

**Shadow Diplomats:
American Humanitarianism
in the Era of the World Wars,
1900-1948**

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Abstract

This project examines the development of American humanitarianism in the era of the world wars. It explores how, in the absence of state power, private citizens often filled the void. Their activities expand the common definition of diplomacy by noting myriad ways private organizations and individuals, including the Rockefeller Foundation and its partners, attempted to influence the direction of American foreign relations. The primary argument here is to demonstrate that American citizens, who grew frustrated at the lack of government involvement in world affairs during the first-half of the twentieth century, sought to insert themselves into positions of power and influence. This project shows that, in the absence of the state, many American individuals and NGOs formed partnerships and coordinated their humanitarian activities on a global scale. In specific ways, they undertook the roles and strategies of foreign policy professionals: stationing professionals in foreign offices, raising and appropriating large sums of money, providing food and medicine, coordinating the mass migration of refugees, and negotiating with foreign governments. By doing so, they acted as “shadow diplomats” – working as a shadow government in opposition to the recognized state authority, but also working in the shadows, away from most public attention and scrutiny, because they reasoned that quiet actions would produce the desired results.

Introduction

The letter is rather unremarkable and easily overlooked.¹ Dated December 8, 1933, in many respects it is simply another sheet of paper in a stack of correspondence contained in a folder at the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC), save that it is written by a 25-year-old Edward R. Murrow, years before he gained fame as a war correspondent and CBS broadcaster. In it, the young Murrow tossed off a two-sentence paragraph to Dr. Alfred E. Cohn, a renowned cardiologist at the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, and he attached a list of six German scholars seeking refuge in the United States during the early months of the Nazi Reich. More significant than its words or the notoriety of its author, the letter itself is an example of material culture, an artifact to be examined, that reveals many significant things about a larger American humanitarian network during era of the world wars.

On its surface, the contents of the letter provide a ground-level view of the process whereby private citizens and organizations adopted a humanitarian mission to alleviate suffering around the world. Murrow's signature falls under the letterhead of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars. The cumbersome name belies the speed and efficiency with which the members of this nongovernmental organization (NGO) reacted to the threat of European fascism. The committee was founded just weeks after Hitler became German Chancellor, and had already launched a program of state-sanctioned oppression. Acting as the assistant secretary of the group, Murrow joined other American internationalists who regretted that the U.S. government had retreated from world affairs after the Great War had ended in 1918. He arrived at the Emergency Committee from another group, the Institute for International Education (IIE), which in later years would come to

administer the Fulbright program. At the Emergency Committee, Murrow focused his attention on the plight of persecuted academics, only one group of Hitler's many victims struggling in the larger human rights crisis of the 1930s. Murrow, in other words, served as a middleman in the complicated and makeshift machinery of refugee relief. He shepherded refugees, such as the six names attached to the letter, from their former faculty positions in German institutions into temporary appointments at American colleges and universities. At a time of extremely restrictive U.S. immigration laws, the Emergency Committee used a loophole that allowed for temporary academic exchanges to help match professors to their safe havens and then offered grants to the cash-strapped institutions to absorb the costs.

But the Emergency Committee did not work alone. It was part of an elaborate humanitarian network that is evident in the organization's letterhead above Murrow's typewritten sentences. It contains thirty names, including Professor Stephen Duggan, the founding director of the IIE, a Wilsonian internationalist who had worked throughout the previous decade establishing educational exchanges; Dr. Livingston Farrand, president of Cornell University, a medical professional who had ties to both the Rockefeller Foundation (RF) and the American Red Cross; Professors Marion Edwards Park and Mary Woolley, presidents of Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke, respectively, are reminders of women's growing involvement in international affairs; and Bernard Flexner, lawyer, Zionist, and member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the Red Cross. Two of Flexner's brothers, Simon and Abraham, had strong affiliations with Rockefeller philanthropy. So it's no surprise that Murrow's circle included Dr. Cohn of the Rockefeller Institute, a logical ally in the cause of humanitarian relief, because of their common interests and also given the years of

experience that the Rockefeller Foundation had in international philanthropy dating back before the Great War.

Less obvious to the letter's significance, though, is the simple paper clip that attached the list of six names to the concise note. The stacks of letterhead, typewriter ribbons, paperclips, and other mundane office products were paid for with help from the New York Foundation, a charitable trust founded in 1909 to make grants to deserving domestic groups providing for the health, education, and general welfare of those who were often forgotten in government aid programs. In the 1930s, as the European crisis developed, the board of directors of the New York Foundation included many prominent individuals, including New York Governor Herbert Lehman, the Warburg banking family, and the Sulzbergers of the *New York Times* – Jewish Americans committed to philanthropic causes. Many also served as leaders of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), one of the earliest and most influential NGOs in the country. Because they served on multiple boards and maintained relationships with relatives and friends who remained in Nazi Germany, these families held a macro-view of the metastasizing crisis. They also were creative in coordinating aid. For example, the Progressive-era charter of their old New York Foundation restricted funding to domestic groups in the New York Metropolitan Area, so they could not directly aid refugee academics abroad in the 1930s. Undeterred, they circumvented the spirit of the Foundation's charter by allocating precious funds to groups, including to Murrow's Emergency Committee, which provided the direct assistance overseas. To free up the Emergency Committee's mounting expenditures, the New York Foundation funds offset the Emergency Committee's mundane daily expenses: the office rent on West 45th Street, Murrow's salary, the phone bill, letterhead, and the paper clips. In other words, the otherwise-

forgettable letter reveals the larger world of an American nongovernmental humanitarian network that was active in the era of the world wars and it shows the roles private citizens played as shadow diplomats.

Shadow Diplomats

In the absence of state power, private citizens often filled the void. Their work expands the common definition of diplomacy by noting myriad ways private organizations and individuals have attempted to influence the direction of American foreign relations. The primary argument here is to demonstrate that American citizens, who grew frustrated at the lack of government involvement in world affairs, sought to insert themselves into positions of power and influence. This history shows that, largely in the absence of the state, many American individuals and NGOs formed partnerships and coordinated their humanitarian activities on a global scale. In specific ways, they undertook the roles and strategies of foreign policy professionals and acted as “shadow diplomats” – working as a shadow government in opposition to the recognized state authority, but also working in the shadows, away from most public attention and scrutiny, because they reasoned that quiet actions would produce the desired results.

Only recently have scholars produced specialized group studies: on the American Red Cross, the American Friends Service Committee (the Quakers), and Herbert Hoover’s Commission for Relief of Belgium, among a few others. They show how activists and volunteers were motivated to help victims of war, repression, and natural disasters around the world. Like those histories, this one grants agency to lower-level

bureaucrats, private citizens, and members of NGOs, who helped raise an American consciousness of humanitarianism and crafted transnational responses to global suffering. Building on those, however, this account examines how groups formed a network of organizations to coordinate relief. The Rockefeller family and Foundation frequently sat at the nexus of these connections. While some provincialism surely persisted in “turf battles,” what is often overlooked is the degree to which individuals and organizations overlapped in their missions, found common cause, and synchronized their activities. Many American humanitarians had worked together for decades in their professional lives before turning to philanthropy. They often lived in the same neighborhoods and attended the same social clubs, places of worship, and parties. As mentioned, they frequently sat on multiple boards of directors within the network and attended regular meetings. They communicated regularly, even daily, through letters, telegrams, and telephone conversations. In several instances, American humanitarians shared common backgrounds and families, either by blood or by marriage. In sum, a functioning humanitarian network retarded further tragedy because individuals recognized there was value in cooperation.

Sources from the Rockefeller archives also help to alter the conventional wisdom of *when* Americans engaged in world affairs. Many people view the periods outside of wartime as eras of traditional isolationism and non-interventionism. When looking at the White House, State Department, and Congress, there is ample evidence to support a perception of inactivity (though there are many examples to contradict this perceived stasis, as well). Though the official leadership in Washington often embraced “normalcy” and retrenchment outside wartime, American activists used relief as a form of international engagement. They internationalized their domestic social welfare activities, then sought to provide emergency relief in Europe during the

Great War. In the 1920s and 1930s, they worked to make those efforts permanent, and expanded their international reach to all other regions of the globe during the years surrounding the Second World War, and finally institutionalized a postwar humanitarian mission in the United States and through the United Nations. By providing food and medicine, establishing orphanages, building foreign infrastructure, and resettling refugees, American humanitarians forged stronger ties with the international arena. For those scholars who delve deeply into a particular time period, the periodization of this work looks at the ways specific humanitarians bridged the years and adapted their practices across time, from the Progressive Era to the Great War to the Second World War and beyond.

Partners in Humanitarianism

Modern American humanitarianism developed during the late-19th century, as philanthropists and social workers joined forces to internationalize immigrant aid and welfare programs at a time when government services were sorely lacking. Sensing, at best, an inadequate government response and, at worst, a fixed program of obstructionism, they sought to fill the humanitarian void. The Progressive Era value of order and a desire to apply social scientific expertise underpinned their activities and brought together men, and an increasing number of women, into the international sphere. Women social workers in particular, such as those in the new National Council of Jewish Women, moved beyond their homes to provide traditional gendered forms of aid – food, clothing, shelter, values instruction – to the immigrant poor in their communities and soon found outlets beyond American borders.

The case of Lillian Wald illustrates the development of a humanitarian impulse in the absence of state action, particularly to aid foreign peoples, and also how such enterprises invited philanthropists to coordinate their efforts. Wald had developed a program of visiting nurses to serve the needs of immigrant tenement dwellers struggling to assimilate into American life. The case workers climbed dark stairwells to meet with their patients. To pay for their services, Wald developed a program that allowed free medical care for those who could not afford it, and a payment plan proportional to what a patient reasonably could afford. Her nascent humanitarianism led her to lobby Congress for the establishment of a federal children's bureau. Wald's Henry Street Settlement House in Lower Manhattan attracted the attention of a diverse group of philanthropists who shared her interest in alleviating suffering and also appreciated her methods. The meticulous nature of Wald and the nurses – identifying social problems, collecting data, embracing techniques of efficiency, crafting bureaucratic solutions, and accepting personal sacrifices to provide aid – attracted the attention of the Rockefellers, who looked to advance their domestic philanthropic efforts. They invested a portion of their fortunes with Kuhn, Loeb & Company, who steered funds toward the Henry Street Settlement. Kuhn, Loeb was an investment house managed by Jacob Schiff, one of the most influential Jewish philanthropists of his day and an early leader of the American Jewish Committee. Already by then, Schiff and other Jewish American leaders (including some Lehmans, Morgenthau, and Warburgs) had invested in Henry Street and served on the board of directors. Weeks before the formation of the Rockefeller Foundation, Paul Warburg recruited John D. Rockefeller, Jr, to contribute funds by praising Wald's enterprise as "highly organized and systematized, under unusual standards of efficiency and humanitarianism."² Convinced, Rockefeller invested substantial funds for many years. In her memoir, Wald recalled how impressed she was that so "many divergent

groups have come together” to provide essential relief. These early years, prior to the outbreak of the Great War, were formative in many ways for the individuals and groups involved. The Great War would put their lessons to the test.

The autumn of 1914 found European capitals filled with citizens who held a romantic notion of warfare. Soon after the celebrations subsided, however, the horrors of the Great War exposed a humanitarian emergency of epic proportions. Other studies, often relying on plentiful materials at the RAC, detail the public-private partnership in humanitarianism during the Great War. In his history of the Commission for Relief in Belgium (CRB) and the RF, Branden Little shows how the two organizations worked closely together, often coordinating with the Red Cross, and how they overcame substantial obstacles to satisfy many victims’ overwhelming needs. They dealt with funding shortages, factionalism, and distrustful belligerents, but ultimately, the partners successfully negotiated humanitarian interventions. Little concludes that, by providing food, clothing, medicine, and emergency supplies to war-torn Europe, relief organizations “advocated a redefinition of the relationship of the individual to the state and advanced a modern understanding of human rights.”³ Building on works such as Little’s, *Shadows Diplomats* shows how the war encouraged international humanitarian organizations to expand their preexisting overseas relief activities and inspired the founding of several new groups.

Many sources, and therefore much scholarly attention, detail the plight of Belgium and the civilians along the Western Front. But just as troubling for some Americans was the situation further east, where Jews residing in Ottoman-controlled Palestine were cut off from European funds. This prompted Henry Morgenthau, Sr., the U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, to cable his compatriots in New York City’s

philanthropic community – notably not to his bosses in Washington, D.C. – and that contact resulted in the establishment of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), one of the most important, if unheralded, humanitarian organizations in the country. Within two days, Schiff, Warburg, and others had raised the requested \$50,000 and began dispersing the funds. Like the CRB, the JDC sought to centralize decision-making, raise money and supplies, and coordinate with other groups as well as the U.S. State Department. Already by October 1914, the JDC had convened a meeting of various groups representing different segments of New York’s Jewish American population. Also like the CRB, by the following spring, the JDC began coordinating steamships full of money and millions of tons of food, medicine, and clothing, to Europeans in need, regardless of belligerent status, religion, or national origin. Of course, after the United States entered the war in April 1917, humanitarian activities became complicated for all, but they did not cease. Just as the CRB worked with neutrals, Spain and the Netherlands, so too did the JDC turn to those countries and Switzerland to distribute aid, including millions of dollars to occupied territories.

Near the conclusion of the war, President Woodrow Wilson’s efforts to build a new world order based on internationalism, collective security, and self-determination captured the imagination of many NGOs. After the guns had fallen silent, members wanted to think beyond war emergencies and inaugurate permanent programs of reconstruction. Of course, most traditional histories point to Wilson’s disappointments, the flaws in the Treaty of Versailles, and the eventual failure of the League of Nations, as the prelude to a generation of so-called isolationism. Countless history textbooks overstate the “return to normalcy” after the war, when Americans purportedly withdrew from world affairs. While based in some truth, this

generalization obscures the many counterexamples of American activism in the postwar global community. Imperfect as it was, the League helped institutionalize the protection of human rights, even the stateless and most vulnerable. And in the United States, prominent Americans further embraced internationalism by forming organizations meant to promote international ties, such as the Foreign Policy Association (1918) and the Institute of International Education (1919), and they found ways to carve out space for international humanitarian activism.

In this milieu, the Rockefeller Foundation joined other groups developing creative reconstruction programs designed to aid victims of war and relentless persecution. At first, the JDC and the RF supported the American Relief Administration (ARA), an outgrowth of Hoover's wartime operations in Belgium, which was formed by an act of Congress in February 1919. While successful in many ways, the ARA also was plagued by disinterest from the new administration in Washington, which now included Hoover, the distracted secretary of commerce. The ARA also struggled with the overwhelming nature of turmoil in Europe and the inhospitality of regimes, especially the Bolsheviks, until it closed operations in 1923. With government aid lacking, private organizations stepped in with the necessary money and personnel. In the immediate postwar period, for example, several groups acknowledged their particular specializations when they coordinated action to alleviate famine and the suffering of orphans in Romania. Using a loophole in the restrictive immigration laws, the JDC built on its war experience by collecting and allocating funds to prepare refugee ships. The National Council of Jewish Women sent representatives to accompany the children from embarkation point to final port of call. And the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society helped settle the children in safe homes and orphanages in the States.

But the JDC and the RF were particularly interested in fostering creative programs that would promote the health, education, economic, and religious conditions for European minorities, thereby eliminating the need for emigration altogether. Nowhere did the opportunity – and the challenges – present themselves more than in the new Soviet Union. One humanitarian program was called the Agro-Joint, an ambitious plan, designed by capitalists to coordinate with communists, to protect the vulnerable Jewish community by helping it adopt a form of collectivization. Under the direction of James Rosenberg, the JDC negotiated with the Kremlin and coordinated a massive supply line of tractors, fertilizer, and farm implements destined for each *kolkhoz* farm in some of the most remote areas of western Russia. Jews saw a way to overcome periodic pogroms and prosper; Bosheviks saw the Agro-Joint as a way to cultivate Russian land, to infuse the economy with foreign investment, and to help the USSR overcome its status as an international pariah. The initial success of this and other JDC operations invited a number of unsolicited donations amounting to over a million dollars from John D. Rockefeller, Jr., in the 1920s, which complemented similar programs undertaken by the RF at the same time.⁴ “It is a genuine pleasure to cooperate in enterprises that are so well managed,” he wrote to Morgenthau in 1928.⁵

In many respects the growing American humanitarianism unknowingly served as preparation for activities that sought to mitigate the refugee crisis of the 1930s. Characteristically, shadow diplomats responded quickly to the problems associated with Nazism, although they were often beset with internal disagreements over how to respond in ways that would not invite a backlash from American isolationists, nativists, and anti-Semites. The economic hardships of the Great Depression fed domestic public opinion that, in turn, figured in the Roosevelt administration’s

political calculus that favored inaction. The State Department, moreover, put up what historian David Wyman aptly terms “paper walls” and bureaucratic red tape to actively prevent refugees from escaping tragedy. The well-known story of the S.S. *St. Louis*, a steamship full of refugees denied multiple opportunities for entrance, is frequently offered as one of the most regrettable examples of Americans ignoring human rights. Despite this, it also should be noted how many American humanitarians filled the diplomatic vacuum left open by officials who could have, and should have, done so much more.

This research report, therefore, returns to where it started, with the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced German Scholars, when Murrow contacted Dr. Cohn of the Rockefeller Institute about the establishment of another Emergency Committee to assist displaced German physicians, which Cohn succeeded in organizing in 1933. “Practically all the organizations cooperated most heartily in the work” of refugee relief, Professor Stephen Duggan recalled.⁶ This included the Rockefeller Foundation, which advised the new Emergency Committees and oversaw the matching of funds to colleges and universities that hired the refugee academics. Anticipating criticism that their activities were undermining immigration restrictions, the Committee ensured that each academic complied with the visa requirement that he or she had taught within the previous two years and had obtained an invitation from an American institution. But just as other humanitarian organizations had found creative ways to comply with the letter (if not the spirit) of the immigration law, RF officials contacted the New School for Social Research about establishing a University in Exile, an institution that would make possible for several more scholars to emigrate to America. The Emergency Committee called upon the American Friends Service Committee to organize orientation activities and English classes for the professors

and their families at a resort in New Hampshire before they departed for their new homes and assimilated into American life. In 1934, Murrow and Cohn traveled to London for a meeting of the League of Nations High Commission for Refugees and met with sympathetic officials about touring American colleges and universities to encourage more participation.

The Emergency Committee was but only one organization that reveals the layers of coordinated humanitarian action. Later that year, various groups set up the National Coordinating Committee (NCC) as an umbrella to oversee these various activities throughout the mid-1930s. The NCC's executive leadership, sources of funding, and membership included many of the groups and individuals who already had been active in international humanitarianism for a generation, including the Joint Distribution Committee, Rockefeller Foundation, New York Foundation, National Council of Jewish Women, Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, Institute of International Education, American Friends Service Committee, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, and the American Red Cross. Individually and collectively, as the U.S. government stubbornly resisted playing a role, these humanitarians undertook the overwhelming and relentless task of rescue, in the shadows. After the spasm of violence known as *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, a reporter asked Raymond Fosdick, then president of the RF, why the philanthropies had not done more to aid refugees. Fosdick informed him, off-the-record, that the RF had been involved for the past several years, but quietly, so as not to arouse the ire of the American public or the German government.⁷ In 1939 the NCC network changed its name to the National Refugee Service and continued its efforts after the commencement of hostilities in Europe.

Acting as shadow diplomats, they met with members of the Roosevelt administration and the State Department, participated in international conferences, raised millions of dollars, opened offices around the world, navigated a web of immigration regulations and bureaucratic “paper walls,” negotiated directly with foreign governments and occupying powers, and handled currency exchanges and bribes. They distributed food and medicine, mediated factional disputes, established land purchases for settlements⁸, chartered dozens of steamships full of passengers from port-to-port, and coordinated the mass migrations of countless refugees to safe havens from Latin America to East Asia, from Palestine to the United States. These shadow diplomats also suffered the frustrations that accompanied those responsibilities, and, especially once the United States entered the war in 1941, humanitarians endured harassment, imprisonment, and deprivation – the very conditions that plagued the victims they tried to help.

Conclusion

For all their efforts, of course, the humanitarian network’s success never surpassed the needs of the victims. But rather than view the American response as negligible and the humanitarian response as feeble, as histories often claim, the sources at the Rockefeller Archive Center and other repositories provide compelling evidence that shadow diplomats often mitigated tragedies because they viewed themselves and their fellow citizens as their brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.

After the war, many American humanitarians moved beyond the specific tasks associated with humanitarianism and sought to institutionalize human rights as a

central national and global interest. Herbert Lehman, for example, who had worked with Lillian Wald, had served on the boards of the JDC and the New York Foundation, and had personal connections to the Rockefeller Foundation before turning to politics, became the postwar head of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, the U.S. government body assigned to provide essential aid to displaced persons. Some humanitarians focused their attention on the Nuremberg war crimes trials, seeking to define genocide and codify human rights abuses. Others worked to incorporate human rights into international law at the new U.N., where they helped craft the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Some prominent individuals, such as Henry Morgenthau, Jr., who had resisted publicly participating in such causes prior to the war, became much more vocal about the need to expose American antisemitism, even going so far as to support the founding of Israel as a Jewish homeland. More generally, American humanitarians urged the U.S. government and their fellow citizens to accept the responsibilities and expectations as a global leader in the protection of international human rights at the dawn of the “American Century.”

¹ Edward R. Murrow to Alfred E. Cohn, December 8, 1933, Folder 1, Box 4, Series 1: General Correspondence, RG FA802, Alfred E. Cohn Papers, Rockefeller Archive Center.

² Paul Warburg to John D. Rockefeller, Jr, April 22, 1913, Folder 510, Welfare Interests – General – Henry Street Settlement 1913-1929, Box 46, RG 2, FA325, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, Welfare Interests - General Files, Series P, Welfare area: Settlements, Rockefeller Archive Center.

³ For example, see Branden Little, “Band of Crusaders: American Humanitarians, the Great War, and the Remaking of the World” (Rockefeller Archive Center, 2008).

⁴ John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to Paul Baerwald, May 20, 1926, Folder 336, Welfare Interests General – JDC, Box 31, RG 2, FA325, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, Welfare Interests - General Files, Series P, Welfare area: Jewish Organizations, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁵ John D. Rockefeller, Jr., to Henry Morgenthau, Sr., December 3, 1928, Folder 336, Welfare Interests General – JDC, Box 31, RG 2, FA325, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller Records, Welfare Interests - General Files, Series P, Welfare area: Jewish Organizations, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁶ Stephen Duggan and Betty Drury, *The Rescue of Science and Learning: The Story of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars* (NY: The Macmillan Company, 1948), 77; Box 24, RG 3, FA1291, Institute of International Education Records, Publications, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁷ Raymond Fosdick relayed the incident to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., December 16, 1938, Folder 330, Welfare Interests General – Jewish Exiles and Refugees, Box 31, RG 2, FA325, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records, Welfare Interests - General Files, Series, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁸ In one case, James Rosenberg of the JDC used his Agro-Joint experience in the Soviet Union and applied it to the development of a new settlement in the Dominican Republic in 1939.