

# “A horrific photo of a drowned Syrian child”: Humanitarian photography and NGO media strategies in historical perspective

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## Abstract

*This article is a historical examination of the use of photography in the informational and fundraising strategies of humanitarian organizations. Drawing on archival research and recent scholarship, it shows that the figure of the dead or suffering child has been a centrepiece of humanitarian campaigns for over a century and suggests that in earlier eras too, such photos, under certain conditions, could “go viral” and achieve iconic status. Opening with last year’s photo campaign involving the case of 3-year-old Syrian refugee Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up on a Turkish beach near Bodrum in early September 2015, the article draws on select historical examples to explore continuities and ruptures in the narrative framing and emotional address of photos depicting dead or suffering children, and in the ethically and politically charged decisions by NGO actors and the media to publish and distribute such images. We propose that today, as in the past, the relationship between media and humanitarian NGOs remains symbiotic despite contemporary claims about the revolutionary role of new visual technologies and social media.*

**Keywords:** history of humanitarian photography, Syrian conflict, history and politics of humanitarian NGOs, media, communication, ethics, Alan Kurdi, image of the child.

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## Introduction

In early September 2015, a photograph of the lifeless body of 3-year-old Alan Kurdi, lying face-down on a Turkish beach near Bodrum, went viral on social media. The boy drowned along with his mother and 5-year-old brother Ghalib when the smuggler's boat in which they were riding capsized. Alan and his Kurdish family, natives of Damascus, were refugees fleeing the Syrian civil war, en route to Europe; only his father Abdullah survived. Within days, photos of Alan's body migrated from social media to news feeds and newspapers. As they did so, the story evolved beyond the tragic fact of Alan's death to focus on the astonishing rapidity with which the child's image had circulated on social media and the widespread anguish and outrage it had provoked.

This response, in fact, rendered the boy's fate newsworthy and initially dominated press reports. It suggested, yet again, the affective power of "the image".<sup>1</sup> When combined with the international reach of social media – in which networks of like-minded or tenuously connected friends, colleagues and acquaintances select, endorse and re-post compelling content – something striking happened. Viewers discussed the intensity of their visceral reactions to Alan's image online, or recognized echoes of their own emotions – and, by extension, their own values – in the postings of others. It seemed possible that this response, if sufficiently broad and persistent, could translate into grassroots political pressure substantial enough to alter national policies regarding the immigration of refugees and to win public support for greater humanitarian commitment to them.<sup>2</sup> Some stakeholders, such as human rights advocacy groups

- 1 Prominent literature on this issue includes Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Picador, New York, 2003; Susie Linfield, *The Cruel Radiancy: Photography and Political Violence*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2010; Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999. For a critique of the absence of attention by international relations scholars, see Roland Bleiker and Emma Hutchinson, "Fear No More: Emotions and World Politics", *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 34, 2008. In a recent article, Pierluigi Musarò claims that Susie Linfield and Lilie Chouliaraki underline that "it is impossible to imagine transnational organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, or Doctors Without Borders in the pre-photographic age. It is also difficult to understand the link between the visual projections of human suffering and the exponential growth of the humanitarian industry without taking into account the devastating imagery that circulated within a variety of Western print and broadcast media formats in the 1980s." Pierluigi Musarò, "The Banality of Goodness: Humanitarianism between the Ethics of Showing and the Ethics of Seeing", *Humanity: An International Journal of Human Rights, Humanitarianism, and Development*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2015, p. 318. The two books that Musarò reviews are Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2013; and S. Linfield, *ibid.*
- 2 Of course, expectations do not always produce results. While German policy liberalized in the wake of Alan's drowning, British policy toward Syrian refugees did not, even though an estimated 80% of Britons had seen the photo. Statistic is from Mukul Devichand, "Alan Kurdi's Aunt: 'My Dead Nephew's Picture Saved Thousands of Lives'", *BBC Trending*, 2 January 2016, available at [www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35116022](http://www.bbc.com/news/blogs-trending-35116022) (all internet references were accessed in January 2016). The names

and humanitarian NGOs, hoped the response to Alan’s image would go transnational and push the grassroots political movement beyond national constituencies.

The meanings constructed around Alan’s image by the media have been insistently, and perhaps understandably, keyed to contemporary concerns: what does it tell us about the ongoing refugee crisis and the Syrian civil war? What does it tell us about the political influence of new social media? Here, we expand the temporal frame to see where Alan’s photos fit in the broader history of photography used for humanitarian purposes during and after armed conflicts. This essay is informed by our ongoing projects, as historians, to employ archival research in order to examine the representational practices and visual politics of humanitarianism, and their evolution, since the nineteenth century. This research, by us and others, is still under way. As a result, we cannot yet offer a comprehensive historical or theoretical analysis of the visual practices of humanitarianism over time. Rather, we focus on select moments and materials from multiple archives to historically contextualize contemporary practices – in this case involving the images of Alan Kurdi – and juxtapose them with those of the past. In the future, we hope that careful historical research will allow us to test some of the theorizing about these issues characteristic of media studies and the social sciences. For although such theory is repeatedly invoked in scholarly and public discussions, it is typically based on the examination of developments reaching back only a few decades or, at most, since the end of the Second World War. It is worth remembering that theory, like humanitarian practice, is shaped by historical forces.<sup>3</sup>

The decision by humanitarian actors to show a dead or dying child is not new. Neither is the idea that displaying shocking images of human suffering, in circumstances that humanitarian organizations deem to be exceptionally dramatic, might induce behavioural and political change. Since before the turn of the twentieth century, missionary societies and private organizations (e.g., NGO ancestors) have used newsletters, newspapers and other media to publicize and protest select incidents of human suffering stemming from natural or man-made causes. Prominent early examples include a focus on atrocities connected to the “new slaveries” in the Belgian Congo Free State starting in the 1890s, the deportation and massacre of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War, and famine or policies resulting in starvation during or after armed conflict in South Africa (1899–1902), in post-revolutionary Russia, and in post-1918 Europe.<sup>4</sup>

of the children have been spelled in various ways: Alan is also called Aylan; Ghalib is sometimes spelled Galip.

- 3 Since this essay is focused on historical analysis, we do not discuss the expansive literature on the agenda-setting effects of media and visual images on national and international policy. See, for example, Larry Minear, Colin Scott and Thomas G. Weiss, *The News Media, Civil War and Humanitarian Action*, Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1996; and more recently, Lei Guo and Maxwell McCombs (eds), *The Power of Information Networks: New Directions*, Routledge, New York, 2015.
- 4 On late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century campaigns, see the essays in Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno (eds), *Humanitarian Photography: A History*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2015. The discussion in this essay draws on, and expands upon, the analysis in that book.

It bears emphasizing that for most of this history, the photographic depiction and publication of dead, dying or suffering children was not taboo. The broad circulation of these images in humanitarian public awareness and fundraising campaigns dates back to before the turn of the twentieth century. Such depictions in books, in newspapers and on postcards – although rarely for humanitarian purposes – are even older. The salient point is that the organized ethical regulation of such images in the humanitarian sector is a relatively new phenomenon, dating to the 1980s.<sup>5</sup>

We cannot state with certainty that the circulation of Alan's photo humanized the current crisis or that it alone explains why, for an ephemeral moment, some European governments, such as that of Germany, seemed less hostile to refugees reaching the European mainland from the eastern and southern Mediterranean. What we, as historians, can do is to set Alan's image in historical context and consider the continuities and ruptures in the role of humanitarian photography over the past century or so. We define humanitarian photography as the mobilization of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across State boundaries.<sup>6</sup> Here, we compare the contemporary use of Alan's images to past practices. Our aim is to sketch how humanitarians of various eras and political hues used photographic images and modern media technologies to develop and disseminate affecting tropes and narratives – such as the suffering “mother and child” or “child alone” – in order to train the ethical impulses of viewers and to win their support for the national or transnational relief, reform or improvement of select conditions at specific historical junctures.

## Humanitarian photography as moral rhetoric

Humanitarianism emerged and evolved in tandem with photographic technologies. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Europeans and North Americans increasingly used photography to generate empirical knowledge of previously unseen worlds: from the spiritual to the material, from the microscopic to the

The use of the Internet for humanitarian campaigns reaches back to at least 2008, when Save Darfur (<http://savedarfur.org/about/history>), a transnational advocacy group that took a clear position in favour of an intervention (armed included) in Sudan against what the organization labelled a genocide, massively campaigned using social media such as Facebook ([www.facebook.com/savedarfurcoalition/timeline](http://www.facebook.com/savedarfurcoalition/timeline)). Save Darfur did not use the image of a dead toddler. Kevin Lewis, Kurt Gray and Jens Meierhenrich, “The Structure of Online Activism”, *Sociological Science*, Vol. 1, 2014; Mahmood Mamdani, *Saviors and Survivors: Darfur, Politics, and the War on Terror*, Verso, London, 2009.

5 A brief discussion of the ethical regulation of images of death and suffering can be found in the final section of this essay. On nineteenth-century depictions, see, for example, James Vernon, *Hunger: A Modern History*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2007, pp. 17–40; Heather D. Curtis, “Picturing Pain: Evangelicals and the Politics of Pictorial Humanitarianism in an Imperial Age”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4. See also the travel and ethnographic literature on India published in book form, like Reuters special correspondent F. H. S. Mereweather's *Tour through the Famine Districts*, 1898, which featured graphic images of starving adults and children yet was not humanitarian in presentation or purpose.

6 H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

cosmic, from the sociological to the anthropological.<sup>7</sup> By the 1880s, journalists, missionaries and reformers were employing photos in illustrated newspapers, books, magazines and lantern-slide lectures to focus public attention on select examples of human misery in the world, thereby transforming specific episodes of privation and suffering into humanitarian “crises” and “campaigns”. Humanitarian imagery gave form and meaning to human suffering, rendering the latter comprehensible, urgent and actionable for European and American audiences.<sup>8</sup> Although realistic in style, the photographic evidence publicized since the late nineteenth century for humanitarian purposes has been necessarily interpretative.

In his classic book *The Photographer's Eye*, photographer and critic John Szarkowski reminds us that photography is “a process of selection”. The “factuality of pictures” differs from reality itself: “[m]uch is filtered out”, while other elements are “exhibited with an unnatural clarity, an exaggerated importance”. Photography is a plastic and interpretative medium. When we confront photos, “what we think about and act upon is the symbolic report and not the concrete event”.<sup>9</sup>

Humanitarian photos are composed, edited, narrated and circulated with an eye toward creating a specific effect: to stimulate emotion, such as empathy or outrage, in viewers, and cause them to act. In this essay, we analyze photos intended to raise public awareness and funds. However, it is clear from the historical record that in some cases, identical photos were used to *document*,

7 See Jennifer Tucker, *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 2005; Corey Keller (ed.), *Brought to Light: Photography and the Invisible, 1840–1900*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 2008; Robert A. Sobieszek, *Ghost in the Shell: Photography and the Human Soul, 1850–2000*, MIT Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Cambridge, MA, and Los Angeles, CA, 1999; Elizabeth Edwards (ed.), *Anthropology and Photography*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1992; Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology, 1860–1920*, Reaktion Books, London, 2011; Anna Grimshaw, *The Ethnographer's Eye*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001; Eleanor Hight and Gary Sampson (eds), *Colonialist Photography*, Routledge, New York, 2002; Anne Maxwell, *Colonial Photography and Exhibitions*, Leicester University Press, Leicester, 2000; Marcus Banks and Jay Ruby (eds), *Made to Be Seen: Perspectives on the History of Visual Anthropology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2011; Deborah Willis and Barbara Krauthamer, *Envisioning Emancipation*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2013.

8 Karen Halttunen, “Humanitarianism and the Pornography of Pain in Anglo-American Culture”, *American Historical Review*, Vol. 100, No. 2, 1995; Thomas Laqueur, “Bodies, Details, and the Humanitarian Narrative”, in Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The New Cultural History*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1989; Richard Wilson and Richard Brown (eds), *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009; L. Boltanski, above note 1; Erica Bornstein and Peter Redfield (eds), *Forces of Compassion: Humanitarianism between Ethics and Politics*, SAR Press, Santa Fe, NM, 2011; Daniel Bell and Jean-Marc Coicaud (eds), *Ethics in Action: The Ethical Challenges of International Human Rights Nongovernmental Organizations*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007; Craig Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action”, in Thomas Weiss and Michael Barnett (eds), *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY, 2008; Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 2011; Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, *Contemporary States of Emergency*, Zone Books, New York, 2010; Ilana Feldman and Miriam Ticktin (eds), *In the Name of Humanity: The Government of Threat and Care*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2010.

9 John Szarkowski, *The Photographer's Eye*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2007 (first edition 1966), p. 8.

*authenticate* and *publicize* atrocities or famines.<sup>10</sup> As a result, no firm distinctions can be drawn between photos mobilized for fundraising and those used for evidentiary or archival purposes: these could be one and the same. Such photos graphically showed viewers that the worst *could* happen and, indeed, somewhere in the world, already did. Such photos were intended to connect British, European and North American viewers to distant subjects' suffering, visually and viscerally, through depiction and description. Humanitarian actors believed in the affective power of images, and deliberately worked to enhance this through careful presentation and narration, rendering photos effective tools for information and fundraising campaigns. If done well, such photos demanded attention and response. Some remain difficult to view.

Humanitarian photography is best understood as moral rhetoric. Historically, it has mobilized images of suffering, including extreme suffering, to enhance sympathy, empathy and a sense of responsibility or guilt in its viewers. Triggering emotional response has been, and continues to be, one effective way to shape public understanding of both what is going on "out there" and what is at stake. Humanitarian photography is designed and circulated with pragmatic purposes in mind: to fuel political pressure on governments for reform or humanitarian intervention, to raise funds for "good causes" and to establish the legitimacy of specific humanitarian campaigns, organizations and actors, and to convince targeted publics of their duty to act. For over a century, photo-centred appeals have continued to forge temporary communities of emotion and political action of like-minded viewers around specific causes. In the process, such strategies of representation and communication have produced a recognizable humanitarian imagery.<sup>11</sup>

## Humanitarian photography and the figure of the child

One significant strand of this humanitarian imagery has been its insistent focus on the figure of the child.<sup>12</sup> The photos of Alan are shocking, but viewed historically,

10 See, for example, the "Sole Survivor" discussion below; this was certainly not unique for the period.

11 For further analysis, see Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, "The Morality of Sight: Humanitarian Photography in History", in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4, pp. 3–4.

12 For a historical discussion regarding the humanitarian use of images of children, see Heide Fehrenbach, "Children and Other Civilians: Photography and the Politics of Humanitarian Image-Making", in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4. On the humanitarian use of the image of the child, see Laura Briggs, "Mother, Child, Race, Nation: The Visual Iconography of Rescue and the Politics of Transnational and Transracial Adoption", *Gender & History*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2003; Kate Manzo, "Imagining Humanitarianism: NGO Identity and the Iconography of Childhood", *Antipode*, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2008; Liisa H. Malkki, "Children, Humanity, and the Infantilization of Peace", in I. Feldman and M. Ticktin (eds), above note 8; Laura Suski, "Children, Suffering, and the Humanitarian Appeal", in R. A. Wilson and R. D. Brown (eds), above note 8; Philip Gourevitch, "Alms Dealers: Can You Provide Humanitarian Aid without Facilitating Conflicts?", *New Yorker*, 11 October 2010; Karen Wells, "The Melodrama of Being a Child: NGO Representations of Poverty", *Visual Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 3, 2013; Iain Wilkinson, "The Provocation of the Humanitarian Social Imaginary", *Visual Communication*, Vol. 12, No. 2013; L. Chouliaraki, above note 1. These social scientists have examined the focus on children as a post-1945 phenomenon and have not investigated or acknowledged its earlier evolution.



they are symptomatic of longer trends.<sup>13</sup> In fact, the two photos of Alan that circulated widely evoked century-old visual tropes in humanitarian photography: that of the solitary child suffering or dying alone (Figure 1), and that of the “rescue” photo (Figure 2).<sup>14</sup> In its formal composition, the latter echoes a subset of humanitarian photography that showcased the agents, and typically also the effectiveness, of humanitarian relief work. The images shown in Figures 1 and 2 were taken by Turkish photographer Nilüfer Demir for the Dogan News Agency; the first photo was cropped in social media and some news reports to show only the child’s body.<sup>15</sup>



Fig. 1 - Colour online, Colour in print

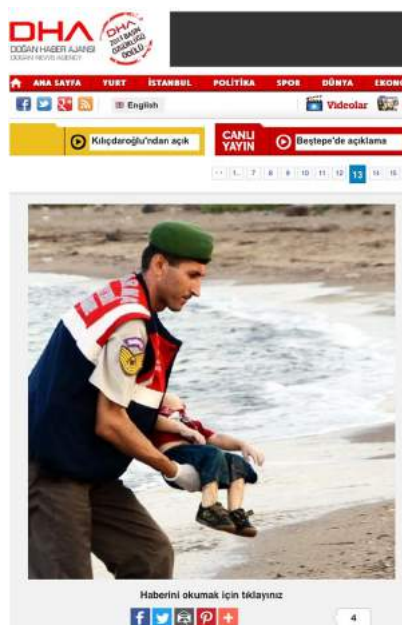


Fig. 2 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 1. Alan lying face-down on the beach. Screenshot from the Dogan News Agency website. Other news organizations and Human Rights Watch featured a tight close-up of Alan’s body.

Figure 2. Alan carried by policeman. Screenshot from the Dogan News Agency website.

13 This despite the fact that photo editors have congratulated themselves on “breaking taboos” and taking “an important step” in publishing and circulating photos of the lifeless Alan. See the quotations by Hugh Pinney of Getty Images and Nicolas Jimenez of *Le Monde* in Olivier Laurent, “What the Image of Alan Kurdi Says about the Power of Photography”, *Time*, 4 September 2015, available at: <http://time.com/4022765/Alan-kurdi-photo/>.

14 See *Time*’s slide show “See Front Pages from around the World Showing Drowned Syrian Boy”, 3 September 2015, available at: <http://time.com/4021560/drowned-syrian-boy-aylan-kurdi-photo-front-page/>.

15 Information on Alan Kurdi, his death and the photos is now available on Wikipedia at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death\\_of\\_Alan\\_Kurdi](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Death_of_Alan_Kurdi). We do not enter the theoretical debate on the so-called “connective turn” and “culture of connectivity” here, but our invitation to our readers to consult the

In his online dispatch “Why I Shared a Horrific Photo of a Drowned Syrian Child”, published on 2 September 2015, Peter Bouckaert, director of emergencies at Human Rights Watch (HRW), reflected on his personal reaction to the photo and his choice to circulate it:

I thought long and hard before I retweeted the photo of three-year-old Alan Kurdi. ... What struck me the most were his little sneakers, certainly lovingly put on by his parents that morning as they dressed him for their dangerous journey. One of my favorite moments of the morning is dressing my kids and helping them put on their shoes. They always manage to put something on backwards, to our mutual amusement. Staring at the image, I couldn't help imagine that it was one of my own sons lying there drowned on the beach. ... It is not an easy decision to share a brutal image of a drowned child. But I care about these children as much as my own. Maybe if Europe's leaders did too, they would try to stem this ghastly spectacle.<sup>16</sup>

While these words may accurately describe Bouckaert's experience in confronting Alan's image, they are also a strategic rhetorical argument for a political response to the refugee crisis based upon a particular narrative frame: the perspective of the observer-as-father. Our proper response to distant suffering, Bouckaert suggested, should be to view the sufferer as our own: to respond as nurturers, with the apparently natural and tender emotions of a parent. The moral heart of the argument – and the moral urgency of humanitarian aid – is keyed to the photo of the dead child, who was failed by politicians unwilling, or perhaps unmoved, to act. This is the incontrovertible “fact” of what is at stake. “I'm convinced that until you've shown this photograph, you haven't shown the reality of this crisis”, remarked Nicolas Jimenez, director of photography at *Le Monde*. His comments were quoted in a *Time* magazine article on “what the image of Alan Kurdi says about the power of photography”.<sup>17</sup>

Alan's death-image particularized the human costs of the Syrian civil war and refugee crisis for millions of viewers around the world. Reciprocally, the avid circulation of Alan's image has abstracted him into a representative symbol of

Internet signals our assumption that they rely on a specific connectivity culture and system. José van Dijck and Andrew Hoskin have suggested that “as memories are increasingly mediated and thus constructed by networked technologies, the boundaries between present and past are no longer given, but they are the very stakes in debating what counts as memory. Memory, after the connective turn, is a new mediatized memory that challenges currently dominant concepts of time and space.” José Van Dijck, “Flickr and the Culture of Connectivity: Sharing Views, Experiences, Memories”, *Memory Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 10, 2010, p. 4. See also Andrew Hoskin, “Digital Network Memory”, in Atrid Erll and Ann Rigney (eds), *Mediation, Remediation and the Dynamics of Cultural Memory*, de Gruyter, Berlin, 2009; José van Dijck, *Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

16 Peter Bouckaert, “Dispatches: Why I Shared a Horrific Photo of a Drowned Child”, *Human Rights Watch* website, available at: [www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/02/dispatches-why-i-shared-horrific-photo-drowned-syrian-child](http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/09/02/dispatches-why-i-shared-horrific-photo-drowned-syrian-child). Bouckaert tweeted a tight close-up of the boy's body from a slightly different perspective. See the tweet and image at: [https://twitter.com/bouckap/status/639037338362978304?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw](https://twitter.com/bouckap/status/639037338362978304?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw).

17 O. Laurent, above note 13.



suffering Syrian refugees.<sup>18</sup> As we wrote this essay, news coverage of the boy and his photographed fate continued. A persistent theme remains the starkly affective impact of his death-image across national boundaries. And this, of course, is due to his status as child, as “innocent”, as victim: as a dependent minor who requires and deserves protection and nurture, whose youth releases him from political responsibility for armed conflict, and who embodies “our” survival (genetically, culturally, as a species) and hopes for the future.<sup>19</sup>

What is new about the publication of Alan’s photos? Certainly, the fact that they went viral on social media is a product of the era in which we are living. The idea of “going viral” specifically applies to social media. However, since the 1890s at least, other photos, mobilized to spur humanitarian action and which look quite similar to Alan’s, went viral in earlier communications networks that relied on print media and public lantern-slide lectures.<sup>20</sup> The speed of “virality” in the pre-internet era cannot be compared with our own,<sup>21</sup> but this is a difference of degree rather than kind. Since the late nineteenth century, networks that fostered virality have existed, as have gatekeepers who controlled the flow of information and connect networks to one another. Phenomena like word of mouth, bandwagon effects, homophily and interest networks, which help to explain the patterns of individual behaviour that make representations and campaigns spread rapidly, predate the internet age.

The earliest example of a mass, cross-class international humanitarian campaign was the Congo Reform Association (CRA), which was founded in 1904 by British journalist Edmund Dene Morel and evangelical Harry Grattan Guinness, head of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, to publicize and protest atrocities committed on inhabitants of the Upper Congo, the site of the Belgian-run rubber trade. Although news of enslavement and other abuses in the Belgian Congo had circulated in Europe and the United States since the early 1890s, a protest and reform movement took a decade to materialize. When it did, under Morel’s leadership, it initially attracted elite male support; within a couple of years, however, it was showing signs of petering out. The CRA’s breakthrough as a mass international phenomenon happened only when Alice and John Harris – a married missionary couple from Regions Beyond who had served in the Upper Congo, returned to Britain and then toured vigorously, giving lantern-slide lectures on the conditions they had witnessed – took charge of the organization.

The photos themselves did not initially make the difference. Morel had used missionary photos of Congo atrocity victims in his publications, including the

18 Liisa Malkki has noted that contemporary humanitarian policy discussions have produced an abstracted and standardized “representational form” of the figure of the refugee, which has been taken up by news and media organizations. Liisa H. Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism and Dehistoricization”, *Cultural Anthropology*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1996, pp. 385–386.

19 This is a simplification, of course, but it sketches a cultural understanding of children and childhood that has informed national child welfare policy and international law in the past century. See the BBC piece cited above and the front-page article by Anne Barnard, “Family’s Tragedy Goes beyond One Boy”, *New York Times*, 28 December 2015, pp. A1, A6–7.

20 See, for example, Kevin Grant, *A Civilized Savagery: Britain and the New Slavery in Africa, 1884–1926*, Routledge, New York, 2005.

21 Karin Nahon and Jeff Hemsley, *Going Viral*, Polity, London, 2013.

famous photo taken by Alice Harris (Figure 3). Even though such photos provoked outrage among Morel's readership, they failed to ignite a mass humanitarian campaign. Only the efforts of the missionaries – with their vast organizational network, domestic and international connections, popular public lectures and subscription print culture, and substantial cultural and moral authority – could manage that.<sup>22</sup>

Fig. 3 - B/W online, B/W in print

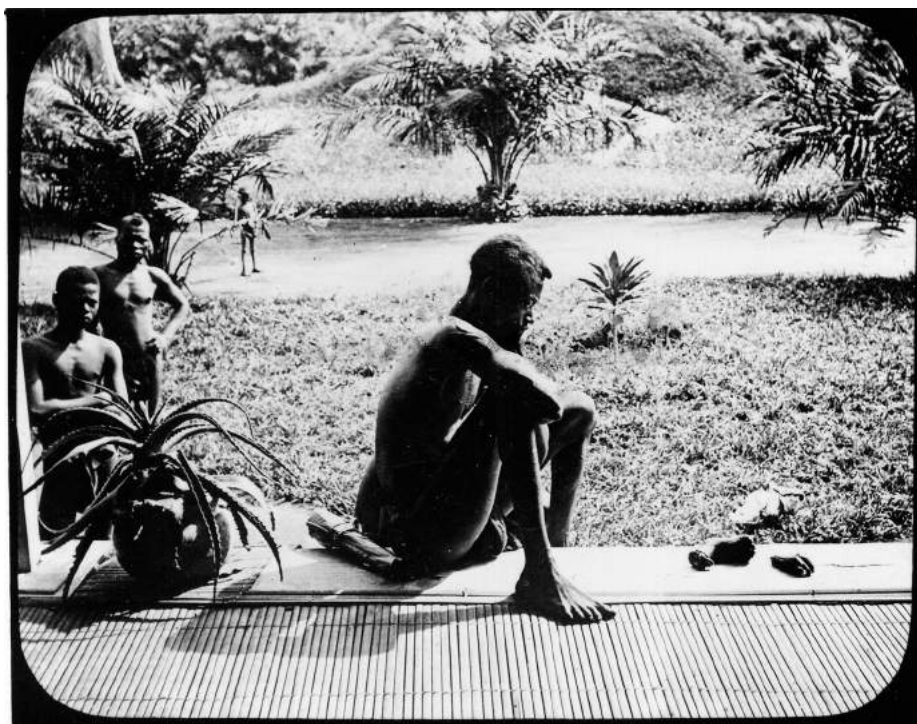


Figure 3. Nsala of Wala with the remains of his 5-year-old daughter. Reproduced in E. D. Morel, *King Leopold's Rule in Africa*, London, 1904. Courtesy of Antislavery International.

Once missionary involvement had unlocked a broader participatory audience, photographic images fuelled the campaign and its popularity. The most widely circulated, exhibited and reproduced photo of the Congo reform campaign was the shot shown in Figure 3, which depicts Nsala, a man who arrived at the Harris's mission house carrying the meagre remains of his 5-year-old daughter. She had been killed and cannibalized, along with Nsala's wife and son, by

22 See the careful scholarship of Kevin Grant, above note 20, who has traced the CRA campaign in detail. See also Kevin Grant, "The Limits of Exposure: Atrocity Photographs in the Congo Reform Campaign", and Christina Twomey, "Framing Atrocity: Photography and Humanitarianism", in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4; Christina Twomey, "Severed Hands: Authenticating Atrocity in the Congo, 1904–1913", in Geoffrey Batchen *et al.*, *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*, Reaktion Books, London, 2012.

sentries working for the Anglo-Belgian Rubber Company. Harris’s photo is carefully composed as the intimate scene of a father’s quiet grief as, head bowed, Nsala contemplates the small severed hand and foot of his child. The photo is incomprehensible without its descriptive caption. The narrated image is an early example of humanitarian photography addressing viewers through the sentimental lens of the father–child relationship. It condemns the Congo atrocities using universal themes of filial love and loss, thereby inviting the viewer to both pity the father and empathize with him. This form of visual and narrative address structures viewer response: on the one hand, it distances the viewer (“Thank God I’m not him; thank God I’m not in the Congo”), but on the other, it encourages at least a passing sense of emotional identification with Nsala in his capacity as a mourning father. It is a rhetorical device: in order to feel moral indignation, viewers of the photo needed to understand his pain.<sup>23</sup>

## Photography, media strategy and the professionalization of humanitarianism

Humanitarian campaigns start with the intentional act of an agent to spread a given image, such as that of a suffering individual or the corpse of a dead child, in order to stimulate awareness and shape public opinion regarding events taking place elsewhere in the world. The intention of the agent does not necessarily guarantee success. It takes the right humanitarian, with the right network, media strategy and audience, for a humanitarian campaign to gain traction. Morel’s efforts only attracted a limited response for the CRA before the missionaries took charge.<sup>24</sup> The missionaries were able to engage with, and appeal to, their national and international networks that were already in place. The great difference between then and now is the speed of communication: missionaries had to rely on print culture and letter writing to spread the word and to advertise their public lectures. In the contemporary case of Alan, we know exactly who initiated the campaign and why. Peter Bouckaert of HRW was the first to post the picture taken by Turkish photographer Nilüfer Demir on his Twitter account. Did he expect the photo to go viral? The answer is, quite probably, yes.<sup>25</sup> And this is one of the reasons why the history of humanitarian photography should matter.

In our contemporary world, NGOs and humanitarians often claim that they need to piggyback on news coverage of emerging events or disasters in order to fundraise. This suggests that events happen and must first register in the media as “news” before humanitarian organizations can seize the short temporal

23 See Grant and Twomey, *ibid.*, on this and other Congo images.

24 The CRA campaign petered out until it was re-energized by Protestant missionaries and their long-time networks. To date there has been little scholarly attention devoted to comparing successful and failed humanitarian campaigns, apart from Kevin Grant’s work on the CRA.

25 Bryan Walsh, *Time*, 29 December 2015, available at: <http://time.com/4162306/alan-kurdi-syria-drowned-boy-refugee-crisis/> (see embedded video featuring interview with photographer Nilüfer Demir and Peter Bouckaert of HRW).

window of news coverage to make a difference while the world is paying attention to a particular reported “crisis”. However, sometimes the sequence leading to public awareness is differently ordered: the resonance of Alan’s photo grew from the deliberate actions of a human rights professional who used the image as a hook to focus public attention and emotions.<sup>26</sup> It is evident from his accompanying online dispatch that Peter Bouckaert expected the photograph, and its circulation, to provoke strong reactions, both favourable and unfavourable. He posted the photo on Twitter because he judged that platform likely to draw the largest audience. Bouckaert is employed by HRW, a non-profit NGO with a global staff of hundreds. Founded in 1978 and “known for its accurate fact-finding, impartial reporting, effective use of media, and targeted advocacy”, HRW annually publishes “reports and briefings on human rights conditions in some 90 countries, generating extensive coverage in local and international media”.<sup>27</sup> While his tweet regarding Alan’s death may have appeared spontaneous – a spur-of-the-moment gesture expressing his profound emotional response to the image – it was also the considered strategy of a man whose job is to undertake “targeted advocacy” through the “effective use of media”. HRW, like the missionaries of the Congo reform movement more than a century ago, benefits from having a ready-made audience of committed and participatory supporters that the organization has cultivated over time. As a result, when an HRW staff member tweets, it is received and read by an expansive yet targeted global audience who can engage in their chosen cause by the simple action of re-tweeting.

Humanitarian NGOs – operational ones as well as those that centre their activities on advocacy – have specific ideas of what a crisis is, how it unfolds, and when it shifts from emergency to extreme emergency or “disaster” (the terminology used varies). Of course, their reading of the unfolding of natural disasters is different from that of man-made disasters, especially prolonged civil wars like the one taking place in Syria since 2011. Humanitarians have their own interpretation of the tempo of a crisis and of how to be as effective as possible in a given situation. In the case of the current “refugee crisis”, the ups and downs of media coverage, the challenges of donor fatigue and the so-called “collapse of compassion” are part of the conditions within which NGOs operate and make decisions.<sup>28</sup> The specific strategic priorities of NGOs matter and help explain the pace or intensification of visual campaigns, press conferences and so on.

To our knowledge, Mr Bouckaert has not explained why Alan’s photo, in particular, was used. Why did he select representations of this particular death?

26 Media, especially large media with meaningful distribution, become strategic allies of crucial importance. Historically, however, there are several examples of major campaigns (from the CRA to Near East Relief to Save Darfur, more recently) in which those who call the shots are humanitarian professionals.

27 HRW website, available at: [www.hrw.org/about](http://www.hrw.org/about).

28 On donor fatigue, see Susan D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War, and Death*, Routledge, New York, 1999; on the collapse of compassion, see C. Dary Cameron and B. Keith Payne, “Escaping Affect: How Motivated Emotion Regulation Creates Insensitivity to Mass Suffering”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 100, No. 1, 2011.

How many Alans did he come across before this? How many times did he – for plausible reasons – decide not to post them on social media? This, again, points to the significance of a historical analysis. Archival sources can elucidate the circumstances informing decisions taken by women and men on the spot; such sources can also inform us of their relations with local (national) press and media, the influence of broader institutional strategies, and particular sensitivities or rationales leading to crucial, heavily charged decisions to use media campaigns to turn particular incidents into international “crises” and “causes”. After all, many twenty-first-century humanitarians, like earlier reformers in the Progressive Era, continue to trust the power of vivid accounts of suffering and its relief to unleash strong emotions in viewers and persuade them to support a cause and donate to it.

## Humanitarian photography in the era of world war

Scholars and journalists often characterize the professionalization of the humanitarian sector as a post-1945 or even a post-1989 development. When it comes to the use of media, however, humanitarians and their organizations have established propaganda departments (later called communications departments) and hired publicity directors since the turn of the twentieth century. Early on, these were important sources for journalists and news organizations. The American Committee of Armenian and Syrian Relief (ACASR, later Near East Relief), for example, fed news organizations the same photos it had used for its own awareness-raising and fundraising campaigns. Instead of following the news, humanitarian actors abroad sometimes made it.<sup>29</sup>

“The Sole Survivor” (Figure 4) was the first in a series of “Sixteen Striking Scenes”, a packaged set of photographic images and information produced and disseminated by the ACASR in late 1917 to generate discussion in church groups, Sunday Schools, and women’s and youth groups in the United States. Accompanying instructions note that the photos could also be used “for the purpose of reproduction in newspapers” at “nominal charge”. The caption identifies the “survivor” in the photo as a mother “weeping beside the dead bodies of her five little sons”. Fleeing Turkish aggression, the woman had first lost her husband “in a Koodish [Kurdish] attack”; her sons succumbed to disease sometime later.<sup>30</sup>

In mid-January 1918, the same photo, along with others from the “Sixteen Striking Scenes” packet, were published in the *New York Tribune* to illustrate a news

29 Since the nineteenth century, it has not been unusual for newspapers, government officials and scientists in Britain, Europe and North America to rely on missionaries, charitable workers, businessmen and other private citizens in the field for information and pictorial renderings of populations, built and natural environments, political and military developments and other subjects. See J. Vernon, above note 5; also T. Jack Thompson, *Light on Darkness? Missionary Photography of Africa in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 2012.

30 Near East Committee Records, 1904–1950, Series 1, Box 3, File 11, MRL2, Burke Library Archives at the Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University, New York.



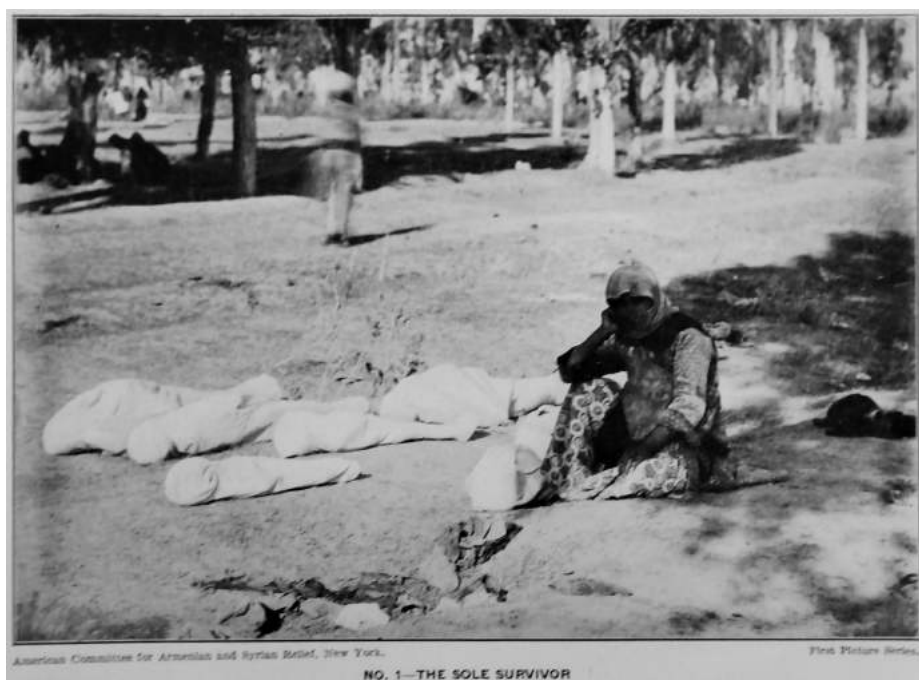


Figure 4. “The Sole Survivor”, from the “Sixteen Striking Scenes” Series. Near East Relief Collection, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

article on American relief for the “agonized remnants” suffering from the brutal “work of the Hun and Turk in Armenia and Serbia” (Figure 5). Two months later, in March 1918, the images were again used in an article, “The Greatest Horror in History: An Authentic Account of the Armenian Atrocities”, authored by Henry Morgenthau, former US ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, and published in the *American Red Cross Magazine*. This time, the mother’s image was titled “Despair” and the caption identified her as being “surrounded by the bodies of her five sons massacred by the Turks”. Morgenthau used the photos as evidence of the “medieval barbarity” of Turks and Germans alike, insisting that Germans share responsibility for the “diabolical cruelty” against Armenian, Syrian and Greek Christians since they “could have prevented it” (emphasis in original). With an eye toward the post-war settlement, he argued that it was the duty of Christians in the United States and Europe to ensure that Armenians “be freed from the yoke of Turkish rule” and that their persecutors be neutralized and prevented from victimizing “fine, old, civilized” Christian minorities again.

In all three instances, the same image of a mother with the sheathed bodies of her dead sons served as evidence and as emotional provocation for three distinct purposes: to support public awareness and fundraising campaigns, to represent “the news”, and to advance a political polemic for how best to achieve post-war justice





Figure 5. “The Sole Survivor”, reprinted in the *New York Tribune*. Near East Relief Collection, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

and lasting peace.<sup>31</sup> As the publishing life of this photo illustrates, there is no essential pictorial difference between humanitarian photos used for evidentiary, informational, fundraising or political purposes. Nor is there a necessary pictorial difference between humanitarian images, on the one hand, and war or atrocity photos, on the other. The difference between those genres is all in the narrative and interpretative framing, and in the publishing venue.<sup>32</sup>

In the era of the First World War and its immediate aftermath, both the American Red Cross and Near East Relief adapted advertising techniques for their public information and fundraising campaigns.<sup>33</sup> They engaged prominent commercial illustrators, whose work would have been familiar to readers of popular books and periodicals of the day, and drew from the professional repertoire of publishers, advertisers, marketers and the movies. Historian Kevin

31 Henry Morgenthau, “The Greatest Horror in History: An Authentic Account of the Armenian Atrocities”, *American Red Cross Magazine*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1918.

32 For a discussion of photos taken, but not used, in the humanitarian campaign, see Peter Balakian, “Photography, Visual Culture, and the Armenian Genocide”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

33 *Ibid.* See also Julia Irwin, *Making the World Safe: The American Red Cross and a Nation’s Humanitarian Awakening*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.

Rozario has argued provocatively that “it was only when philanthropy became a marketing venture and when donors began to be treated and courted as consumers who had to be entertained that philanthropy could become a mass phenomenon”. Instead of viewing “sensationalism and humanitarianism as distinct and competing cultural developments”, he concludes, we should recognize modern humanitarianism as a “creation of sensationalist mass culture”.<sup>34</sup>

By the late 1910s, Near East Relief had cultivated a colourful commercial look for its fundraising materials, as is evident from a look at its posters and mailings. Some, like the “Lest We Perish” poster (Figure 6), have a muted palette to underscore the seriousness of the organization’s mission and the profound need of the image’s beseeching recipient – in this case, a beautiful young girl who would not have been out of place in a household magazine or a children’s book.

The pamphlet “Now or Never” (Figure 7) reproduces the charming photographic portrait of a young Armenian girl, reportedly taken prior to the deportations. In many Christian cemeteries, there is a tradition of inserting a photo or a small painting on the tombstone of the person who has passed away. The portrait set into the brick wall on the left of the image evokes this tradition of memorialization. Here the difference with the contemporary photo of Alan on the Turkish beach is tangible. Our view of Alan was of the little boy’s body, face-down; his death image is a warning of future deaths to come if policies toward Syrian refugees do not change. In Figure 7 we see the smiling face of a child. While we are not told of her individual fate, the framing suggests that she has died, “massacred” like thousands of others. The reader is left to imagine the atrocious murders of thousands children like her. The actual deaths are not displayed in this case; rather, the pamphlet opens with an artistic rendering (right) of the destitute and needy surviving children and mother figure. This image (the folded pamphlet’s front cover) tells us, the viewer, what to do: donate,



Figure 6. “Lest We Perish”, Near East Relief poster by Ethel Franklin Betts, c. 1918. US Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, DC.

Fig. 6 - Colour online, Colour in print

34 Kevin Rozario, “Delicious Horrors: Mass Culture, the Red Cross and the Appeal of Modern American Humanitarianism”, *American Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3, 2003, pp. 418–419 (emphasis in original).

“now or never”. Near East Relief targeted churches and churchgoers as a primary audience for its appeals: it addressed viewers on the basis of a shared Christian identity with Armenian victims. Both the poster and the pamphlet (Figures 6 and 7) visually represent children in ways that show they are *worth saving* and deserving of aid. The accompanying drawing on the pamphlet illustrates the dismal present circumstances – the *ongoing* suffering of apparently fatherless families – in an effort to convey a sense of urgency and to motivate immediate viewer response.



Fig. 7 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 7. “Now or Never!”, Near East Relief pamphlet. Near East Relief Collection, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

In contrast, mailings like “Share Your Christmas with the Orphans” (Figure 8) used bright, eye-catching primary colours and a blend of holiday cartoon kitch and photographic realism. This juxtaposition was – and remains – an important strategy of address and communication by humanitarian organizations and NGOs. On the one hand, it highlights and celebrates both a shared Christian heritage and a middle-class ideal of childhood, born of the Romantic period and subsequently sentimentalized and commercialized throughout the industrialized West. At the same time, it graphically depicts the reprehensible absence of that ideal in places “over there” – which would remain out of view, this mailing suggests, if cameras were not there to record it.

Fig. 8 - Colour online, Colour in print



Figure 8. “Share Your Christmas with the Orphans”, Near East Relief mailing. Near East Relief Collection, Burke Library at Union Theological Seminary, Columbia University in the City of New York.

NGOs of the period also continued the nineteenth-century tradition of using poetry to frame images and heighten readers’ emotions.<sup>35</sup> In 1921, the Save the Children Fund (London) was in its second year of operation and involved in relief efforts for the Volga famine, which was spurred by drought but exacerbated by disrupted agricultural production and food distribution during the First World War, Bolshevik Revolution and ensuing civil war. Just before Christmas 1921, a posed group photo of nine Tatar refugee children from the Saratov Province appeared in the organization’s newsletter (Figure 9). It was accompanied by a poem by British pacifist writer Israel Zangwill.<sup>36</sup>

In British, American and German publications, Russian famine photos of children were accompanied by artwork by children and sentimental poetry that celebrated childhood. In this instance, the mix of literary and visual forms sought to disarm British critics’ refusal of relief for “Bolshevik babies” by invoking the natural, and therefore universal, vulnerability of the young sufferers.

Since the early twentieth century, humanitarian imagery has had to compete for public attention in a diverse visual economy produced by commercial, religious and political actors. As the Volga famine worsened and the Russian civil war dragged on, communists too organized internationally to provide relief for Russian famine victims and to compete with the fundraising

35 There is a long tradition of humanitarian poetry devoted to far-away stricken populations. Davide Rodogno has counted no less than 500 poems in the French National Library written by Frenchmen on behalf of Greece. Paintings too, like Delacroix’s *The Massacres of Chios*, *The Ruins of Missolonghi*, had a political and humanitarian message; there is also an example of a Russian painting of the Bulgarian Martyrdom. Delacroix exhibited *Massacres of Chios* in the Louvre to support the work and ideology of the Philhellenes, to show that the Turk slaughtered, massacred, raped and killed women and children (all visible in the painting). That painting was completed and exhibited in record time for the nineteenth century, and “*le Tout-Paris*” saw it, causing a buzz. This is perhaps the equivalent of “going viral” for the period. Davide Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2012.

36 The Zangwill poem appeared in *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 15 December 1921.



## They Might Be Yours



TARTAR REFUGEE CHILDREN AT SARATOV.

Alas! for the wizened infants  
Sucking at stone-dry breasts;  
Alas! for the babies writhing  
In the grip of plagues and pests.  
They are fever-stricken and famished,  
They are rotten of skin and bone;  
Yet their mothers must die and leave them  
To suffer and starve alone;  
And any one of these children  
Might be your very own.

—Israel Zangwill.

Figure 9. “They Might Be Yours”, *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 15 December 1921, p. 107. Cadbury Research Library, Special Collections, SCF Box A670, University of Birmingham.

and relief efforts of organizations like Herbert Hoover’s American Relief Administration and the Save the Children Fund. The Internationale Arbeiterhilfe (IAH, Workers International Relief) was created in Berlin in autumn 1921 and had affiliates in Western Europe and the United States, where communist fundraising efforts were particularly successful. The use of photography by the IAH was more limited and selective than in non-communist campaigns. This likely had to do, in part, with the organization’s difficulty in obtaining photos. Evidence suggests that some images used in information and fundraising campaigns were borrowed from other organizations. In early 1922, for example, the US branch of the IAH published an image of a starving child’s agonies in its official mouthpiece, *Soviet Russia* magazine (Figure 10). A similar photo is located in the archives of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Geneva (Figure 11). In this era, before photographers professionalized and

Fig. 10 - B/W online, B/W in print



Figure 10. Photograph published in *Soviet Russia* magazine (New York), 1 February 1922, p. 55.

Fig. 11 - B/W online, B/W in print



Figure 11. Russian Famine victim, 1922. Archives of the ICRC, Geneva, V-P-HIST-02590-01A.

demanded credit lines and copyrights for their images, photos circulated more freely and were shared more among organizations and publishing venues than would be the case after the Second World War.<sup>37</sup>

37 For a discussion of the ICRC's film archive and its early use of film and photography, see Valérie Gorin, "Looking Back over 150 Years of Humanitarian Action: The Photographic Archives of the ICRC", *International Review of the Red Cross*, Vol. 94, No. 888, 2012; Francesca Piana, "Photography, Cinema, and the Quest for Influence: The International Committee of the Red Cross in the Wake of the First World War", in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.



Instead of drawing from commercial models and relying heavily on photography, the public information and fundraising campaigns of the IAH recruited prominent artists like Berlin-based Käthe Kollwitz to make artwork for posters, limited-edition artistic portfolios for sale, and other print-based fundraising efforts. Kollwitz’s woodcut, “Hunger”, was the most striking and dramatic example. While it showcased the revolutionary aesthetics of German expressionism, Kollwitz’s image was nonetheless characteristic of broader international and non-leftist trends in humanitarian image-making in its thematic focus on the anguished mother and dying child (Figure 12).

### Enduring tropes: “Mother and child” and “child alone”

The visual trope of the mourning mother and dying child in wartime humanitarian photography (Figure 13) can be traced back to at least the era of the Boer War

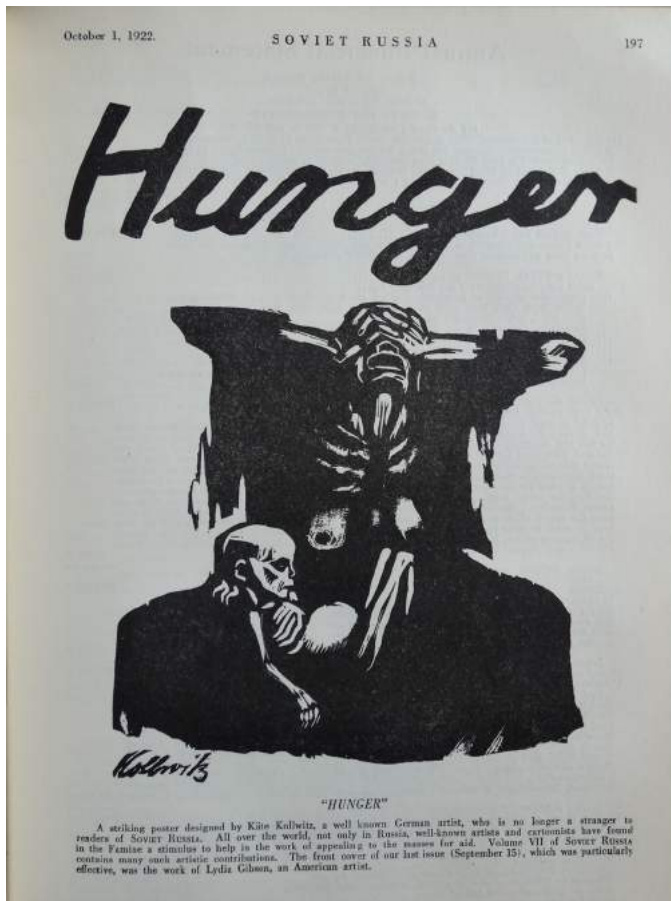


Fig. 12 - Colour online, Colour in print

Figure 12. Käthe Kollwitz, “Hunger”, *Soviet Russia* (New York), 1 October 1922, p. 197.

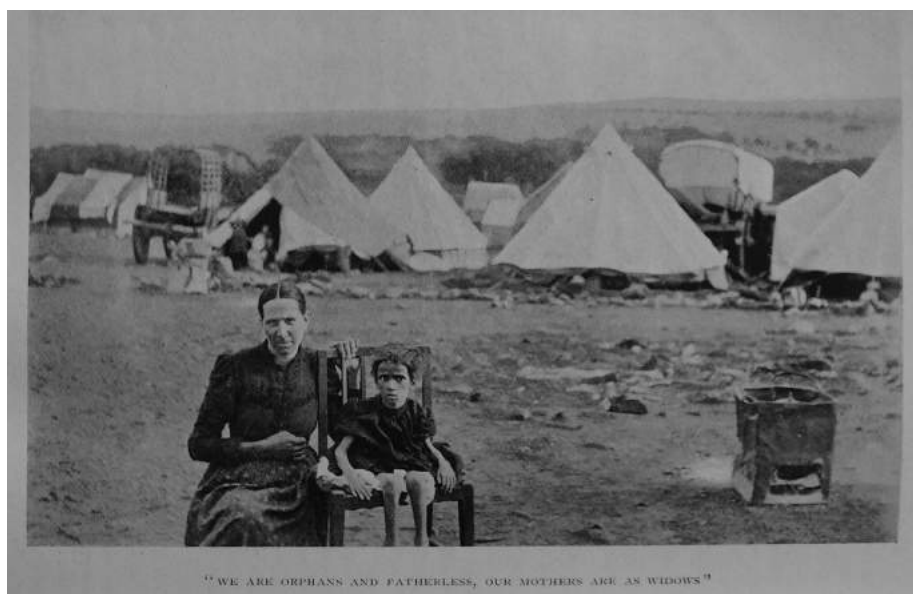


Figure 13. “We Are Orphans and Fatherless, Our Mothers Are as Widows”, in Emily Hobhouse, *The Brunt of War and Where it Fell*, London, 1902.

(1899–1902). In December 1900, the English Quaker reformer and pacifist Emily Hobhouse travelled to South Africa to investigate and protest British treatment of Afrikaner women and children interned in British concentration camps. These were white families of Dutch origin in the Orange Free State and South African Republic whose farmsteads had been razed by British troops due to concerns that they were surreptitiously supplying and assisting Afrikaner guerrilla actions against the British.

British officials characterized their scorched-earth tactics and military actions against non-combatants as “necessities of war”. Hobhouse, who toured the camps in early 1901, filed an unillustrated eyewitness report with Parliament, and helped found the South African Women and Children Distress Fund when she returned home, disagreed. She pressed British officials to improve camp conditions and provisioning in order to staunch high mortality rates among camp inhabitants. She took her quest public and met with hostility since she was criticizing the conduct of her own country at war. Ultimately, her campaign compelled British officials to improve camp conditions, but not until tens of thousands of Afrikaner women and children, and their black African workers and servants (segregated into separate camps), had died of malnutrition, dysentery and disease. In 1902, Hobhouse published the book *The Brunt of War and Where it Fell*, with nine photo illustrations, collected but not taken by her, in order to publicize Britain’s “barbarism”, which, she argued, contravened the 1899 Hague Convention and “civilized conduct” in war. Focusing on the treatment of women and children, her book employed statistics, interviews and photographs to document the dire effects of British policy on non-combatants.

Fig. 14 - B/W online, B/W in print



Figure 14. Photo of Lizzy van Zyl, Bloemfontein concentration camp. Public domain/Wikicommons.

Hobhouse intended to use a photo of the severely emaciated Lizzie van Zyl (Figure 14), whom she had befriended on her tour of Bloemfontein camp. The photo shows a tightly framed shot of the naked, dying girl, with a gaunt, empty gaze and no mother present, lying on a bed. The pro-government English press, along with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had already published the image to denounce Hobhouse and suggest that Lizzie's death was the result of maternal neglect, not camp conditions – a charge Hobhouse vigorously refuted. Her plan to reproduce Lizzie's image in her own book was blocked by her publisher, who considered it “too painful for publication”. Hobhouse questioned this ethical position in her book, asking readers “whether it is right to shirk from a typical representation, however distressing, of suffering which others have to endure, and which has been brought about by a sequence of events for which we are partly responsible”. Such loss of life, she argued, could have been avoided through more humane policies and planning; the English population therefore shared the moral responsibility.<sup>38</sup>

As these examples suggest, for over a century, humanitarian photography has increasingly relied on *specific* visual tropes – namely, the “mother and child” and the “child alone” – to accomplish its work. These tropes are informed by closely held cultural notions of children's innocence and pre-political status. This is why the most affecting photographs tend to feature young children who are unambiguously vulnerable and dependent, rather than older children or teens.

38 Emily Hobhouse, *The Brunt of War and Where It Fell*, Methuen, London, 1902, p. 215, also pp. 317–318.

The visual and narrative expressions of humanitarian photography have also reflected a marked perception of, and sensitivity to, the experiences of women and children in war. Historically, humanitarian photography and imagery have been informed by diverse political commitments. Nonetheless, one common theme has been a recognition, via visual representation, of the absence or *inadequacies* of the patriarchal protections of one's State, one's husband and one's father, particularly in wartime.<sup>39</sup>

### **“It could have been my child”: Strategies of identification and difference since 1945**

Still photography remains widely used, and perhaps preferred, for conveying messages, despite the availability of video.<sup>40</sup>

Dimitri Beck, editor of the photojournalism magazine *Polka* (France), stated that the power of Alan Kurdi's picture can be explained by its minimalism: “It's a simple photograph that deals with an essential truth.”<sup>41</sup> But what is the “truth” that the image contains or conveys? After all, the meaning of Alan's photos, like that of all photographic images, is dependent on narration and framing, text and context.

Humanitarian photography presents itself as revealing stark truths, hidden in plain sight, that need telling.<sup>42</sup> The fiction is that this truth is “discovered” by some photographer who stumbles upon and captures it. Yet photographs are cultivated products, whose careful framing, crafting and editing “lends a special kind of presence” to what is depicted.<sup>43</sup> Kevin Carter's Pulitzer

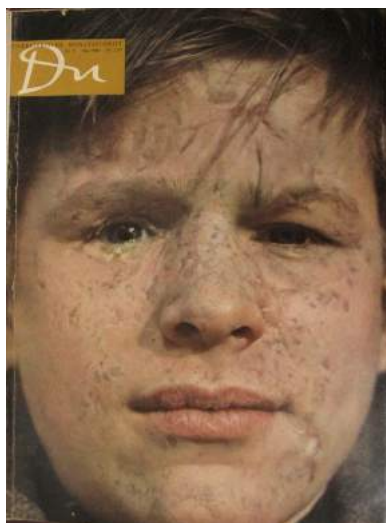


Figure 15. “The Future of Europe's Children” issue, *Du*, May 1946. Cover photo by Werner Bischof.

39 The analysis of the historical material in this and the previous section is drawn from H. Fehrenbach, “Children and Other Civilians”, above note 12.

40 For a discussion of “the parallel between moments arrested mechanically” by the camera, “experientially by the traumatized psyche”, and fixed into memory, see Ulrich Baer, *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002. Video of the discovery and recovery of Alan's body, for example, can be seen on YouTube (available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzw8L-Ubrik](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gzw8L-Ubrik); [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk1HE9kSGE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uk1HE9kSGE)), but at the time of writing it has attracted far fewer views (about 60,000) than the still photos of his body.

41 O. Laurent, above note 13.

42 See, for example, S. Linfield, above note 1, and her criticisms of Susan Sontag on the representation of the effects of violence.

43 Alan Trachtenberg, *Lincoln's Smile and Other Enigma*, Hill and Wang, New York, 2007, p. 110. On iconic images, see Robert Hariman and J. L. Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture and Liberal Democracy*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 2007.

Prize-winning photograph of an unnamed starving toddler hunched, near death, on the arid ground and “stalked” by a vulture in 1993 Sudan is a famous case in point.<sup>44</sup> Since Carter’s untimely death at the age of 33 one year later, there have been numerous academic and press discussions of how he got the shot (including his long, patient wait for a vulture to approach the child so he could effectively frame the photo), his lack of assistance to the child, his uncertainty regarding her exact fate, and the ethics of such photographic practice (including whether this experience informed his decision to commit suicide the following year).<sup>45</sup>

The use of professional photographers by humanitarian organizations and NGOs did not become commonplace until after the Second World War.<sup>46</sup> With the introduction of the fast-shutter lightweight Leica camera in the interwar period and the rise of photojournalism, “war photographers” emerged as a profession. Taking to the field to cover the Spanish Civil War and Second World War, these photographers were predominantly male. Robert Capa, David “Chim” Seymour and Werner Bischof, for example, made their names and gained reputations as their photos appeared in glossy weekly and monthly magazines (like *Life*, *Look*, *Picture Post*, *Paris Match*, *Vu*, *Regards* and *Du*) throughout Europe and North America (Figure 15). In the process, new genres like the photo-story were developed that used photographs, carefully ordered in serial succession, to structure and dramatize news and human interest stories. In addition to publishing in news magazines, professionalizing photographers like Capa, Chim and female US expat Thérèse Bonney published their wartime photo-stories in popular book form.

Bonney, in particular, launched photo exhibits of her wartime work in prominent museums and venues throughout the United States in order to publicize the plight of European children and fundraise to feed them. Unlike her male counterparts, Bonney focused on the war’s effect on families and children in Europe. During the Second World War, photos like Bonney’s popularized the notion of “the civilian” as imagined through the figure of the innocent, endangered child. After war, this image of child-as-civilian was disseminated via the public relations material of the UN Relief and Rehabilitation Agency and

44 Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin\\_Carter#/media/File:Kevin-Carter-Child-Vulture-Sudan.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Carter#/media/File:Kevin-Carter-Child-Vulture-Sudan.jpg).

45 Arthur Kleinman and Joan Kleinman, “The Appeal of Experience, the Dismay of Images: Cultural Appropriations of Suffering in Our Times”, *Daedalus*, Vol. 125, No. 1, 1996. See the 2004 documentary by Dan Krauss entitled *The Death of Kevin Carter: Casualty of the Bang Bang Club*. It was nominated for an Academy Award in the documentary short subject category in 2006.

46 On the professionalization of news photography during the Spanish Civil War and Second World War, and the post-war engagement of wartime photographers by UN organizations, see, among others, Robert Lebeck and Bodo von Dewitz, *Kiosk: A History of Photojournalism*, Steidl, Göttingen, 2001; Cynthia Young (ed.), *We Went Back: Photographs from Europe 1933–1955*, International Center of Photography and Delmonico Books, New York, 2013. Immediately after the First World War, the American Red Cross hired US photographer Lewis Hine to go to Europe and take photos of the post-war misery there. Hine, by that time, was well known for his portraits of children in the workplace, which were used in the American campaign against child labour. However, the American Red Cross did not make use of Hine’s European photos for purposes of fundraising; why the organization did not exploit them for these purposes is not clear.



Fig. 16 - Colour online, Colour in print

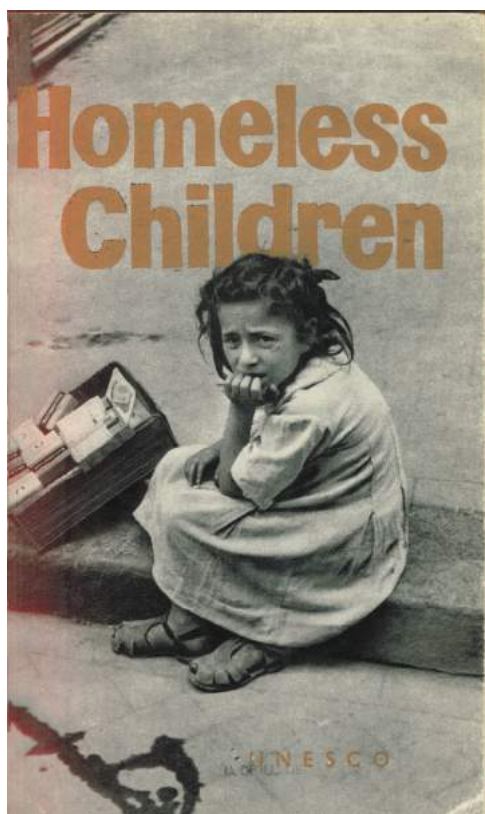


Figure 16. Thérèse Brosse, *Homeless Children*, Paris, 1950. Photo by David “Chim” Seymour for UNESCO.

viewer with the depicted subject. As Peter Bouckaert noted, regarding the photo of Alan: “It’s, sadly, a very well-composed image showing a little toddler that we can all identify with .... I think for a lot of the public, their first reaction is: ‘This could have been my child.’”<sup>47</sup> The beach location, after all, is the site of middle-class leisure; online comments show that viewers responded to Alan’s photo as an inverse horror shot of their happy, sun-filled family vacation photos. Bouckaert conceded that the child’s ethnicity played a role in the image’s impact. “This is a child that looks a lot like a European child”, he wrote. “The week before, dozens of African kids washed up on the beaches of Libya and were photographed and it didn’t have the same impact. There is some ethnocentrism [in the] reaction to this image, certainly.”<sup>50</sup> From the point of view of

through publications of UNESCO and other UN agencies in photo campaigns that advertised both the ongoing need of post-war populations and the effectiveness of the organizations tasked with meeting those needs (Figure 16).<sup>47</sup>

This doubly depoliticized category – *civilian-as-child* – is a visual trope and a moral construct. Yet Bonney’s camera lens gave it geographical and cultural particularity, depicting the “civilian” as a white European child. What is more, Bonney’s photos (Figure 17) evoked the genre of child portraiture. Her intentional reference to that familiar (and familial) photographic form helped make the moral argument on the basis of recognition: the civilian-as-European-child deserved the protection of Western viewers since violence against it could be violence against their own child.<sup>48</sup>

In practice, humanitarian photography has made very selective use of images based upon the anticipated identification of the

47 See, for example, Silvia Salvatici, “Sights of Benevolence: UNRRA’s Recipients Portrayed”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

48 The argument is drawn from Heide Fehrenbach, “Children and Other Civilians”, above note 12.

49 O. Laurent, above note 13.

50 *Ibid.*



Fig. 17 - B/W online, B/W in print

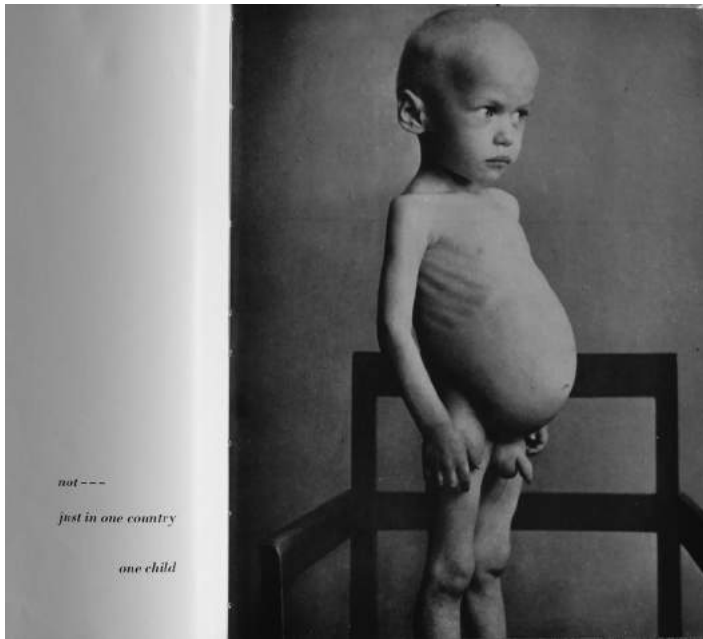


Figure 17. Thérèse Bonney, *Europe's Children*, 1939–1943, self-published, 1943.

humanitarian organizations, the choice of a photo and subject has never been random. Historically, humanitarian organizations have paid a lot of attention to skin colour.

The CRA's Congo reform campaign (1904–13) used images of children like Impongi (Figure 18), who was mutilated by agents in an effort to terrorize villagers and compel labour, productivity and profits for Belgian King Leopold's rubber trade. Yet initially the campaign did not spread widely and even when missionary networks enlivened it, children and child labour practices were not its focus – rather, acts of violence and Leopold's “perfidy” in not abiding by international agreements (on how to rule the Congo Free State and treat its indigenous inhabitants) were. The CRA depicted and circulated images of adult and child victims in rough parity. The main thrust of the campaign did not rest on the readiness of Western viewers to identify with a vulnerable Congolese child. Some ten years later, humanitarian organizations such as Near East Relief did not hesitate to whiten the skin of Armenian children whom they depicted in posters, pamphlets and other visual outlets in order to arouse public opinion and stimulate giving among white Christians in the United States and Europe.

A determined focus on the depiction of “Third World” children in humanitarian campaigns only took hold and proliferated in the era of accelerated decolonization after 1945. The World Health Organization, like various other international organizations, advertised its goals, effectiveness and technocratic savvy by showcasing images in its newsletter and glossy magazine of its medical



Figure 18. Impongi, Congo victim mutilated by State soldiers. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Jean Blackwell Hutson Research and Reference Div., New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections, available at: <http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-f447-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.

“African Auschwitz”, in an effort to underline the urgency of the crisis, yet suggested that the “worst could still be avoided” with the provision of immediate relief.<sup>52</sup> As in the case of the CRA or, in fact, the case of Alan Kurdi and HRW, humanitarians initiated the campaign and created alliances across religious denominations. Comparisons with the Holocaust, Heerten notes, were deliberately cultivated by Biafran propaganda in order to deflect politics (including criticisms of the unsavoury behaviour of Biafran rebels) and render the crisis a purely humanitarian affair.<sup>53</sup>

professionals eradicating disease among the children of affected non-white populations.<sup>51</sup> However, it was probably the Biafra crisis of the late 1960s that etched particular visual depictions of the “Third World” into Western imaginations while also showing remarkable continuities with a longer, colonial tradition. In summer 1968, the civil war between Nigeria and the breakaway Biafran region, which had eluded journalistic attention for a year, became an international media, protest and humanitarian event. Newspapers and TV networks in Europe and the United States flooded their audiences with relentless images of starving Biafran children. Campaigners united in transnational protest networks, criticized national governments’ inaction and raised funds for relief operations.

First and foremost, Biafra resonated with memories of the Holocaust. Many viewers, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, explicitly compared the 1968 photographs of Biafran children to Jewish victims of the Nazi camps (Figure 19). As historian Lasse Heerten has argued, humanitarians campaigning on behalf of Biafran children deliberately made this connection, stoking fears of an

51 Davide Rodogno and Thomas Davide, “All the World Loves a Picture: The World Health Organization’s Visual Politics, 1948–1973”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

52 Lasse Heerten, “‘A’ as in Auschwitz, ‘B’ as in Biafra: The Nigerian Civil War, Visual Narratives of Genocide, and the Fragmented Universalization of the Holocaust”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

53 *Ibid.* An appropriate current comparison to this strategy is perhaps the photos and videos released by the Syrian government allegedly showing starving children in Madaya, which circulated in late December

# 6 million



## Dear God, not again.

Does this scene look familiar? It should. It was only twenty-five years ago that similar scenes scarred the face of Europe, while nations turned their heads and said they did not know. You don't have that excuse.

Today Nigeria is engaged in the genocide of eight million Biafrans, calling it an "internal problem" and a "political solution." The Nigerian army which rapes, pillages and burns

everything in its path is supported by Russian Mig's flown by Egyptian pilots who are training for the next war with Israel.

The world stood silent while 6,000,000 Jews died. Are you going to stand by now?

The scene above exists today. Help today before it is too late. Write your senators and congressmen and insist on an immediate ceasefire and send contributions now to the American Committee To Keep Biafra Alive, Inc.

1234 Broadway - Hotel Hudson  
New York, New York 10001  
(212) 736-2040

Figure 19. American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive. Clearing House for Nigeria-Biafra Information Records, DG168, Box 10, Swarthmore Peace Collection, Swarthmore, PA.

In the case of Alan's photo, such contextualization was, in a way, less necessary than in 1968. Viewers need not be reminded of meaningful precedents because they already carry these images – or subsequent presentations of pictorial moments of trauma – in their memories; they have become part of our “connected” public visual repertoire. The horror of the picture is enough, and

2015. “Starving Children in Madaya”, *LiveLeak*, available at: [www.liveleak.com/view?i=a3a\\_1452404656](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=a3a_1452404656); “Syrian Govt to Allow Aid into Starving Town”, *Sky News*, 7 January 2016, available at: <http://news.sky.com/story/1618288/syrian-govt-to-allow-aid-into-starving-town>; Al Jazeera, “Inside Story – Starvation as a Tool of War in Syria”, available at: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1AewGozXoo](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D1AewGozXoo).

Alan's image has become an iconic representation of the current "crisis". Before his picture went viral, there was no single, vivid image that captured the tragedy of Syrian (and other) refugees, despite the efforts of many Syrian civilians and international organizations.<sup>54</sup> Before Alan Kurdi, the dominant image of refugees on television, in newspapers and in news feeds was that of masses of people crammed into drifting boats or rescued in Lampedusa or on some Greek island. Alan came to embody – in the sense of giving individual human form to – the tragedy of hundreds of thousands of refugees and civilian victims of the war.

In becoming an icon and a meme, Alan's photo encapsulated a meaningful moment in an otherwise long, uninterrupted campaign related to at least two intertwined crises: the Syrian conflict and the refugee crisis which extends beyond Syria. Biafra, in contrast, was a geographically localized humanitarian emergency. In the 1968 humanitarian campaigns, Biafrans, like Holocaust victims, were represented as archetypal figures rather than individuals: they were like the nameless inmates doomed to die in the *univers concentrationnaire*. In 2015, the narrative built around the photograph of the toddler's corpse lying on a Turkish beach is centred on his name: Alan. Like starving Biafrans, Alan is *the* victim, but nowadays campaigners know it would be inappropriate to invoke genocidal precedents. Singling out one child seems a more effective way to provoke and cultivate a virtuous circle of empathy, emotions and action.

## Fixed images, fluid meanings: Politics, ethics and media technologies

In the late 1960s, when it turned out that Biafra was not a pristine case of humanitarian need but a messy political conflict with bad behaviour on both sides (including the withholding of food aid from starving victims by Biafran forces), the momentum of the Biafra campaign could not be sustained.<sup>55</sup> It is too soon to say what will happen to the story of Alan Kurdi, but there have already been indications that his iconic image is far from sacrosanct.

In January 2016, the satirical French magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published a provocative cartoon attacking the presumptive innocence of the child – and the reverential treatment of his death image – by imagining the boy's future, had he lived, as a monkey-faced "ass groper" harassing European women (a reference to reports of sexual attacks on women in public by Syrian and immigrant men in Cologne, Germany, in December 2015.<sup>56</sup>) In response, Queen Rania of Jordan released a cartoon rejoinder, imagining Alan first as a

54 See, for instance, UNICEF celebrity campaign, "No Place Like Home", available at: <http://youtu.be/un4cZOKFK3M>; UNICEF videos in which refugee children narrate their experiences, available at: <http://youtu.be/AFVUoYQL6LA>.

55 L. Heerten, above note 52.

56 See [www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35231046](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-35231046).

student and then as a doctor as he moves into adulthood.<sup>57</sup> Just days later, the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei exhibited a photo of himself lying face-down on a beach on the Greek island of Lesbos, mimicking Alan’s pose, in tribute to the drowned child and to rally attention to the refugee crisis.<sup>58</sup> Although the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoon attracted substantial criticism in France and beyond, the cartoon skirmish and ongoing recontextualizations of Alan’s image make one thing clear: the meaning of what Alan Kurdi represents is up for debate. For some, he remains the embodiment of the innocent, suffering refugee fleeing violence and seeking succour and peace. Others are trying to manipulate Alan’s image into something quite different: the incipient threat of an alien immigrant incursion.<sup>59</sup>

But that, of course, conveniently ignores something crucial about the image: that it depicts a child who achieved representative status in these debates not by his own choice or volition but by the circumstances of his demise and the fact that his death-image was deemed shocking, useful and newsworthy by others. Hugh Pinney, vice president at Getty Images, a distributor of news images, had this to say in an interview with *Time*: “the reason we’re talking about it after it’s been published is because it breaks a social taboo that has been in place in the press for decades: a picture of a dead child is one of the golden rules of what you never published”.<sup>60</sup> Or as Nicolas Jimenez, director of photography at *Le Monde*, put it: “We’d written about it in the past, but we hadn’t shown it in such a hard way .... [T]o show it like this is an important step.”<sup>61</sup>

Pinney is correct that newspaper and magazine editors have generally followed a code of ethics that strongly discourages publishing graphic images of corpses – especially those belonging to one’s own nation or allied nations. During the Second World War, this was reinforced by government censorship: in the United States, Britain and Germany, for example, publication of photos showing one’s own dead (citizens or soldiers) was restricted or prohibited for reasons of wartime propaganda and morale, moral propriety, or emerging legal claims of privacy.

Such practices of pictorial restraint have rarely extended to those outside one’s sphere of national, cultural, religious or ethnic belonging, as the historical examples we have presented – from the Congo Free State, Armenia, South Africa and Nigeria – demonstrate. In fact, it took until the 1980s for humanitarian NGOs to develop written rules for the regulation of their photographic imagery in their public information and fundraising campaigns,<sup>62</sup> and even then, this

57 For the cartoon response by Queen Rania, see: [www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordans-queen-rania-responds-charlie-hebdo-cartoon-form-1272612906](http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordans-queen-rania-responds-charlie-hebdo-cartoon-form-1272612906); [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35333895](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35333895).

58 On Weiwei’s photo, see Rama Lakshmi, “Chinese Artist Weiwei Poses as Drowned Syrian Child”, *Washington Post*, 30 January 2016, available at: [www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/30/chinese-artist-ai-weiwei-poses-as-a-drowned-syrian-refugee-toddler/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/01/30/chinese-artist-ai-weiwei-poses-as-a-drowned-syrian-refugee-toddler/).

59 On the cartoon skirmish, see the BBC News website at: [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35333895](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35333895).

60 O. Laurent, above note 13.

61 *Ibid.*

62 “Code of Conduct: Images and Messages Relating to the Third World”, adopted by the General Assembly of European NGOs meeting in Brussels in April 1989. The strategy for implementation was assigned to the



trend was at first limited to Europe and was triggered by the widespread circulation of appalling images of suffering during the Ethiopian famine in 1984 and 1985. In Britain, television news coverage and tabloids alike covered the “Race to Save Babies”. Musician Bob Geldof founded Band Aid – which recorded and released the single “Do They Know It’s Christmas?” to raise funds for famine victims – and went on to promote an internationally televised charity concert, staged simultaneously in London and Philadelphia in July 1985 and viewed by an estimated 1.6 billion people.<sup>63</sup> The sheer scale of this philanthropic *qua* entertainment enterprise was unmatched in history. Yet in addition to attracting unprecedented international attention and donations, the negative images of African suffering, passivity and helplessness mobilized by Europeans and North Americans in relation to the Ethiopian campaign attracted withering criticism and a report on Western “Images of Africa” authored by representatives of thirteen countries. The report launched a period of sober self-assessment by humanitarian and development NGOs regarding their own representational practices. It resulted in the adoption of written guidelines meant to guarantee that NGO media practices respect the individual subjectivity, dignity, identity, culture and volition of those portrayed. By the turn of the 1990s, the trend among humanitarian NGOs (if not among purveyors of the news) was to request that their photographers produce “positive” imagery. The aim, which continues to this day, is to find engaging ways to brand the organization and depict its effectiveness, to showcase the resilience and activity of its clients, and to steer clear of depictions of death or of bodies in pain or in need.<sup>64</sup>

As this article goes to press, we can report, sadly, that the image of Alan, like similar ones from previous crises, has not entirely fulfilled the expectations of those who decided to make it public. The circulation of Alan’s photo in various media stimulated awareness of the problem and dangers of refugee migration

Liaison Committee’s Development Education Working Group. See also Nikki Van der Gaag and Cathy Nash, *Images of Africa: The UK Report*, Oxfam, Oxford, 1987; for a discussion of written regulations in Europe, see Henrietta Lidchi, “Finding the Right Image: British Development NGOs and the Regulation of Imagery”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

- 63 *Ibid.* There is a growing literature on celebrity humanitarianism which critically covers several crucial aspects of this phenomenon but leaves unaddressed the historical dimension. Lilie Chouliaraki, “Post-Humanitarianism: Humanitarian Communication beyond a Politics of Pity”, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 2010; Lilie Chouliaraki, “The Theatricality of Humanitarianism: A Critique of Celebrity Advocacy”, *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2012; H. Louise Davis, “Feeding the World a Line? Celebrity Activism and Ethical Consumer Practices from Live Aid to Product Red”, *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2010; Ilan Kapoor, *Celebrity Humanitarianism. The Ideology of Global Charity*, Routledge, London, 2013; Cheryl Lousley, “Humanitarian Melodramas, Globalist Nostalgia: Affective Temporalities of Globalization and Uneven Development”, *Globalizations*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 2015; Mary Mostafanezhad, “‘Getting in Touch with Your Inner Angelina’: Celebrity Humanitarianism and the Cultural Politics of Gendered Generosity in Volunteer Tourism”, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 2013; Jemima Repo and Riina Yrjölä, “The Gender Politics of Celebrity Humanitarianism in Africa”, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2011.

- 64 H. Lidchi, above note 62. See also Sanna Nissinen, “Dilemmas of Ethical Practice in the Production of Contemporary Humanitarian Photography”, in H. Fehrenbach and D. Rodogno (eds), above note 4.

from Syria; it did not, of course, solve these. Twitter and Facebook proved as inefficient, and as inadequate, as older media such as newspapers and news magazines in promoting more incisive and humane policies towards refugees and immigrants fleeing armed conflict in Syria, the Middle East and Africa. Since September 2015, many Alans have followed.<sup>65</sup>

What can make a difference? In this shifting media environment, some have put their faith in yet more sophisticated technology. Late last year, for example, the *New York Times* collaborated with Vrse, a virtual reality production studio, to create for its readers a more “immersive experience” (and, one imagines, to keep its business afloat, as newspapers and news organizations continue to contract and close). The *Times* unveiled its product on Sunday, 8 November 2015, using shared content across three media platforms, and dubbed the launch a “multimedia journey in text, photographs, and virtual-reality film”. That Sunday, the *New York Times Magazine* featured a story entitled “The Displaced”. On the magazine’s cover was a photo of 9-year-old Chuol making his way through a swamp in South Sudan as ominous grey storm clouds fill the horizon. “War has driven 30 million children from their homes”, read the accompanying text; “These are the stories of three of them.” The magazine, website and virtual reality video (available through a smartphone app) all told the stories of three children: Chuol, who “without his parents was forced to flee to the swamps of South Sudan” in order to survive; Oleg, 11, who was “living in the ruins of his former life in Ukraine”; and Hana, 12, who “has lived one-quarter of her life as a Syrian refugee in Lebanon”. Regular subscribers to the newspaper received a special cardboard “3-D viewer” with instructions on how to assemble it and insert their smartphone in order to achieve the full “360-degree immersion effect” while watching the 11-minute virtual reality video on the children.<sup>66</sup>

The *New York Times* newspaper, magazine and website subsequently featured a number of self-congratulatory essays extolling their adoption of the technology and its revolutionary possibilities, and discussing its ethical challenges. Readers, for their part, wrote in to say that watching the 3-D video was “an amazing experience”, that they were struck by “the immediacy and intimacy of the images” and that it “felt like I was standing there myself, not observing from

65 For example, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* reported news first published in the *Times of Malta* about a 2-year-old Syrian child who lost his life when the boat he was in crashed against the rocks of an Aegean Island. The news originated from the Migrant Offshore Aid Station, a humanitarian institution funded by US billionaire and philanthropist Christopher Catrambone. The Italian newspaper did not fail to invoke Alan, the original 3-year-old symbol of Syrian suffering, but did not re-run his photo. *Corriere* noted that 700 children have died in Mediterranean waters fleeing war and hunger; the slaughter (*strage*) continues in 2016. “Migranti, il gommone si schianta sulle rocce: Muore bimbo di 2 anni”, *Corriere della Sera*, 3 January 2016, available at: [www.corriere.it/esteri/16\\_gennaio\\_03/migranti-gommone-si-schianta-rocce-muore-bimbo-2-anni-191ded8c-b233-11e5-829a-a9602458fc1c.shtml](http://www.corriere.it/esteri/16_gennaio_03/migranti-gommone-si-schianta-rocce-muore-bimbo-2-anni-191ded8c-b233-11e5-829a-a9602458fc1c.shtml). The *New York Times* reported on 31 January 2016 that the bodies of at least ten more children had washed up on Turkish shores the day before. This time, it was reported not on the front page but on page 17.

66 “The Displaced” and advertising insert “Changing the Way Stories are Told”, *New York Times Magazine*, 8 November 2015.

afar”. One leading expert explained that the technology was “like writing on the brain with indelible ink”.<sup>67</sup> In order to channel such powerful effects, the *New York Times* included with the original multimedia rollout a column telling viewers “How to Help”. The column provided readers with a list of aid organizations to which they could send “donations for child refugees”. It also noted that “Save the Children and Unicef were involved in coordinating the reporting of ‘The Displaced’”, thus proving that the symbiotic relationship between media and humanitarianism – with its ambiguous politics and reliance on emotional and moral appeals – continues today.<sup>68</sup>

The viewing experience was indeed impressive. Still, what is not clear – as ever – is exactly *how* further enhancing our visual, perceptual and emotional experience of distant suffering will yield solutions to it. Might not these ever more intense impressions also prove fleeting? Will our stimulated emotions necessarily move us to action? And if so, of what sort? At the moment, the only thing that is incontestable is that commercial and entertainment companies like Cola-Cola, Volvo and HBO are, along with advertisers and marketers, exploring the uses of virtual reality for their own purposes of increasing their customer base and their profits.<sup>69</sup>

## Conclusion

Alan’s photo, like humanitarian photographs in general, tells us more about us, the purveyors and observers of images, than about those whose suffering we depict, bemoan and re-tweet. This is an old dilemma, well known to scholars and practitioners of humanitarianism.<sup>70</sup> The parameters of the debate about the transformational possibilities of humanitarianism did not change because of the Internet and social media. Rather, its possibilities and pitfalls alike, while shaped by political and economic structures, remain informed by the subjective identities, social positioning, political commitments and moral values of its supporters, donors and workers.

67 Margaret Sullivan, “The Tricky Terrain of Virtual Reality”, *New York Times*, 15 November 2015; Robert D. Hof, “Advertising: Brands Look Far and Wide for a Niche in Virtual Reality”, *New York Times*, 16 November 2015.

68 Jaime Lowe, “How to Help”, *New York Times Magazine*, 8 November 2015. The organizations named were the US Fund for UNICEF, USA for UNHCR, Save the Children, Mercy-USA for Aid and Development, and the World Food Programme. On Christmas Day 2015, “How to Help in a Global Refugee Crisis” was published in Tara Siegal Bernard’s “Your Money” column, *New York Times*, 25 December 2015, available at: [www.nytimes.com/2015/12/26/your-money/how-to-help-in-a-global-refugee-crisis.html?ref=topics&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/26/your-money/how-to-help-in-a-global-refugee-crisis.html?ref=topics&_r=0).

69 R. D. Hof, above note 67.

70 For an interesting recent discussion, see Liisa H. Malkki, *The Need to Help: The Domestic Arts of International Humanitarianism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2015.



Fig. 20 - B/W online, B/W in print

Figure 20. Full-page advertisement for the International Rescue Committee, *New York Times*, A11, 25 September 2015.

We should not be surprised that the contemporary practice of humanitarian photography, like that of the past, employs a narrow range of recognizable tropes, such as the “mother and child” and “child alone”. Such tropes have come to express our preferred view of the suffering “out there” that we judge to be worthy of response and remedy. That is why such images, and their expertly framed narratives, continue to touch our hearts and emotions. What they do not do – cannot do – is offer actual solutions. At most, humanitarian photography can aspire to portray problems in ways designed to influence public opinion and, through it, political agendas.

For over a century, humanitarian photography has mobilized the universalizing language of “humanity” through the sentimental lens of family. Over time, it has learned to wage politics via a consciously cultivated apolitical portrayal that suggests and showcases victims’ innocence. Humanitarian photography accomplishes this by erasing political context and complexity from its visual frame in order to focus attention on apparently unjust suffering. Peter Bouckaert’s use of Alan Kurdi’s photo was rooted, in this sense, in a century’s worth of humanitarian practice. As a result, he and HRW were convinced that the publication and circulation of that photo was the right thing to do.

