantist to Wilsonian ideals (from pure neutrality to its opposite) or on the political idealism of

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organisation founders<sup>3</sup>, not to mention the ever-elusive notions of motivation, not much history has yet been written on humanitarian practices *as* practices.<sup>4</sup> Much needs to be written on humanitarian concepts as tools for the mobilisation and deployment of resources, or on the history of standards and their application. Historians have yet to engage with this story fully and the bare bones of biographical narratives which some present as foundational moments serve only to remind us of the great extent of the unknown mass of humanitarian destinies or episodes.

Starting with a recent reunion, this article will reflect on the relationship between memory and history, how historical texts such as the ones gathered in this special issue address the challenges of a historical deficit in the humanitarian world and finally how the role played by memory in humanitarian organisations still represents an obstacle to humanitarians effectively embracing historical ways of thinking.

## The reunion

On 9, 10 and 11 January 2015 an unusual event took place on the Thai-Cambodian border. A small crowd of veterans of the UN system, NGO workers from the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, Cambodian workers, members of the Cambodian diaspora in North America, and even members of the Thai military and Thai workers gathered. They did not gather to celebrate a particular anniversary of the large refugee or resettlement camps (Site 2 and Khao I Dang respectively) which hosted the transient crowds of the Cambodian exodus of 1979 and subsequent years until the repatriation of 1992–3<sup>5</sup>, but because they wished to commemorate their work, their bonds of friendship, their youth and, for many of them, their formative years.

At the invitation of the organizers, Bertrand Taithe was there to begin an oral-history project, to record voices and interview a variety of NGO workers who have since moved on. Some had moved back to their professional life in the United States, some had stayed in Thailand and worked with other refugees at the Burmese border<sup>6</sup>, many had moved on in the United Nations administration or across the many organisations of the humanitarian system, working for Handicap International (founded on the Thai-Cambodian borders)<sup>7</sup>, creating their own non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Cambodia (for instance Krousar-Thmey)<sup>8</sup> or, after an international and largely expatriated career, settled in consultancy roles in Geneva or Washington DC. Some, like Christopher Elias moved on to lead the global development programme of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation or other major players in contemporary humanitarian aid.

The approximately 180 people who met at the Thai Border shared an experience – that of having been young humanitarian practitioners once, facing the largest refugee crisis of the era in the midst of the complex Cold War politics of the 1970s. At the Thai border only one camp was set up for resettlement at the hands of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); most other camps, city-size collections of fragile bamboo and straw structures, were destined to serve as a buffer zone between the warring parties of Cambodia. Through international aid Khmer Rouges and anti-Communist factions were supported to resist and fight the Vietnamese and their allies within Cambodia.<sup>9</sup> This subtext of manipulated humanitarian aid and perverted protection, as well as the politics of the different factions involved in the delivery of aid, were only occasionally mentioned at the gathering. The reunion was not overly concerned with politics. With the singular exception

of the Thai General confessing his secret-services past and explaining the support to the Khmer Rouges as realpolitik alignment with Chinese objectives, almost no one dared object openly to the sometimes quite contradictory statements made on the shared megaphone. The megaphone itself authorized the sharing of personal anecdotes which were recounted at the eerily empty sites of what were, once, the second and third largest cities of Cambodia.<sup>10</sup>

Oral history has a particular dimension in relation to Cambodia where, for many years, the expression of what had been endured was deemed 'therapeutic' by a whole range of Western psychiatrists and psychologists.<sup>11</sup> They embraced the concepts of oral history in a particular manner which has, in turn, been reclaimed by diasporic Cambodians seeking to establish the facts of their past and the roots of their new identity.<sup>12</sup> Some stories were vocalized in this meeting of humanitarian veterans and they came out in a spontaneous but also staged fashion. What came out was an outpouring of memories, anecdotes reflecting culture shock, illustrating the resourcefulness or the adaptive qualities of the NGO workers or the sociability that kept them sane. Some were about evacuating the camps under Vietnamese shelling, about a bridge that failed, a buffalo fallen down a well or the celebrated International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Friday night parties. Much of the message behind these stories was that they would not happen today – that the ICRC would not have wild parties in the era of social media, that humanitarian workers would have more resources but also less freedom – that this past was, indeed, distant memories of an era now over.

Beyond the unique fact that this was the third such gathering and that much historical material emerged then – thousands of photographs taken by Jack Dunford, private archives and or the very detailed diary kept by Chhanto D. Touch<sup>13</sup> – this event was an opportunity to reflect on the role of history and memory in the humanitarian sector.<sup>14</sup> The gathering was a gentle coming together of disparate strands of an international mass deployment of humanitarian aid. It was a meeting of people, some bound by friendships of 30 years and others who had merely transited by these places. To take the concepts brought forward by Pierre Nora these sites acted as *lieux de mémoire* and invited commemorative practices.<sup>15</sup> The absence of genuine commemorative spaces, monuments and dedicated memorial space – unlike other sites of the same era in Indonesia, for instance, or in Cambodia itself – only made the efforts to recall events and people more poignant.<sup>16</sup> This was a history which the Thai officials, diasporic Cambodians and those who had made the journey by coach and NGO workers attempted to summon into some kind of transient existence.<sup>17</sup>

The oral-history project is tied to this desire but it also seeks to uncover the role of experience in the humanitarian self-narratives and its articulation around notions of community and knowledge (which one could describe as epistemic communities).<sup>18</sup> The Thai border camps embodied a UN success story: hundreds of thousands of refugees had survived; the cold war in which they were pawns was won; most refugees were successfully repatriated. Yet the Cambodian 'tragedy'<sup>19</sup> was also the site where trauma, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in particular<sup>20</sup>, became a key analytical tool to understand the past or the essence of the refugee experience. Much science was produced from the camps in this respect, but ultimately one might ask legitimately what were the 'lessons learnt' on the Thai border? What need do humanitarian practitioners have to remember or, and it is a different process, think about their history? What role did events such as the ones that took place between 1979 and 1992–3 at the Thai border play in shaping the humanitarian system?<sup>21</sup>

## Lessons learnt from memory?

The Thai border camps were subjected to a long sequence of evaluations over the years.<sup>22</sup> Academic ‘fly in’ researchers produced data and analyses which were often primarily concerned with mental health and refugeedom as a pathology.<sup>23</sup> Within the humanitarian-aid nexus, many NGOs which either grew, like MSF, or were born in this era (like Handicap International) produced a range of evaluations, yearly reports, fundraising documents and, occasionally, militantly political outbursts (like Liberté Sans Frontières).<sup>24</sup> Returning on the site of the Thai border, MSF for instance re-evaluated its cultural imperialism in *Utopies Sanitaires*<sup>25</sup>, its scientific innovations<sup>26</sup> and, more recently, its willingness to serve the American ideals of the Cold War.<sup>27</sup> This unusually self-critical stance on a formative and key period of the organisation avoided any self-congratulatory posture. Yet, when one interviews the key actors of the movement, notably the shaper of the logistical arm of MSF, the late Jacques Pinel, another story emerges which, while self-reflexive, also implies that a formative step-change had taken place on the Thai border.<sup>28</sup> Lessons were learnt, from other NGOs or from the military, lessons which translated into humanitarian kits and pre-deployment planning. Another interview also showed that the nutritional learning that had taken place in these camps where much of the relief (and politics) was shaped by food distributions had shaped the Sphere handbook guidelines started in 1997.<sup>29</sup>

At a basic level this continuity of personnel and practices reflected that of previous eras when staff serving in Korea could recall their experience with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), when staff working during the Vietnam war could recall the Korean conflict through the vast production of memoirs and humanitarian histories written mostly for internal consumption.<sup>30</sup> The history of humanitarian aid plunges its roots in a variety of fertile grounds and, through the missionary genealogy, goes back hundreds of years in overseas relief work. Yet the stretching back rarely transcends the boundaries of immediate human memory, making for the current generation of humanitarian workers, the late 1970s the horizon line of memorial practices.

Yet this particular group may have had other claims than being of or nearing retirement age. Their generation had been the one that had claimed to found afresh the ‘humanitarian system.’ The 1990s were transformative of this accumulated experience in the sense that it witnessed the rise of normative attempts at shaping an industry or standards of practice worldwide in the vacuum left by the Cold War. Within that context, much of the late 1980s debates – in Cambodia or Sudan –<sup>31</sup> some of the ‘scandals’ or so-called ‘dilemmas’ of humanitarian aid were forceful reminders of the need for humanitarian practitioners to reflect and to think politically and culturally. Standards of practice became embroiled with new measuring and target-setting tools devised by humanitarian agencies themselves to assess the efficacy of their remote operations or the operations delegated to ‘remote-controlled’ partners on the ground.<sup>32</sup> The donors, increasingly large institutional donors such as the European Union or the governments of Europe – soon set up programming priorities and policy imperatives. The long list of these keywords and funding programmes – advocacy, capacity-building, gender-balancing, partnerships and resilience – can be mapped out in the self-narratives of the humanitarian workers. In interviews humanitarian workers tend to present themselves as the recipients or the victims of the fickle changes in funding and many expressed their nostalgia for the distant past when most of these things (advocacy for instance) went unmentioned ‘but we did them anyway’.<sup>33</sup>

This self-narration is therefore contradictory – on the one hand some claim that their experience shaped the need for better universal standards of relief – setting targets for a new sector – while others claim that their own holistic and cost-effective practices have been chipped away by the relentless rise of bureaucratisation and target setting. Within a discursive framework, humanitarian practitioners can thus think about the past with the combined benefits of nostalgia and the sentiment of having moved on towards better practices. This combination of nostalgia and positivism are both profoundly anti-historical in the sense that they both assign to the past a teleological meaning and significance. In both the sense of a lost golden age or an era of primitive and now out-dated practices, the past seems both dead and the material of myth-making.

While memory serves a foundational role for the cohesion of a group<sup>34</sup> or as the founding moment in self-narratives<sup>35</sup> its role within a bureaucratic system remains fragmented. The humanitarian sites of the past have for some of them become the sites of dark tourism, sites of pilgrimage where members of the boat-people diaspora can visit and meditate on the sufferings of humanitarian subjects of the past<sup>36</sup>, but on the Thai border, for instance, the preoccupation was always to erase insofar as possible that past. The sites of the great camps were always purposefully transitory with no cement allowed, except in a few instances. The camp of Khao I Dang was set on fire to prevent its long-lasting occupation by Cambodians; it was then turned into an arboretum under royal patronage, completing a cycle of regeneration intent on burying the past quite literally. Furthermore, while this reunion at the border, with help and protection from the Thai military, hosted by local dignitaries and local schools, revealed the strength of a working community, 30 years hence, it also strikes by its unusual nature. The great Sudan camps of the 1980s, the Ethiopian famine, let alone Darfur, Rwanda, Afghanistan or Somalia have not been propitious to commemorative acts of this kind.

Some memories are worth exploring further than others – though it remains difficult at this stage to know why. It is precisely this intrinsically subjective quality of memory which makes it inapt to the wider needs of the humanitarian system. History and memory have obvious and fundamental links but they are not the same<sup>37</sup> – in the same way that an evaluation is not history, though historians will often rely on the evidence evaluations gather to cross-reference some of their other sources.

### **What would thinking about the past historically entail for humanitarian practitioners?**

The papers in this special issue reveal the rich, expanding and ever finer tapestry of historical scholarship on humanitarianism and the ideas, norms and organisations that comprise it. The range of periods, subject and perspective is remarkable and breaks from the narrow chronological and Eurocentric frame within which much of the historiography has long been enclosed. By including for instance the formation of the Haku-Ai-Sha (Philanthropic Society) founded in 1877 and its evolution into the Japanese Red Cross Society in 1887, Käser challenges the received narrative of the spread of the Red Cross movement as being Eurocentric and teleological. Kind-Kovacs' exploration of the American Red Cross's (ARC) relief activities in Hungary between 1919 and 1921 uncovers *inter alia* the deliberate focus on children (as innocents who had no role in being on the opposing side to the American forces in the First World War) and the portrayal of the (helpless) population and the (medical

sophistication and munificence) of the ARC. Through the literal lens of photographic images, Kind-Kovacs provides insight into the medicalized (and depersonalising) approach to the treatment of malnutrition. Supplementary feeding was 'placed entirely on a medical basis'.<sup>38</sup> Also touched on but not analysed in any depth were the ARC's achievements (often self-congratulatory) on the supply of equipment and supplies to no fewer than 122 hospitals across Hungary and the distribution of large quantities of clothing, cotton, presents and everyday products 'for free' to needy children.

Wieters meanwhile gives a novel 'business history' perspective on the history of CARE and its shift from being a voluntary agency delivering donated food and consumer goods to individuals in Europe in the immediate post-Second World War period to becoming a large NGO co-operating closely with the US government in distributing food aid in the Global South. Bocking-Welch's work on the British Youth Against Hunger (BYAH) campaign, which was launched in 1965 in an effort to involve youth in educational and operational activities associated with the Freedom from Hunger Campaign (FFHC) that had been launched two years earlier by the Food and Agriculture Organization, brings forward the contextual nature of all humanitarian campaigns. Gatrell's article uncovers the role of three very different NGOs (WCC, JAI and CIMADE). In particular he analyses their relationship with the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) to tease out what this might tell us about the process of NGOs finding and filling particular niches. He also explores the challenges UNHCR faced in relying on such NGOs as its operational partners whilst trying to maintain its 'non-political' stance. Merzinger closely analyses the German Emergency Doctors (GED) (also known as 'Cap Anamur', after the ship chartered in 1979 to rescue Vietnamese 'Boat People') which held fast to its approach based on voluntarism and 'radical humanism' (similar to what many agencies would today term 'the humanitarian imperative') eschewing involvement in 'politics', 'development' and capacity-building. The final article by Borton stands apart from these accounts of humanitarian organisations in different periods and contexts. By alerting us to the obstacles to the greater use of historical knowledge within the humanitarian sector he provides a veritable cold shower of realism for historians who often assume that their work is both of interest to those currently working in the humanitarian sector and is being read by them. For the most part this is simply not the case. Fortunately it is not a completely negative picture and Borton proposes a number of measures to increase the accessibility of the work of historians of humanitarianism and the likelihood that their work will be read and perhaps even used by present-day humanitarian workers.

## Memory and organisations

With a few notable exceptions, Heike Wieters's article being one, the history of NGOs as businesses has yet to be written. From the perspective of 'NGOs as businesses' their ability to adapt to changing contexts and evolving markets becomes key to their survival. As Wieters points out, the story of CARE might easily have ended in the late 1940s or early 1950s had it not been for US government funding and the organisation adapting itself to becoming a major channel for US government food aid – a process of adaptation that transformed and 'managerialized' the organisation.

Since at least the late nineteenth century, many generations of humanitarian volunteers have had entire lives, careers and trajectories, often unmapped, within organisations which

offered, through bridges and accidents rather than design – new possibilities for individuals in their career paths and life experiences.<sup>39</sup>

Let us reflect for a moment on the numbers of people who were working for the organisations covered in just this collection of papers. In 1900 the Japanese Red Cross Society (which had been formed from the initial Haku-Ai-Sha Philanthropic Society) constituted the largest Red Cross Society in the world with 728,507 members. From later periods the number of people working (whether in paid or volunteering roles) with the American Red Cross in Hungary after the First World War or in the 1960s those working with CARE, the World Council of Churches, JAI and CIMADE, or the British Youth Against Hunger Campaign, must have numbered in the tens of thousands. Just think for instance how many idealistic German medical staff passed through the German Emergency Doctors/Cap Anamur in the period after 1979, working as volunteers for periods of approximately six months. What impact did their experiences have on their subsequent careers and their political beliefs? Were they radicalized or did they emerge with more cynical views about the ability of Western agencies to provide effective humanitarian assistance?

Merzinger's article reminds us that humanitarian organisations have a social function too. For a generation that had begun its political life demonstrating against the war in Vietnam in 1968, the plight of the Boat People in 1979 offered a practical means for expressing solidarity with, and responding to the needs of, the Vietnamese people (at least those who did not want to remain within the new Communist regime) at a time when they were experiencing extreme vulnerability and need. In the words of one observer at the time: 'Humanitarianism is now the common ground of the united undogmatic left.'<sup>40</sup>

Despite the good examples of articles included in this collection, it is often difficult for today's humanitarian workers to recognize themselves in the histories professional historians have been writing. Too concerned with occasionally faddish terminology such as corporeality or complex theoretical inputs from post-colonial theory, transposed but not translated from other disciplines, they have occasionally lost their intelligibility to the lay reader even though the empirical credentials of much of that history-writing remain flimsy in those readers' eyes. Historians are often too ignorant of the bureaucratic, technical and empirical forms humanitarian aid takes to make their narratives convincing. The tendency to reify 'the system' as one when it is most often torn apart by debates and controversies or to attribute hegemonic intent often does not ring true to practitioners – even if, from a certain distance, many meta-political analyses do make considerable sense – as Hugo Slim argued recently in a paper at the University of Nottingham.<sup>41</sup> The historians' perspectives and their focus on politics and policies disincarnated and not on their micro-practical forms creates a disconnect which can only be transcended by humanitarian practitioners taking the same critical stance, often on the basis of self-education or, more recently, thanks to their exposure to historical and political courses in a handful of academic institutions.<sup>42</sup>

This critique may sound more final than it is meant, when it may well be an artefact of a budding field of research in which some dwell or extend temporarily their interests.<sup>43</sup> Within the history of aid there are many stories buried which cry out to be told – many accounts which deserve a hearing and rigorous critical examination. Borton's article reminds us that many of today's humanitarian workers have only a very limited interest in history, and that their interest is more likely to be sparked by those aspects of humanitarian history that resonate in some way with their own experience and the situations they currently face.



Humanitarian practices are one natural area of interest. How did agencies actually organize food distributions or the provision of shelter in the 1890s, the 1920s, the 1940s or the 1970s? How did they cope with the ethical dilemmas of working with governments and opposition groups?<sup>44</sup> How true to their declared humanitarian principles were they able to remain? What did they do once the emergency was over? Did they pack up shop or try to refocus their activities on addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability and poverty? If the latter, then how did this affect their relationship with governments and their humanitarian principles? And how did it alter the way they were perceived within the wider population? These are all issues with which today's humanitarian workers wrestle.<sup>45</sup>

Merzinger's article explores issues such as these in relation to GED/Cap Anamur. Given the opportunity of supporting the TB Department in Hargeisa Hospital Somalia (a disease which above all else requires long-term commitment and consistency), the organisation held on to its volunteerism involving relatively ineffective short-term deployments even though some staff were pressing for a longer-term, more professional engagement. Quite how the organisation squared this position with its 'radical humanism' is not completely clear. If historians want their work to be read by and engage today's humanitarian workers, then an increase in the number of historical case studies covering such issues and probing such questions will be helpful. In his paper Borton suggests that historians wishing to have their work read by current humanitarian workers should engage with them and their agencies so as to better understand those aspects of humanitarian history and the history of those particular organisations that would be of most interest to them. Such historical consultancy (probably unpaid) would certainly increase the number of agency case studies and contribute to increased awareness of their own history by those agencies engaging with historians in that way.

If humanitarian practitioners have relied on memory for much of their historical consciousness they have also leaned heavily on the mythologies to which organisations like to anchor themselves.<sup>46</sup> Within stereotypes of self-sacrifice and grandeur, often associated with the more distant figures of the past, Nansen, Dunant and others, more recent ego-narratives of the recent past can echo and reinforce the daunting presence of fatherly or motherly figures. Some recent historical accounts indeed rely on these old biographical tropes to make broader claims on the 'birth of humanitarianism'.<sup>47</sup> These mythologized or hagiographic self-narratives were then either summarized in a list of principles and values, the identikit of organisations, or merely turned into corporate straplines.

Today's humanitarian workers have lived a different life from that of these figureheads. Their work has involved preparing complex project proposals specifying anticipated outputs and outcomes, communicating frequently with their head offices and colleagues elsewhere (many times a day during periods of intense activity). Their daily tasks are fed into international co-ordination bureaux, the most recent incarnation of which are the UN clusters, and negotiated for handling complaints with representatives of the communities they serve. They have sought to break from the boundaries of their limited efforts and to exchange ideas – and their work often unrecognized, sometimes futile and always limited in scope and depth – has often left a limited imprint on the world. This sense of powerlessness is to be contrasted with the often exaggerated claims made for the founding figures of humanitarian organisations. How could one match the achievements of a mythologized Dunant or Jebb? The grand history does not lend itself to the more incremental, social and cultural

approach which has dominated the historiography for the past 50 years, and this gap may explain the limited impact of historians so far on the humanitarian sector.

Furthermore, as the NGO archives project in Birmingham has made clear and as anyone working in this field will know only too well, the archives of many humanitarian organisations are not the best kept. Where they do exist in a centrally organized form, boxes of Board minutes may be mixed in with boxes of distribution waybills that a particular country office felt necessary to send back to head office, perhaps because of an on-going fraud investigation at the time or perhaps because the country office was closed down quickly and all documents had to be shipped without any sifting or curating. Invariably it is the finance and human resources/personnel files that are the best kept due to legal and donor requirements. Unfortunately it is often the programme and operations files, the ones so vital for historians examining humanitarian practices, that are the patchiest and the worst maintained. Within the head offices themselves it seems that organisations that are under pressure to minimize their overhead costs have an uncanny tendency to store their collections of old files in basements where they are at substantially greater risk of flooding and being damaged or destroyed in the event of burst pipes or rainstorms. Whilst recently preparing a history of one UK humanitarian organisation, a possible explanation given to one of us for the complete absence of Board minutes and papers for the period before 2002 was a burst water main in the street which had flooded the organisation's basement!

In such circumstances there is little option other than tracking down and interviewing former staff, hoping that they are still alive and with reasonably intact memories. Our recent experience is that some (perhaps one in 10) will have kept their own personal collection of materials – even from 20 years ago – and that for some organisations over the last 20–30 years or perhaps even longer, it is possible to reassemble partially the gaps in the archive through these personal papers.

So what would history entail for humanitarian practitioners? Should it ever be written in terms and in ways that may address even the most emergency-driven individuals?<sup>48</sup> Beyond the platitude of learning from one's mistakes to avoid new ones – often disproved by the reality that new mistakes invariably contain too much *new* in them to be regarded as mere repetitions of past ones – history provides a powerful tool to think more broadly about the three dimensions of one's work:

- The embedded presence of the past in the present – and the hidden meanings within;
- The impact of current work on the future and its accountability to future generations; and
- The broader context of what are often very narrowly focused remits and aims.

Historical method is primarily a tool humanitarian practitioners may wish to embrace to go beyond the commemorative mood or the often self-denigrating tone of denunciatory accounts. At its heart there is an attempt to comprehend the limits, the language and the culture that made humanitarian acts of a certain kind possible or unimaginable. The role of historians is not to offer glib judgements and denunciatory tirades, but neither should it become part of the epistemic furniture in a cosy club room. The kind of anxieties arising from critique produced from within development programmes by embedded ethnographers are pertinent to historians. Historians need to be conducting research in the contemporary field – one where their theoretical insights and archival work might challenge memorial practices or established narratives.<sup>49</sup>

A fascinating area for greater examination by historians is that of systemic violence, either perpetrated by humanitarian workers or in which they were complicit but which remained almost invisible to most of them at the time. For instance, during the reunion at the border camps, some of this buried violence came through poignantly. The famous 'Khao I Dang fever' was recalled.<sup>50</sup> This was the fever to escape from repatriation camps to the possibility of a new yet unknown life abroad in the United States, France or Australia. Major countries then opened their borders to refugees in a manner that seems unreal compared to our contemporary practices. Over 400,000 Cambodians could move to the United States, over 70,000 to France in a matter of a few years alone.<sup>51</sup> Those who had made it to Khao I Dang and had obtained that status were deemed fit for resettlement. Most remained in other camps and were denied this possibility. The temptation was great for inhabitants of Site 2, a few miles down the road to find the means of crossing from one fenced camp to another. The UNBRO camps and the UNHCR were guarded and militarized. One could die leaving or entering. The Thai guards thus shot the sister of one of the Khao I Dang survivors who attended the reunion. Her baby made it inside the camp. Another refugee spoke publicly of the year she spent as an 'illegal' refugee inside another refugee camp, a veritable Russian doll of refuge within refuge and how she managed to survive off the charity of other refugees while being denied a ration by official UNHCR humanitarian aid.

Myriad stories of faceless bureaucratic cruelty like this one rubbed shoulders with the individual generosity of a generation of volunteers devoting their lives and sometimes losing it, in the service of culturally distant people. The humanitarian endeavour often appears quixotic and naïve, but often through the hindsight of a shrill political prism; history may be a kinder lens to think about what individuals and organisations have attempted – warts and all.

## Notes

1. We use the concept of humanitarian as defined by practitioners and most recently in the World Humanitarian Summit to define a type of emergency response to sufferings (as opposed to a developmentalist perspective). For a thorough investigation of the meanings of humanitarian and humanitarianism please refer to Didier Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire*.
2. See, for instance, Destexhe, *L'Humanitaire impossible*; Ryfman, *Une Histoire de l'humanitaire*; Gill *Calculating Compassion*; Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*; Barnett and Stein, *Sacred Aid*.
3. Barnett and Weiss, "Humanitarianism a Brief History of the Present" in *Humanitarianism in Question*, 1–48.
4. Smirl, How Cars, Compounds and Hotels Shape Humanitarianism.
5. Kiernan, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia*.
6. For instance Jack Dunford, "Three Decades of Service on the Thai Border," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7p98dGs4eU> (Accessed 15 April 2015).
7. See Young, "My Heart it is Delicious;" Heinzl, *Cambodia Calling*.
8. <http://www.krousar-thmey.org/html/> (Accessed 18 January 2015), interview with Benoit Duchateau-Arminjon (aka Benito), 10 January 2015.
9. Barber, "Feeding Refugees, or War?," 8–14; Hall and Getlin, *Beyond the Killing Fields*; French, "From Politics to Economics at the Thai–Cambodian Border," 427–70.
10. Benson, *The Changing Role of NGOs*.
11. Herbst, "From Helpless Victim to Empowered Survivor," 141–54.
12. Becker, Beyene, and Ken, "Memory, Trauma, and Embodied Distress," 320–345.
13. Soon to be the object of a separate publication.
14. Interview with Jack Dunford, 10 January 2015.

15. See Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 16–19; Young, *The Texture of Memory*; Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*.
16. Williams, “Witnessing Genocide,” 234–54; Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam*; Ledgerwood, “The Cambodian Tuol Sleng Museum of Genocidal Crimes,” 82–98; Hughes, “Nationalism and Memory at the Tuol Sleng Museum,” 175–92 and “The Abject Artefacts of Memory,” 23–44.
17. Carruters and Trinh Huynh-Beattie, “Dark Tourism,” 147–60.
18. On epistemic community, see Adler and Haas, “Epistemic Communities,” 367–90; Sebenius, “Challenging Conventional Explanations of International Cooperation,” 323–65.
19. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History*, and “‘The Killing Fields’ and Perceptions of Cambodian History,” 92–7; Kiernan, *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, xii–xiv; Kiernan, “The American Bombardment of Kampuchea, 1969–1973,” 4–41; Kiernan, *Genocide and Democracy in Cambodia*.
20. Fassin and Retchman, *L’Empire du traumatisme*; Carlson and Rosser-Hogan “Cross-Cultural Response to Trauma,” 43–58; David, “Posttraumatic Stress Disorder among Survivors of Cambodian Concentration Camps,” 645–50; Hiégel and Hiégel Landrac, *Vivre et revivre*; Kinzie, “Therapeutic Approaches;” Mollica et al., “Effects of War Trauma on Cambodian Refugee,” 1098–1106.
21. Brauman and Neuman, *MSF and the Aid System*.
22. Benson, *The Changing Role*, 70–89.
23. This was in itself not entirely new of course, see Gemie and Rees “Representing and Reconstructing Identities in the Postwar World,” 441–73 or Gatrell, *The Making of the Modern Refugee*.
24. Davey, *Idealism beyond Borders*.
25. Crochet, “Le Pêril fécal” in Brauman, *Utopies Sanitaires*, 21–45.
26. Bradol and Vidal, *Innovations médicales*.
27. Magone, Neuman, and Weissman eds, *Humanitarian Negotiations Revealed*.
28. Interview with Jacques Pinel, January 2010; Vidal and Pinel, “MSF ‘Satellites’” in *Medical Innovations in Humanitarian Situations*, 22.
29. Walker and Maxwell, *Shaping the Humanitarian World*.
30. See Taithe, “Humanitarian History,” 62–72.
31. de Waal, *Famine Crimes*.
32. Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*.
33. Interview with Arlys Herem, present on the camps from 1985 until 1990 with ARC. Interview 10 January 2015.
34. Laderman, *Tours of Vietnam*.
35. Ashplant, Dawson, and Roper, *Commemorating War*.
36. Carruters et al., “Dark Tourism,” 147–60.
37. See Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*; Cubbitt, *History and Memory*.
38. Letter by Mary K. Taylor cited in Merzinger.
39. Some of them will be chartered in Roddy, Strange, Taithe, *Selling Compassion*, forthcoming.
40. Shelliem, Jochanan (1979) cited in Merzinger.
41. Hugo Slim, “A Bare Line: Why Critical Theorists are Wrong About Humanitarian Aid”, unpublished, paper presented at the University of Nottingham, 28 January 2014. Hugo Slim is now policy director at the ICRC in Geneva.
42. For instance, Fassin’s work built on a long involvement with humanitarian organisations themselves. Fassin, *La Raison humanitaire*.
43. For instance, Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism*.
44. Revealing that one of the best examples should be produced by humanitarians themselves: Magone, Neuman, and Weissman, *Humanitarian Negotiations*.
45. De Torrenté, “The Relevance and Effectiveness of Humanitarian Aid,” 607–634.
46. Taithe, “Humanitarian History?”
47. Lester and Dussart, *Colonization and the Origins of Humanitarian Governance*.
48. Borton and Davey, “The Use of History by Humanitarians” in Ramos Pinto and Taithe, *The Impact of History*, 153–68.

49. For an excellent discussion of the difficulties arising from this insider-outsider perspective, see the world of Mosse, "Anti-Social Anthropology?," 935–56. Thanks to Fabrice Weissman for this reference.
50. See Interview with Arlys Herem.
51. Benson, *The Changing Role of NGOs*.

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