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FORUM: HUMANITARIANISM AND THE MILITARY

A Humanitarian Moment? The U.S. Military in Europe, 1943–1946

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The U.S. military is not usually identified as a humanitarian force, and indeed the very concept of military humanitarianism strikes one as a paradox. According to conventional wisdom, at least, modern humanitarianism emerged as a direct response and even an antidote to military violence. As the story goes, Geneva businessman Henri Dunant's efforts to redress the horrors of war after seeing the terrible aftermath of the Battle of Solferino (1859) eventually gave rise to the Geneva Conventions and the Red Cross movement. The two world wars reinforced this violence-breeds-care logic, as the vast scale of wartime suffering generated ever greater humanitarian counter-efforts. By the 1940s, an array of national, international, and supranational organizations increasingly aspired to provide neutral and impartial relief to the victims of war, thereby counteracting, or so they hoped, the violence and partisanship of armed conflict. Even if, on closer inspection, humanitarianism and warfare have always had a more symbiotic relationship—after all, in an era of citizen armies it was only the relative humanization of warfare that guaranteed its survival as an instrument of statecraft—the conceptual divide between the military and the humanitarian remains strong.[1]

Still, as the contributions to this forum show, the (U.S.) military has been involved in forms of humanitarian assistance for much of its history. While there are many excellent reasons not to classify it as a humanitarian organization *per se*, there are equally excellent reasons to probe more deeply into its humanitarian activities and to locate them, however uncomfortably, in the history of humanitarianism. World War II offers a particularly prominent case study to this end. Even as it unleashed extreme violence, the U.S. military experienced something of a humanitarian moment: for a brief period during and after World War II, it became one of the most important humanitarian actors in the world. As U.S. troops landed in Europe from mid-1943—first in Italy, then in France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Germany, and Austria—they assumed essential humanitarian functions: they restored roads, sewage canals, and access to drinking water; they cared for and repatriated millions of displaced persons, refugees, and prisoners of war; and they fed, clothed, and sheltered, as best as they could, the civilian populations of liberated and occupied Europe. For the U.S. military, and the U.S. Army in particular, dealing with the needs of civilians—150 million of them at one point—became a mission "second only in scope and significance to the war itself."[2]

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[1]On the need to humanize and thereby save warfare see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca, NY, 2011), 79–80; and Thomas G. Weiss and Kurt M. Campbell, "Military Humanitarianism," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 33, no. 5 (1991): 451–65, here 463.

[2]Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg, eds., *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors* (1964; Washington, DC, 1986), viii; Earl F. Ziemke, *The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Germany, 1944–1946* (Washington, DC, 1975), v.

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This development was hardly predictable when the war began. When the United States entered the war in December 1941, there existed no specialized personnel, administration, or overarching doctrine for what came to be known as "civil affairs," or at least none deemed suitable to the task at hand. More importantly, the Roosevelt administration was reluctant to give the U.S. military any longer-term authority over liberated civilians. When the War Department began training civil affairs experts in early 1942, U.S. cabinet members and the press accused it of imperialist designs.[3] For New Dealers this was a matter of principle as much as ideology: extended military rule over (Western) civilians struck them as un-American, and the military seemed hardly the right institution to start implementing the "New Deal for the world" that they envisioned.[4] In fact, in late 1943, the Roosevelt administration helped establish an altogether different international organization, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), for precisely that purpose. Largely financed by the United States, UNRRA was to provide food, shelter, and clothing to suffering mankind while doubling as a practical experiment in American-led international cooperation.[5]

Why, then, did the U.S. military—not UNRRA or another civilian agency—end up assuming responsibility for civilian needs? The most immediate answer is that no one else could. During the war, the Army's administrative capability and infrastructural power was simply unmatched. Indeed, U.S. civilian agencies, notably the State Department and the Foreign Economic Administration, struggled to plan effectively for civilian relief. Their limited capabilities became evident in the disorganized humanitarian efforts during the North African campaign in November 1942, leading General Dwight D. Eisenhower to quip that U.S. civilian agencies gave him more trouble than the Germans.[6] Meanwhile, the War Department further professionalized its own civil affairs machinery, creating a Civil Affairs Division in March 1943 and a Combined (Anglo-American) Civil Affairs Committee in July 1943. By late 1943, with the Anglo-American occupation of Italy more difficult than anticipated and the liberation of Northwest Europe in the not-so-distant future, there was simply no other organization that could effectively address the burgeoning civilian needs faced by the Allies. Only one day after the founding of UNRRA, Roosevelt informed Secretary of War Henry Stimson that the "Army was to assume the initial responsibility of shipping and distributing relief supplies" for Europe.[7] And while Roosevelt imagined an early transition to UNRRA, that transition only came from the autumn of 1945 onward.

That the U.S. military retained its near exclusive humanitarian role for the next two years (and even longer in occupied areas) had much to do with its unparalleled access to liberated areas, its personnel, and the war's complicated global logistics. Indeed, Allied military rule in liberated Europe gave the Army a privileged position to administer humanitarian aid. Although its authority varied—running the gamut from a liaison role in liberated Belgium to full control in parts of occupied Italy, Germany, and Austria—its priority access to transportation, information, and local resources was the key prerequisite to effective humanitarian work. Only Civil Affairs officers, who followed immediately on the heels of Allied combat troops, had

[3]Memo, Gullion for Col. Reuben Jenkins, Chief, Officers Branch, SOS, Feb. 6, 1943, in *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors*, eds. Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg (1964; Washington, DC, 1986), 27.

[4]Elizabeth Borgwardt, *A New Deal for the World: America's Vision for Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA, 2005).

[5]See Roosevelt's remarks in *First Session of the Council of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration. Selected Documents* (Washington, DC, 1944), 3–6; Jessica Reinisch, "Internationalism in Relief. The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA," *Past and Present* 210, S6 (2011): 258–89; Samantha Knapton and Katherine Rossy, eds., *Relief and Rehabilitation for a Post-War World* (London, 2023).

[6]Walter M. Hudson, *Army Diplomacy: American Military Occupation and Foreign Policy after WWII* (Lexington, KY, 2015), 129; Eisenhower to George V. Strong, Dec. 4, 1942, in *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower. The War Years: 1*, ed. Alfred D. Chandler, Jr. (Baltimore, MD, 1970), 794.

[7]George Woodbridge, *UNRRA. The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, vol. I (New York, 1950), 24.

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the wherewithal and authority to connect local needs with the military's vast resources—that is, to be effective humanitarians in that situation. That said, the War Department was also—despite public claims to the contrary—extremely reluctant to admit any civilian agencies to areas under its control. It only called forward UNRRA personnel from late 1944 and for the circumscribed (if enormous) task of dealing with displaced persons.[8] Additionally, facing serious bottlenecks in shipping, port capacity, and rolling stock, the War Department was not willing to further complicate its global supply chains by giving civilians authority over any parts of its supplies, whether for military or civilian use.

Above all, the military's humanitarian role was facilitated by perhaps *the* most critical factor, its immense resources, or what I might call the "power of stuff." Indeed, the U.S. military was able to amass shipping, supplies, personnel, and every conceivable other resource at gigantic and unprecedented proportions. Blankets, fuel, food, ambulances, medical supplies, entire field hospitals, and—the most prized possession of them all—jeeps flowed comparatively freely when the military asked for them. Many of these military supplies were also especially suited to humanitarian purposes. Military field rations, for example, were high in calories, and, due to their concentrated and often dehydrated form, they were also easily preserved and shipped. Ample trucks and fuel were also crucial to tending to civilian needs in regions where regular transportation had broken down. Importantly, the abundance of military supplies continued to fuel U.S. humanitarian efforts long after the Axis surrender. With the end of the war, millions upon millions of tons of military surplus became available for other purposes.[9] Given American fears that the surplus would depress the U.S. economy if dumped on domestic markets, its use for overseas (humanitarian) purposes was a good solution. It was no coincidence that the first CARE package in 1946 was a ten-in-one ration parcel (packing a whopping 40,000 calories) purchased at great rebate from surplus military stocks (Figure 1).[10] Moreover, even where the U.S. military was no longer directly responsible (as it continued to be, for example, in occupied Germany), U.S. Army veterans often joined UNRRA following the war, essentially doing the same job at considerably better pay. Military expertise and resources shaped U.S. humanitarianism during the war, and long thereafter.

The exercise of U.S. military humanitarianism, to be sure, was fraught with contradictions. The most obvious was that the U.S. military was involved in both large-scale violence and large-scale care. At times, it reversed roles in a matter of days, even hours. In Western Europe, GIs would lay waste to towns and villages as they drove back German forces, just to help rebuild them briefly thereafter. They would displace thousands of civilians and then open refugee camps to accommodate them. Allied bombing campaigns killed many friendly civilians, whom Civil Affairs officers subsequently helped bury. When John Maginnis, one of the first U.S. Civil Affairs Officers to land in Normandy, arrived in the town of Carentan on June 12, 1944, his first task was to appoint a new mayor since the previous one had been killed in an Allied air raid.[11] On a larger scale, the military expended enormous efforts to secure the equitable distribution of food to civilians, but nothing so fueled the debilitating black markets as the near endless stream of military supplies arriving in European ports, and while the military imported vast amounts of civilian supplies, many scarcities only existed because of the

[8]Meeting with Lieut.-General Grasett and Branch Heads of G-5, SHAEF, Nov. 25, 1944, Folder: Meeting with SHAEF, Herbert H. Lehman Papers, UNRRA Personal Correspondence & General Files, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York City.

[9]"Surplus Property," *Life Magazine*, Dec. 18, 1944, 20.

[10]Department of State, War Areas Economic Division, Oct. 5, 1945, "Individual Relief Food Packages," Roll 15, 1945–1946, M1284 Records of the Department of State Relating to the Problems of Relief and Refugees in Europe Arising from World War II and Its Aftermath, 1938–1949, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD.

[11]Entry, June 12, 1944, in John Maginnis, *Military Government Journal: Normandy to Berlin*, (Amherst, MA, 1971).

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Figure 1. An original ten-in-one ration in Eudora Richardson and Sherman Allen, *Quartermaster Supply in the European Theater of Operations in World War II, Volume II, Subsistence* (Camp Lee, VA, 1948).

military's priority claim to roads and rolling stock.[12] Nor, of course, did U.S. soldiers always behave decently or appear particularly charitable to the liberated, let alone to the conquered.[13] Clearly, the military was never to be, or perceived to be, a primarily humanitarian actor.

More fundamentally, U.S. military planners never desired theirs to be a humanitarian organization, and they were often ill at ease with that role. Their fundamental motivation was not humanitarian, and their decisions were dictated by military expediency, not human needs. Civilians under military administration could expect to be fed at subsistence levels, but little more.[14] This is not to say that soldiers individually did not feel or show compassion, even toward the former enemy (Figure 2).[15] Indeed, the chocolate handed out by U.S. soldiers to Italian and German children and the candy dropped during the Berlin airlift in 1948–1949 later became an integral part of the imaginary of the "good war" and the "good occupation."[16]

But as an institution, the U.S. military maintained a pragmatic attitude to human needs. Commanders never tired of reminding their troops and political leaders that "the Army is

[12]J.R., "Food and Transport in France," *Bulletin of International News* 22, no. 10 (May 1945), 427–34.

[13]Peter Schrijvers, *Liberators: The Allies and Belgian Society* (Cambridge, UK, 2009).

[14]Robert W. Coakley and Richard M. Leighton, *Global Logistics and Strategy, 1943–45* (1968; Washington DC, 1989), 819.

[15]See entry, Dec. 2, 1945, in Maginnis, *Military Government Journal*, 319; Petra Goedde, "From Villains to Victims: Fraternization and the Feminization of Germany, 1945–1947," *Diplomatic History* 23, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 8.

[16]Susan L. Carruthers, *The Good Occupation: American Soldiers and the Hazards of Peace* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); see Kaete M. O'Connell, "'Uncle Wiggly Wings': Children, Chocolates, and the Berlin Airlift," *Food and Foodways* 25, no. 2 (2017): 142–59.

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SICILIAN CHILDREN RECEIVING CANDY FROM A SOLDIER. U. S. soldiers were universally popular with children of all classes. The individual soldier gave a good portion of his ration of sweets and chewing gum to native children.

Figure 2. It is notable that this and another image of a U.S. soldier sharing his ration with European children are among the only images of military–civilian interaction featured in the official Pictorial History of the U.S. Army. See *The War Against Germany and Italy. Mediterranean and Adjacent Area. Pictorial Record* (Washington DC, 1988), 139.

not a welfare organization."[17] No doubt, to military minds, hungry civilians or refugees on the move were first and foremost an obstacle and, quite literally, a "roadblock" to military victory. Put bluntly, military refugee camps were not run primarily to give succor to suffering humanity but to clear the roads for forward movement. Just how non-humanitarian this seemed to *actual* relief workers is clear from the disdain expressed by early UNRRA personnel.[18] Military humanitarianism was a peculiar type of humanitarianism, to be sure.

[17]Letter, Hilldring to Assistant Secretary of State Acheson, Nov. 9, 1943, in *Civil Affairs: Soldiers Become Governors*, eds. Harry L. Coles and Albert K. Weinberg (1964; Washington, DC, 1986), 153.

[18]Silvia Salvatici, "'Fighters without Guns': Humanitarianism and Military Action in the Aftermath of the Second World War," *European Review of History* 25, no. 6 (2008): 957–76.

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What, then, should we make of the U.S. military's humanitarian moment during and after World War II? Certainly, it raises questions about how we define humanitarianism. Basic guiding principles commonly associated with humanitarian assistance such as "do no harm," neutrality, independence, impartiality, or even humanity, did not (fully) apply to the U.S. Army. Nor was it particularly concerned with 'distant others'; as a matter of fact, it usually cared most about those in closest proximity to its fighting and yet, despite having few humanitarian inclinations, the U.S. military's impact in terms of lives saved was vastly greater than that of even the most compassionate Quaker organization. This conundrum points to the limits of the dominant "Geneva model," which readily recognizes as humanitarian the efforts of voluntary agencies or Red Cross societies, but fails to account for other key actors. Indeed, if one acknowledges that much aid today, and throughout history, is provided not to distant others for benign reasons, but to distinct groups for strategic gain, then the U.S. military might appear a fairly typical humanitarian actor.

And yet, such a delimitation of the concept of humanitarianism is also highly problematic. Given that aid was and is routinely provided by soldiers for reasons of military necessity, we might end up with a definition that classifies even the *Wehrmacht*, Nazi Germany's armed forces, as a humanitarian actor. Likewise, to claim that U.S. military humanitarianism surely is different *a priori* is to fall into an exceptionalist trap. Rather, the U.S. military's specific "humanitarian moment" in the era of World War II, as well as its long-term involvement in humanitarian projects outlined in the contributions to this forum, should prompt us to think critically and comparatively about the nature and significance of U.S. military humanitarianism (in Europe versus in the Pacific, and vis-à-vis other militaries). This could help identify unique or representative features of U.S. military humanitarianism, without from the outset depriving the larger concept of all meaning. Above all, we need a history of the development of humanitarianism that more accurately reflects its deep entanglement with the violence of the world wars. The sheer scale of the military operations in these wars created unprecedented human needs, but also brought forth some of the means to address them. As such, World War II was a key moment in what Julia Irwin in her contribution to this forum calls "the entwined revolution" of U.S. humanitarian and military power.

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