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**UNRRA and the Humanitarian Foundations of Economic Aid:  
Relief and Rehabilitation in Europe, 1943-1947**

My dissertation, “From Relief to Reconstruction to Development: Defining and Implementing Foreign Aid in Post-war Italy,” explores the European foundations of contemporary ideas and practices of foreign aid, which grew out of relief and reconstruction following the Second World War. The first two chapters of this project deal with the establishment and operation of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA), which I see as the first stage of international aid to Italy and other parts of Europe at the end of and following the Second World War. My research trip, January 18-20, 2016, to Columbia University’s Rare Books Collections in New York, New York, allowed me to read and take photographs of documents relevant to how UNRRA officials defined “relief,” “rehabilitation,” and “reconstruction,” how these concepts shaped the organization’s mission and policies, as well as what the major challenges faced by UNRRA were, and what public perception of foreign aid was. This is the ninth archival repository I have visited for my dissertation research, and I returned home with copies of 212 pages of highly relevant material, as well as notes on other documents.

From November 1943 to early 1948 an organization of forty-four nations from around the globe came together to provide aid to the countries of Europe and Asia that had suffered under Axis occupation during World War II. Quickly, assistance was extended to the people of Italy and Germany as well. Food, clothing, and medical supplies were sent by the hundreds of thousands of tons, as were industrial and agricultural supplies to rebuild these countries’

devastated economic capacities. Before the United Nations Charter was signed, before the United Nations Monetary and Financial Conference met at Bretton Woods, and before the Marshall Plan poured its aid into Europe, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration came into being and began to operate on the basis of a newly coalescing set of views about the need for international cooperation and the rights of all people to both political and economic security.

Surprisingly, UNRRA (as the Administration's was commonly known) has received relatively little scholarly attention, and practically none in the context of the literature on the history of development. The two book-length studies of UNRRA focus on its work with displaced persons, barely touching on its function as an international source of economic aid. Scholars such as Michael Barnett and G. Daniel Cohen see UNRRA's work as a sort of "neo-humanitarianism" (Barnett's term, as contrasted with 19th century "imperial humanitarianism") predicated on the emerging recognition of human rights as articulated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From this perspective, however, UNRRA's function in promoting the economic recovery of Europe it was unimportant relative to its work in providing immediate, direct relief to suffering populations.

Post-development theorists, conversely, believe that the project of foreign-assisted development was a 'neo-imperial' venture from the start and thus not authentically humanitarian. Post-developmental writings represent the anti-development position in contemporary debates. Works by Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, Arturo Escobar, and Gilbert Rist point to Truman's presidential inauguration speech in January 1949—in which he presented his "Point Four" program—as the foundation for economic development in the post-war. They argue that with this Truman first articulated the concept of "underdevelopment" that American policymakers would then use to "constitute" the global South as suited American interests. Scholars who hold this

view of the origins of economic development consequently tend to see the contemporary project as distinct from the aid provided to already- “developed” Europe after World War II.

Interestingly, the continuation of aid to Europe featured as “Point Two” of Truman’s address.

Some scholars, particularly in recent years, have challenged the “Point Four” origins of development, pointing to this assistance to Europe. These authors tend to be more amicable toward the concept of development. For H.W. Arndt, President Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” and the Atlantic Charter (with its promise of equal access to trade and raw materials for all countries) were “the signposts to a new era.”<sup>1</sup> Craig Murphy argues in a similar vein, citing an August 1940 speech by Churchill that anticipated the need for foreign help in restoring “food, freedom, and peace” to Europe at war’s end. UNRRA’s official history cites the importance of this speech as well.<sup>2</sup> Despite their earlier datings of the concept of development, however, these scholars still address UNRRA only in passing, moving from the approval of the Atlantic Charter by the United Nations (that is, the alliance against the Axis Powers) to the Bretton Woods Conference in July 1944 or the signing of the United Nations Charter in October 1945.

Elizabeth Borgwardt does seem to acknowledge the appropriateness of discussions of UNRRA in the context of economic aid. Yet, with only passing mention of a very interesting debate over the differences between ‘relief’, ‘rehabilitation’, and ‘reconstruction’ in regard to UNRRA’s work, she moves on to the Bretton Woods Conference.

A final strand of relevant literature, represented by Eric Helleiner’s work, places development’s origins even earlier, in U.S.-Latin American cooperation reaching back to the

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<sup>1</sup> H.W. Arndt, *Economic Development: The History of an Idea* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 44. The Atlantic Charter, a document of less than 400 words signed by Roosevelt and Churchill in August 1941. The text is available Yale Law School’s The Avalon Project. Accessed April 25, 2015 from <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/wwii/atlantic.asp>

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in George Woodbridge, *UNRRA: The History of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration*, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1950), 7. See Craig Murphy, *The United Nations Development Programme: A Better Way?* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

1890s. While he makes a convincing case for a pre-1940s emergence of the idea of development aid, the truly global character of later aid that makes it so distinct is not present in inter-American negotiations. Furthermore, the hoped-for Inter-American Bank never came to fruition, and so on this count alone earlier efforts were surpassed by UNRRA. Helleiner points to one crucial aspect of the early history of development: full participation by the global South.<sup>3</sup> But in doing so without discussing UNRRA he has missed a crucial juncture in the evolution of development thought and practice.<sup>4</sup> He, like others, thus overlooks the experiential link between Europe and the non-European world that is at the foundation of international economic development. In fact, those involved with UNRRA—as well as other contemporary observers—saw the organization somewhat differently than have more recent scholars. Its status as an international endeavor garnered a constant stream of praise, and its ‘humanitarian’ role received widespread recognition, but commentators in the 1940s focused almost equally on its function in the revival of the European economies and consequently the world economic system. During the UNRRA years, the line between ‘humanitarian’ and ‘economic’ assistance seems to have been much less clear than the scholarly literature on post-war international aid has subsequently implied.

My preliminary research in this field has suggested that the work of UNRRA displayed both genuine humanitarian impulses and the features necessary to consider it as perhaps the earliest example of the sort of international economic development project that holds contemporary resonance. To be clear: this is not to automatically conflate any and all humanitarian assistance with a monetary value with aid for economic development. Rather, I

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<sup>3</sup> Eric Helleiner, “The Development Mandate of International Institutions: Where Did it Come From?” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 44 (2009): 189-211.

<sup>4</sup> Jessica Reinisch also presents a fairly comprehensive analysis of the “internationalism” of UNRRA—but seems generally to dismiss any rhetoric about economic reconstruction as merely appealing to American self-interest in order to secure U.S. support. Jessica Reinisch, “Internationalism in Relief: The Birth (and Death) of UNRRA,” *Past & Present* 210 (2011): 258-289.

illustrate that UNRRA was focused on a genuinely international effort at enabling the long-term economic prosperity of Europe and the rest of the world. It is this long term outlook that qualifies UNRRA as an early agent of economic development. The large aid programs both to China and Europe, and the critical participation of Latin America alongside North America, Europe, and the British Empire make it one of the first instances of a truly international institution. When its financial functions are viewed alongside its strong humanitarian inclinations, UNRRA emerges as a remarkable early example of international cooperation that holds important implications for how the foundations of economic development are to be viewed.

The first archival-based chapter of my dissertation will further develop my earlier work on UNRRA's internationalism, within the context of the post-war proliferation of multilateral institutions (namely the Bretton Woods institutions, and other economic agencies under the United Nations Organization). The second chapter of my dissertation will consider how the counterpart fund set up in Italy by UNRRA was an early use—perhaps the first—of a financial mechanism that would play an important role in Europe's economic reconstruction, through the Marshall Plan and World Bank loans, as well as in later development initiatives throughout the world. This second chapter also considers the transition from UNRRA to other aid sources. Some of the materials in Columbia's collections pertained to UNRRA's closing of its European offices in June 1947, and the challenges of transitioning to other sources of aid before the rehabilitation of Europe's infrastructure was complete.

The primary goal of my research trip to Columbia University's Rare Books Collection was to increase the diversity of my source material for these two chapters, particularly with respect to personal, non-official views of UNRRA's work. While there, I utilized two collections of personal papers: those of Herbert H. Lehman (former governor of New York, head of the State

Department's Office of Foreign Relief and Rehabilitation Operations (OFRRO), and then director general of UNRRA); and of Hugh R. Jackson (assistant director of OFRRO and later deputy-general of UNRRA). These papers also offered valuable insight into the dynamics of cooperation (and competition) between US government agencies and multilateral institutions in the course of administering foreign aid. This topic is becoming increasingly prominent in my dissertation as I move into the final stages of analysis and writing, and speaks to a topic that remains central to foreign aid and foreign policy today.

For instance, in a February 1946 letter to U.S. Secretary of War Robert Patterson, which I found in my research at Columbia, Herbert Lehman writes: "I think it would be most unfortunate if any unilateral action were taken by this or any other Government before the whole problem could be considered by [UNRRA]."<sup>5</sup> Lehman is referring to the prospect of relocation of wartime refugees by the US military, which continued to run displaced persons camps alongside UNRRA's camps. The written exchange sheds light both on the personal views of UNRRA's director-general, which—in conjunction with other evidence—helps me to construct a picture of the type of people who were drawn to UNRRA's work, and the role this institution played in the post-war world. It is also interesting to contemplate how UNRRA's experiences may be instructive for governments and international organizations currently trying to address a new refugee crisis in Europe today. Ultimately, the source material I was able to access at Columbia University, thanks to the support of the History Project and Institute for New Economic Thinking (INET), will allow me to begin drafting two out of four research-based chapters of my dissertation.

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Lehman to Robert Patterson, 28 February 1946. Herbert H. Lehman Papers, MS #0763, UNRRA Personal Correspondence & General Files, 46-21 Displaced Persons Reports