

# Humanitarianism in a Cold War Hot Spot

## *Protestant Missionaries and Humanitarianism in the DRC: The Politics of Aid in Cold War Africa*

By Jeremy Rich. Suffolk: James Currey, 2020. Pp. 277. \$105.00, hardcover (ISBN: 9781847012586); \$29.95, e-book (ISBN: 9781800100237).

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In recent decades, historians, political scientists, and development experts have demonstrated how humanitarian intervention has eroded state sovereignty and even basic governmental rationality in a variety of countries in the Global South.<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Rich's book builds off of this literature to examine a nation-state that is arguably more of a 'political assemblage'<sup>2</sup> than a cohesively bound, fully sovereign country: the Republic of Congo, renamed 'Zaire' in 1971, and currently referred to as the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). However, Rich's *Protestant Missionaries and Humanitarianism in the DRC* adds significant complexity to previous studies.

Rich considers nation-building not by a government or indigenous social movement, but rather by a faith-based humanitarian aid organization — the Congo Protestant Relief Agency (CPRA) — whose leaders and volunteers formulated idiosyncratic and ideologically inconsistent strategies for contributing to and strengthening national reconstruction in Congo. Rich's work stands in sharp contrast to previous analyses of humanitarian assistance and multilateral aid, as these mainly examine the work of foreign governments and global, secular institutions. Instead, he presents the approaches and worldviews of a missionary society and its aid workers who worked to both reimagine and shore up political stability, governmental legitimacy, and administrative functionality in a newly decolonized Africa. Rich concludes that CPRA's work in early independence-era Congo marked 'a watershed period in humanitarianism in Africa during the Cold War' (7). He accomplishes this by deftly illustrating the dramatic exit of colonial government-sponsored missionary societies and their charitable wings and their replacement by a new iteration of humanitarian agent: faith-based relief organizations. While these new intercessors could be influenced by political agendas emanating from the Global North, much like their predecessors, Rich shows how committed they were to the principles of African self-determination.

All relief provision and assistance in postcolonial spaces in the 1960s was to some degree political. Cold War rivalries, former colonial powers attempting to reinforce their prestige, domestic leftist insurgencies, and other political developments reified, misconstrued, or manipulated faith-based and other forms of humanitarian assistance in Congo, turning beneficence into the furtherance of some form of power. Even if neutrality was the stated aim of a humanitarian mission (and it often was not), the activities associated with relief provision or technical assistance directly affected governance, and therefore the survival of different political communities. In this highly precarious

<sup>1</sup>See G. Mann, *From Empires to NGOs in the West African Sahel: The Road to Nongovernmentality* (Cambridge, 2014); D. Acemoglu and J. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty* (New York, 2013); W. Easterly, *The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good* (London, 2007); P. Uvin, *Aiding Violence: The Development Enterprise in Rwanda* (West Hartford, 1998).

<sup>2</sup>Mann, *From Empires to NGOs*, 244.

atmosphere, the CPRA helped different constituencies in different regions and in different moments, supporting or coordinating with the Congolese government, rebel groups, or refugees, and reconciling the contradictions inherent to this *modus operandi* by claiming to serve the greater aim of promoting the stability of the new state by supporting populations in crisis and preventing large-scale suffering.

Rich vividly details the history of three major CPRA programs in Congo in the first half of his book, exploring how the organization provided relief, supplies, and administrative assistance to (1) Luba Congolese refugees in Kasai province, (2) Angolan refugees fleeing Portuguese repression, and (3) the Congolese army struggling against the ‘Simba’ rebels of the Armée Populaire de la Libération. In each of these missions, the CPRA ‘took a clearly partisan role’ (25), but not for the same side. CPRA and other agents on the ground in the Global South in the 1960s were not yet part of what Keith David Watenpaugh describes as ‘a permanent, transnational, neutral, and secular regime’ for addressing the causes of human suffering.<sup>3</sup> Rather than the ‘huge, well-oiled humanitarian operations’<sup>4</sup> run by international development programs that eventually characterized the 1990s, frontline interventions in Congo’s myriad disasters in the 1960s were handled ad hoc by ‘loosely organized aid programmes’ (4) made up of evangelical missionaries, medical workers, and volunteers, who were poorly resourced and utterly unmentored and received conflicting messages from partners on the ground. Rich sensitively demonstrates that aid workers often possessed deep cultural competency and knowledge of the societies in which they worked (often as a result of colonial-era missionary or charitable work); and some were aware of the superpower rivalries and ideological battles then being fought in Congo. But that was not enough to administer and organize assistance and support to Congolese people in crisis in a manner that ultimately served a nation-building objective, as was CPRA’s implicit and explicit ambition.

The dilemmas with which CPRA and workers were faced played out in multiple ways during the 1960s. In Chapter Four, Rich describes how the CPRA worked as an agent of the US government by distributing food supplies in a manner that crippled the operations of the Simbas, the leftist rebels led by Pierre Mulele. The CPRA thus contributed to the US-backed Congolese government’s military victory. Rich keenly differentiates between how Mennonite pacifists and evangelical Christians working for the same organization wrestled with the moral ambiguities of this sort of humanitarian assistance in different ways. He also underlines how these kinds of operations portended future dissent within the humanitarian sphere in Africa, making this and subsequent chapters a fascinating and useful comparison to histories of humanitarian relief during the Nigerian Civil War, the Ethiopian famines of the 1980s, and later interventions in Congo. Rich’s is a unique voice examining humanitarian aid in the 1960s from a process orientation and an ideological orientation: he distinguishes the role of humanitarian organizations in Congo in this period as *supporters* of a particular regime, rather than *reformers*, which is how most aid and development organizations have been oriented in more recent decades.

Rich is attuned to a wide variety of actors and events, including village-level humanitarian and military operations in Congo, personal reflections and perspectives of individual missionaries, doctors, and workers who aimed to alleviate suffering in the young nation, and the actions and struggles of independent Christian churches as they interfaced with the CPRA. In fact, some of his best use of local voices emerges in his analysis of indigenous Congolese churches as they interfaced with foreign aid organizations. The fact that Congolese churches remain the most powerful civil society actors in present-day Congo underscores their long history of engaging in international interventions as local partners. Rich uses a stunning variety of sources, including but not limited to personal records of CPRA aid workers, the archives of the Mennonite Central Committee, Church World Service, and the World Council of Churches (all CPRA donors who recorded the work of the agency), records

<sup>3</sup>K. D. Watenpaugh, *Bread From Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Berkeley, 2015), 5.

<sup>4</sup>L. Polman, *The Crisis Caravan: What’s Wrong with Humanitarian Aid?* (New York, 2011), 11.

from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, the US State Department, and the US Agency for International Development, as well as the archives of smaller foreign and local church organizations in Congo. Rich not only provides insight into how aid operations and humanitarian work became a feature of military strategy, but also how humanitarian agencies and workers struggled to define what kind of work would result in human improvement, at what moral and material cost, and according to which doctrines, during a period of dramatic foreign interference by Western governments.

Rich's book is in some ways a prehistory of what Susan Moeller describes as 'compassion fatigue'.<sup>5</sup> CPRA workers of every professional background and ideological leaning all felt strongly that the calamities in Congo in the 1960s merited a substantial philanthropic response. Rich likewise describes the 'outpouring' of aid from Western countries in response to the famine crisis in South Kasai in 1960, with governments coordinating with the United Nations and voluntary organizations to gather huge quantities of charitable donations (71). Foreign governments were also committed to achieving both material and philosophical ambitions in the Congo. He compares this to the evolution of a space of humanitarian crisis that no longer generates the same level of international concern — either from religious proponents of compassion or Western governments conducting human rights diplomacy. In Congo today, he argues, spiritual and political ambitions are largely in the hands of local institutions, as liberal interventionism is often geopolitically hamstrung and countries in the Global North grow more isolationist.<sup>6</sup> As an example, the UN team investigating violence in the Kasai province in 2018 — in which mass rapes, mutilations, and beheadings were carried out as part of a conflict that left up to 5,000 people dead — deadpanned that the conflict 'did not amount to genocide', thereby granting the international community permission to ignore the conflict, which it did.<sup>7</sup> While Rich's book does not have a policy proscription, he clearly identifies a striking shift in both government and faith-based organizations' orientations in Africa and also keenly identifies how 1960s-era relief provision, while possessing many limitations, was in many ways still more robust than that of the current era.

Rich's highly nuanced and richly detailed history identifies the troubled foundations of the international humanitarian regime. His archives help him to appreciate the CPRA's achievements, while also drawing attention to the deficiencies in the broader literature on humanitarianism and international development. Dominant understandings of how to relieve suffering were never truly unmoored from their colonial foundations, and were then contorted to serve conflicting and often inhuman postcolonial Cold War ambitions. The latest controversies over aid 'failures' that are rife in the literature would do well to deeply read Rich's study of the early history of humanitarian-centered nation building by a foreign organization and foreign actors who gave their energy and power to a wide variety of local agents, with unforeseen consequences for the human condition in the Congo.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>S. D. Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York, 1999).

<sup>6</sup>Nowhere was American isolationism vis-à-vis Africa more clearly demonstrated than in the Trump administration's decision to offer praise and quickly accept the results of Congo's December 2018 presidential election, despite evidence of widespread fraud. See R. Gramer and J. O'Donnell, 'How Washington got on board with Congo's rigged election', *Foreign Policy*, 1 Feb. 2019; R. L. Kelly and M. R. Lehnert, 'Trump's dangerous isolationism weakens USA and strengthens our adversaries: retired generals', *USA Today*, 26 Oct. 2020.

<sup>7</sup>W. Eagle, 'UN investigator: atrocities in DRC fall short of genocide', *Voice of America*, 3. Aug. 2018.

<sup>8</sup>These include, but are not limited to, D. Moyo and N. Ferguson, *Dead Aid: Why Aid Is Not Working and How There Is a Better Way for Africa* (New York, 2009); P. Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries Are Failing and What Can Be Done About It* (Oxford, 2008); A. V. Banerjee and E. Duflo, *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York, 2011).