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ARTICLE

# Christian Humanitarianism, Refugee Stories, and the Making of the Cold War West

David Brydan 

Department of History, King's College London, London, UK  
Email: [david.brydan@kcl.ac.uk](mailto:david.brydan@kcl.ac.uk)

## Abstract

This article argues that refugees and the Christian humanitarian organizations supporting them, particularly Catholic ones, helped to construct the Cold War West. Christian NGOs valued these refugees, not only for their needs or their suffering, but for the power of their stories. Refugees' stories served to encapsulate and dramatize the horrors of communism, transforming it from an abstract ideological threat to a vivid personal danger. Their suffering and sacrifice, and the efforts to relieve this suffering, helped to forge ties of solidarity across Western Europe and North America. Christian groups fuelled this solidarity through the dissemination of information about communist persecution and the courage of refugees seeking to escape it, mobilizing the faithful to contribute through donations, prayers, and relief campaigns. The vision of the West which emerged from these campaigns emphasized religious freedom as the cornerstone of Western societies. It promoted solidarity across national borders by emphasizing Christian unity, although there were tensions between different denominations and Catholics were often the most active supporters of anti-communist humanitarianism. It also, strikingly, had little to say about democracy, something that becomes particularly evident when we examine the participation of Franco's Spain in Christian refugee relief.

## I

'Little Karl could not understand why his mother was so excited.' She was rushing around their East Berlin home packing a small bag. Karl's father was a policeman, and had always said that one day they might have to leave their home and go to the West. 'I cannot arrest innocent people', he told Karl.

So far I have been able to avoid doing this and have even been able to warn some people who were to be arrested just because they had been teaching their children about God. But...it will not be long before they find out the truth and then I will be arrested.

Karl, his sister, and his mother managed to cross the border, and headed straight to a refugee shelter in West Berlin run by Caritas, the Catholic welfare charity, where they prayed for the safety of Karl's father. Thankfully, he arrived unharmed a few hours later. After a few weeks, the whole family flew to Hamburg, where they were met by a social worker from Caritas and given food 'made possible by the generosity of American Catholics'.<sup>1</sup>

This article argues that refugees like Little Karl, their stories, and the Christian humanitarian organizations supporting them, particularly Catholic ones such as Caritas, helped to construct the Cold War West. Its focus is not on refugees per se, but on the particular subset of refugees which received most attention from Christian humanitarians and of which Karl was a prime example – Christian refugees escaping communism. Churches and relief organizations valued these refugees, not only for their needs or their suffering, but for the power of their stories. Refugees' stories, like the story of Little Karl which was published in a Catholic teachers' handbook in 1953, served to encapsulate and dramatize the horrors of communism, transforming it from an abstract ideological threat to a vivid personal danger. Their suffering and sacrifice, and the efforts to relieve that suffering, helped to forge ties of solidarity across Western Europe and North America. Churches and Christian NGOs fuelled this solidarity through the dissemination of information about communist persecution and the courage of the refugees who sought to escape it, mobilizing the faithful to contribute through donations, prayers, and relief campaigns.

Christian humanitarianism thus played an important role in building the solidarity and sense of mission which underpinned the making of the early Cold War West. The idea of the 'West' certainly had to be remade after 1945.<sup>2</sup> The physical and moral collapse of Europe during the Second World War prompted diverse efforts to reconstruct and renew European civilization.<sup>3</sup> The conflict had also witnessed a jarring realignment of geopolitical imaginaries, uniting the Anglo-American democracies (and their empires) with Uncle Joe's newly benevolent Soviet Union, against an Axis coalition led by countries such as Germany and Italy which had traditionally been seen as core elements of the civilized, Western world. But in a few short years after 1945, Western publics were asked again to turn this vision on its head, accepting Italy and West Germany as part of a Free World aligned against the terror and totalitarianism of a Soviet-led East. It helped, of course, that this marked a return to a familiar anti-communism of the interwar period, and to the even more deep-rooted habits of thought involved in contrasting the 'civilized' West

<sup>1</sup> 'Handbook for Teachers, 1953: Bishops' Fund for the Victims of War in Europe, Asia, The Near and Far East', American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives (ACUA), Washington, DC, US Conference of Catholic Bishops Office of the General Secretary (USCCB-OGS), series 1, box 49.

<sup>2</sup> On broader histories of the idea of the idea of the 'West', see Alastair Bonnet, *The idea of the West: culture, politics and history* (Basingstoke, 2004); Christopher Browning and Marko Lehti, eds., *The struggle for the West: a divided and contested legacy* (London, 2010); Riccardo Bavaj and Martina Steber, *Germany and 'the West': the history of a modern concept* (New York, NY, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Paul Betts, *Ruin and renewal: civilizing Europe after the Second World War* (London, 2020).

to the 'barbarous' East. The consolidation of the Cold War West has generally been understood as a state-led process, with scholarship focusing on the political and military policies of Western governments, particularly the United States. Within this tradition, the Truman doctrine, the formation of NATO, the Marshall Plan, and Western European integration have been understood as foundations on which the West was built.<sup>4</sup> But while these are important processes they do not necessarily tell us much about the cultural and ideological construction of the Cold War West: the role of non-state actors in promoting ideas about the West; how ordinary people understood their Western identity; and the way ideas about the Cold War were shared across borders.

The popular construction and understanding of the Cold War West has been approached from various angles, from arguments about 'consensus liberalism', to studies of consumerism, leisure, modernization, and technology.<sup>5</sup> But in contrast to all of these, the vision of the West being promoted by Christian humanitarians and refugee relief was built around the idea of the 'Christian West'. Over recent years, historians have begun to emphasize the importance of religion to the Cold War, and particularly in post-war Europe and North America.<sup>6</sup> The immediate post-war years witnessed a religious revival across both continents, with a wave of Marian apparitions, for example, pointing towards a new era of Christian fervour and faith.<sup>7</sup> It was an era when Western European politics was dominated by Christian Democracy, by parties and leaders explicitly shaped by religious beliefs. Members of these parties worked closely together across national borders and were at the heart of early moves towards European integration. And it was a period, as a number of historians have recently emphasized, when Christian ideas and thinkers exerted a significant influence over emerging human rights discourse and

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<sup>4</sup> The literature on the West and the origins of the Cold War is too vast to pick out specific works, but a good range of representative articles appear in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cambridge history of the Cold War, I: Origins* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-colonization and the Cold War: the cultural mission of the United States in Austria after the Second World War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1994); Michael E. Latham, *Modernization as ideology: American social science and 'nation building' in the Kennedy era* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000); Holger Nehring, "'Westernization': a new paradigm for interpreting West European history in a Cold War context", *Cold War History*, 4 (2004), pp. 175–91; Victoria de Grazia, *America's advance through twentieth-century Europe* (Cambridge, MA, 2006); Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachmann, eds., *Cold War kitchen: Americanization, technology and European users* (Cambridge, MA, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> On the broader history of religion and the Cold War, see Dianne Kirby, ed., *Religion and the Cold War* (Basingstoke, 2003); and Philip Muehlenbeck, ed., *Religion and the Cold War: a global perspective* (Nashville, TN, 2012). On its application to North American and Western Europe, see Jonathan P. Herzog, *The spiritual-industrial complex: America's religious battle against communism in the early Cold War* (Oxford, 2011); Uta Andrea Balbier, 'Billy Graham's Cold War crusades: rechristianization, secularization, and the spiritual creation of the Free World in the 1950s', in Hugh McLeod and David Hempton, eds., *Secularization and religious innovation in the North Atlantic world* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 234–54.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Jan Margry, ed., *Cold War Mary: ideologies, politics and Marian devotional culture* (Leuven, 2020).

legal structures.<sup>8</sup> In this context, Christian humanitarianism offered a powerful tool to promote and buttress a vision of the West united by its Christian heritage and values, and contrasted to the godless materialism of the communist East.

This vision of Christian unity was threatened by divisions between Catholics and Protestants. To a certain extent, the post-war era was one of inter-confessional co-operation, enabling the promotion of a shared Christian identity previously complicated by sectarian divisions. This was perhaps most clearly evident in political co-operation between Protestants and Catholics, either under the umbrella of European Christian Democracy or as promoted by political leaders on both sides of the Atlantic as a response to the shared threat of global communism.<sup>9</sup> But this gradual shift toward religious tolerance and pluralism was a fraught and contested one.<sup>10</sup> On the Catholic side, the ecumenical movement was fiercely challenged by the Vatican under Pius XII. Protestant ecumenists in the United States were keen advocates of unity between Protestant denominations, particularly those sharing their liberal outlook, but continued to view Catholicism as a threatening ‘totalitarian’ faith. And they were themselves increasingly challenged by emerging evangelical movements which grew rapidly in popularity on both sides of the Atlantic during the early Cold War.<sup>11</sup>

Refugee relief offers a new perspective on these tensions over Christian unity in the context of the early Cold War. Humanitarian efforts were often led by Catholic organizations like Caritas, *Secours Catholique* in France, and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) in the US which was part of the US Catholic church’s National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). This Catholic predominance stemmed partly from the fact that many of the largest groups of refugees fleeing communism in places like Hungary, Cuba, and Vietnam were themselves predominately Catholic. The vision of the West which was promoted by these relief agencies through stories of refugees aligned closely with contemporary Catholic concepts of the West as *Abendland*, rooted in centuries of shared Christian tradition.<sup>12</sup> But refugee relief also involved Protestant organizations like *Evangelische Hilfswerke* in Germany and Christian

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<sup>8</sup> Wolfram Kaiser, *Christian Democracy and the origins of European union* (Cambridge, 2009); Samuel Moyn, *Christian human rights* (Philadelphia, PA, 2015); Marco Duranti, *The conservative human rights revolution: European identity, transnational politics, and the origins of the European convention* (Oxford, 2017); Gene Zubovich, *Before the religious right: liberal Protestants, human rights, and the polarization of the United States* (Philadelphia, PA, 2022).

<sup>9</sup> On Truman’s efforts to promote Christian unity during the early Cold War, see Andrew R. Polk, *Faith in freedom: propaganda, presidential politics, and the making of an American religion* (Ithaca, NY, and London, 2021).

<sup>10</sup> Udi Greenberg, ‘Catholics, Protestants, and the violent birth of European religious pluralism’, *American Historical Review*, 124 (2019), pp. 511–38.

<sup>11</sup> James D. Strasburg, *God’s Marshall Plan: American Protestants and the struggle for the soul of Europe* (Oxford, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> For recent work on the idea of the Christian West and the *Abendland* during the early Cold War, see Rosario Forlenza, ‘The politics of *Abendland*: Christian Democracy and the idea of Europe after the Second World War’, *Contemporary European History*, 26 (2017), pp. 261–86; Giuliana Chamedes, ‘Transatlantic Catholicism and the making of the “Christian West”’, in

Aid in the UK, often working under the umbrella of the World Council of Churches or the World Lutheran Federation. Some of the most recent scholarship on US Protestants has emphasized the divisions between denominations over ideas of human rights and religious freedom during the period.<sup>13</sup> But the co-operation between Protestant and Catholic humanitarians, and the similar narratives they promoted around refugee relief, suggest that the Christian anti-communism encapsulated in refugee stories was a source of co-operation and unity, at least to some degree. At the same time, however, tensions between denominations were evident within relief efforts, particularly in places such as Franco's Spain where Catholic concepts of religious freedom were very different from those promoted by liberal Protestants in the US and elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

Refugees played an important role in the history of the early Cold War in part because there were so many of them.<sup>15</sup> The end of the Second World War and the decade that followed witnessed the mass movement of people across borders on a previously unimaginable scale. The epicentre of the refugee crisis was in Europe. Millions of people displaced by Nazi rule (referred to as Displaced Persons, or DPs) were seeking to return home, including former forced labourers, prisoners of war, and Jews released from camps.<sup>16</sup> Population transfers and expulsions took place across the continent, from the Germans removed from Central and Eastern European states following the Potsdam conference, to expulsions of Poles, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Turks, Yugoslavs, Finns, and others from their homes.<sup>17</sup> The consolidation of communist rule in Eastern Europe prompted many to flee to the West, following in the footsteps of the millions who had fled the advance of the Red Army during the war itself. Beyond Europe, mass population movements accompanied the end of the Second World War in Southeast Asia, the partition of India, and the ongoing civil war in China.<sup>18</sup>

International interest in the plight of these refugees led to the drafting of the 1951 Refugee Convention, the creation of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and the emergence or expansion of dozens of private NGOs dedicated to relief and welfare work. These initiatives built on a broader history of humanitarianism and refugee relief stretching back to the late nineteenth century, and particularly from the beginning of the so-called 'forty years' crisis' of refugees in Europe which began after the First World

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Charlotte A. Lerg, Susanne Lachenicht, and Michael Kimmage, eds., *The transatlantic reconsidered: the Atlantic world in crisis* (Manchester, 2018); Betts, *Ruin and renewal*, ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Strasburg, *God's Marshall Plan*; Zubovich, *Before the religious right*.

<sup>14</sup> On US concepts of religious freedom and its history, see Anna Su, *Exporting freedom: religious liberty and American power* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Tisa Wenger, *Religious freedom: the contested history of an American ideal* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> On the post-war refugee crisis, see Anna Holian and G. Daniel Cohen's special issue 'The refugee in the postwar world, 1945–1960', *Refugee Studies*, 25 (2012).

<sup>16</sup> Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In war's wake: Europe's Displaced Persons in the postwar order* (Oxford, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Frank, *Making minorities history: population transfer in twentieth-century Europe* (Oxford, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The making of the modern refugee* (Oxford, 2013).

War.<sup>19</sup> The nation-based private charity which had dominated nineteenth-century humanitarianism was gradually institutionalized and internationalized after 1918 with the growth of private and semi-private relief organizations such as the American Relief Administration and Save the Children. These were complemented by the first intergovernmental efforts to co-ordinate refugee relief, most notably through the League of Nations' High Commission for Refugees led by Fridtjof Nansen, which supported refugees from Russia, Armenia, and elsewhere. But it was the Second World War and its aftermath which prompted the real explosion in refugee relief. Although the long-term trend in the field was towards secularization, impartiality, and professionalization, post-war relief was still dominated by religious groups such as Catholic Relief Services, World Lutheran Relief, and World Vision International, which continued many of the same faith-based campaigns and paternalistic approaches of their predecessors.<sup>20</sup>

Refugee scholarship has long recognized the impact of the Cold War on the lives of refugees and on the structures set up to support them. Cold War concerns shaped the refugee policies of national governments, particularly in the United States where legislation was often specifically targeted at victims of communism.<sup>21</sup> The same can be said of the relief campaigns led by the private NGOs which offered relief for refugees. The work of international organizations like the International Refugee Organization (IRO) and UNHCR was also shaped by geopolitical rivalries between the two superpowers.<sup>22</sup> Cold War scholarship, on the other hand, has tended to pay less attention to the impact of refugees on the conflict, although with some notable exceptions.<sup>23</sup> The history of refugees has been used, for example, to show how ideas about captivity, imprisonment, and escape helped to shape Cold War diplomacy and the popular imagination of the Cold War as a contest between liberty and enslavement, particularly in the United States.<sup>24</sup> In Western Europe, refugees helped to promote popular anti-communism, and migration policies became an important part of international co-operation designed to contain and undermine communist regimes.<sup>25</sup> The question of resettlement of Eastern European DPs back to their homelands 'behind the Iron Curtain' represented one of the

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Frank and Jessica Reinisch, eds., *Refugees in Europe, 1919-1959: a forty years' crisis?* (London, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Michael Barnett, *Empire of humanity: a history of humanitarianism* (New York, NY, 2011); Gatrell, *The making*; Kevin O'Sullivan, 'A "global nervous system": the rise and rise of European humanitarian NGOs, 1945-1985', in Marc Frey, Sönke Kunkel, and Cronna R. Unger, eds., *International organizations and development, 1945-1990* (Basingstoke, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Carl Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate: the United States and refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, NJ, 2008); Peter Gatrell, *Free World: the campaign to save the world's refugees, 1956-1963* (Cambridge, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Gatrell, *The making*, pp. 107-9.

<sup>23</sup> To take one example, the journal *Cold War History* has only ever published two articles on the subject of refugees.

<sup>24</sup> Sarah L. Carruther, *Cold War captives: imprisonment, escape, and brainwashing* (Berkeley, CA, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Anna Holian, 'Anticommunism in the streets: refugee politics in Cold War Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 45 (2010), pp. 134-61; Emmanuel Comte, 'Waging the Cold War: the origins and

first major sources of conflicts between the Soviet Union and the Western states, and contributed to the tensions which led to the outbreak of the Cold War.<sup>26</sup>

Refugees and Christian humanitarianism can help us to explore how ideas about the West were promoted and understood in the context of the early Cold War. Christian NGOs and their refugee relief campaigns offered a way for ordinary people across different countries to participate in the emerging Cold War world and to engage with the anti-communist cause. The vision of the West which emerged from these campaigns emphasized religious freedom as the cornerstone of Western societies; it used stories of refugees and their persecution to bring the threat of communism to life; it promoted solidarity between Christian believers across national borders; and it enjoyed genuine mass reach and participation. It also, strikingly, had little to say about democracy, something that becomes particularly evident when we examine the participation of Franco's Spain in Christian refugee relief.

## II

Christian NGOs led refugee relief efforts during the early Cold War, and framed their work around the defence of the West. We can identify three broad categories of refugees who received most attention in the West during the period. All involved Christian refugees fleeing communism, and all occurred between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s. The first two were in Europe: the 'expellees' and 'escapees' who fled Eastern Europe to Germany and elsewhere from 1944; and the Hungarians who fled to the West following the uprising of 1956. The third involved various refugee groups beyond Europe: Chinese refugees in Hong Kong; both Korean and Vietnamese refugees fleeing from the North to the South of their countries during the wars of the early 1950s; and most prominently the Cubans who left following Castro's revolution in 1959. In each of these three cases, churches and Christian NGOs used refugee relief to promote a particular understanding of the West rooted in a shared Christian history and identity, and united both by its faith and its anti-communism.

Before we explore these cases, it is worth noting that Christian NGOs were not the only refugee relief organizations at the time; they existed alongside secular NGOs such as the International Rescue Committee, other religious groups such as the Joint Distribution Committee (JDC), and international organizations like the UNHCR. This was also a period when the division between secular and religious humanitarianism was not always clear-cut. Christian NGOs co-operated with organization like the JDC. The UNHCR did not run relief programmes directly but spent its funds through grants to private relief organizations, including Christian NGOs. Indeed, most of the UNHCR's early funding came from the Ford Foundation in a donation which was organized by

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launch of Western cooperation to absorb migrants from Eastern Europe, 1948–1957', *Cold War History*, 4 (2020), pp. 461–81.

<sup>26</sup> Cohen, *In war's wake*.

international Christian NGOs, and which was largely then channelled through their own relief projects.<sup>27</sup> And even nominally non-religious organizations were not always strictly secular. The chairman of the International Rescue Committee during the early Cold War, for example, was the American liberal theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. But in the era before the expansion of secular humanitarian organizations in the 1960s, Christian NGOs were by far the biggest players in the refugee relief sector.

Beyond the DPs who represented the most immediate welfare challenge at the end of the Second World War, the first groups of refugees targeted by Christian humanitarians were ‘expellees’ and ‘escapees’ in Germany. Expellees and escapees were treated at the time as two legally distinct groups, and have often been studied as such subsequently. But there were also important similarities between them, and many of the church organizations and Christian NGOs which supported them were keen to emphasize their shared refugee identity. The expellees (*Vertriebene*, or *Heimatvertriebene*) were ethnic Germans or German citizens who fled their homes with German defeat towards the end of the war, or were expelled by post-war regimes. Some were ‘victims of communism’ in the sense that they were fleeing before the Red Army, but many of the expulsions were carried out by post-war states before the cementing of communist rule, and their expulsions were given sanction by the Allies at the Potsdam conference. They represented a huge challenge for post-war Germany. By 1950, there were over 7 million expellees in the new Federal Republic, around one sixth of the total population.<sup>28</sup> In East Germany, the proportion of expellees was even higher. The cost of resettling, housing, and compensating expellees represented a huge economic burden for the already impoverished new German states. And in the West, expellees’ associations represented a powerful and often dangerously reactionary political force.<sup>29</sup>

‘Escapees’ was a looser term broadly used to describe two groups. The first were Eastern Europeans fleeing communism in various ways. Some of those were non-German anti-communists or Nazi collaborators who fled the approaching Red Army from 1944, or who later chose to leave their Eastern European states as communist rule developed. Within this broad category were a second group: East Germans moving from the GDR to West Germany (*Zonenflüchtlinge*) from the late 1940s, often travelling through Berlin before the construction of the Berlin Wall. Their numbers were relatively small at first but began to climb in the early 1950s as political repression and popular protest in the GDR intensified. Over a million were estimated to have made the crossing by 1952, and 3 million by the time the wall was constructed in 1961.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Archive of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (AUNHCR), Geneva, Records of The United Nations Office at Geneva: Registry First Period.

<sup>28</sup> Das Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, *10 questions and answers relative to the German refugee problem* (Stuttgart, 1950).

<sup>29</sup> Peter Gatrell, *The unsettling of Europe: the great migration, 1945 to the present* (London, 2019), pp. 51–8. On the broader history of refugees, DPs, and anti-communism in post-war Germany, see Holian, ‘Anticommunism’.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*; Gatrell, *The unsettling*, p. 59.

These groups formed part of the mass movement of refugees and DPs across Europe at the end of the Second World War, and thus coincided with the emergence of new international institutions and legal regimes to support them. During the war and its immediate aftermath, the care of DPs was led by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA).<sup>31</sup> Disbanded after the end of the war, responsibility for DPs and refugees was transferred to the newly established IRO in December 1946. The IRO was then replaced by the UNHCR in 1951, coinciding with the new UN Refugee Convention which codified international legal rights and responsibilities related to refugees for the first time. None of these organizations, however, were willing to support the expellees. The mandates of UNRRA, the IRO, and the UNHCR all concentrated on DPs and those refugees who had been persecuted or rendered stateless. Expellees in contrast, were not stateless, were not deemed to have faced persecution, and, perhaps most importantly, were German. The situation for escapees was different. As the tensions of the early Cold War began to solidify, those who could argue their refugee status had been caused by communist persecution were more easily able to access support from international relief organizations, or, more frequently, from Western states.<sup>32</sup>

For both groups, however, relief on the ground was often led by churches and Christian NGOs, particularly in West Germany. The involvement of these organizations began in 1945, when the collapse of German state services combined with the lack of support from Allied and international relief agencies created a vacuum of support for expellees. Relief efforts for expellees were spearheaded by *Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche*, the aid agency of the German Lutheran Church, and Caritas, the welfare arm of the German Catholic church, which together established a co-ordinating committee for expellee support in January 1946 working alongside the Allied Control Commissions and local German authorities.<sup>33</sup> In the immediate post-war period, their priorities were running basic reception centres at railway stations and helping refugees seek food and shelter in bombed-out German cities. Their efforts were soon supported by overseas and international religious groups. US and British Quakers included expellees in their German relief efforts from the start. Catholic Relief Services, the newly formed aid arm of the US Catholic Church, had begun helping refugees in the early 1940s, originally Polish refugees in Iran and Mexico, and Jewish refugees in Spain and Portugal.<sup>34</sup> After the war, they too were willing to combine their support for DPs in Germany with aid for German expellees, and later escapees, providing personnel and material support to German Caritas. The Assembly of the Lutheran World Federation and the newly formed World Council of Churches

<sup>31</sup> Jessica Reinisch, 'Old wine in new bottles? UNRRA and the mid-century world of refugees', in Frank and Reinisch, eds., *Refugees in Europe*.

<sup>32</sup> On US support for escapees, see Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 37–56.

<sup>33</sup> Archiv des Deutschen Caritasverbandes, Freiburg (ADC), 374.024 Fasz. 1, Flüchtlings- und Vertriebenenhilfe, and 374.025, Vertriebenenhilfe, allgemein.

<sup>34</sup> On the early history of the CRS, see Eileen Egan, *For whom there is no room: scenes from the refugee world* (New York, NY, 1995).

helped to channel international support for Protestant relief efforts in Germany. From the late 1940s, the work of all these groups turned increasingly towards support for expellees.

One of the primary goals for these Christian groups was to internationalize the cause of German refugees, be they expellees or escapees, at a time when international relief efforts were focused on non-German DPs. They did so partly by seeking to blur the distinction between the two groups, often referring to them together as 'German refugees'. Calls for the United Nations relief agencies to extend their work to German refugees came from the Assembly of the World Lutheran Federation in 1947, and the Assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1948.<sup>35</sup> A conference on German refugees organized by the World Council of Churches in Hamburg in February 1947 declared that 'the Germany refugee problem in its origin and effect is not a German but an international problem, and that the responsibility is also international'.<sup>36</sup>

One of the ways Christian NGOs sought to mobilize international support for 'German refugees' was by framing them in the context of the Cold War, linking support for refugees to the defence of the Christian West in a climate of increasing conflict with the Soviet Union. As early as November 1945, German Caritas was calling for refugee relief from Western states in order to 'Save the Christian Occident [Abendland]!'. The *Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche* pointed in 1950 to the risk of unsupported refugees forming a pool of support for communist parties in the West, their 'inclination toward nihilism and radicalism' making them 'easy prey to communism'.<sup>37</sup> Eileen Egan, one of the leaders of US Catholic relief efforts in Germany, described refugees from East Germany in 1953 as 'presenting themselves at this door to the inn of the Free World'.<sup>38</sup> Expellees themselves also sought to hammer home this point, linking the refugee issue to the wider question of the role of Christian values in the West and to the international fight against communism.<sup>39</sup> The efforts to integrate 'German refugees' into the international refugee relief system paralleled broader efforts to reconstruct and rehabilitate Western Germany, and to reincorporate it into 'Western civilization'.<sup>40</sup>

The second major displacement of Cold War refugees resulted from the Hungarian uprising in October 1956. Soviet military intervention to crush the revolt in November forced around 200,000 Hungarians to cross the border to Austria, with smaller numbers fleeing to Yugoslavia.<sup>41</sup> Although the number

<sup>35</sup> 'The church in action', *World Communique: Humanity on the March* (IRO, 1951), ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

<sup>36</sup> Das Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirche in Deutschland, *10 questions*.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>38</sup> Eileen Egan, 'Berlin today', *NCWC News Bulletin* (Spring 1953), p. 16, ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

<sup>39</sup> Dr Franz Monse-Glatz, 'Marienweihe des Deutschen Ostens', *Heimat und Glaube*, 1 (1949), p. 3. In ADC, 374.065 Fasz. 00, Vertriebenenhilfe, allgemein.

<sup>40</sup> Patrick Thaddeus Jackson, *Civilizing the enemy: German reconstruction and the invention of the West* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2006).

<sup>41</sup> On the Hungarian relief crisis, see Andrew S. Thompson and Stephanie Bangarth, 'Transnational Christian charity: the Canadian Council of Churches, the World Council of

of refugees was much smaller than the movement of expellees a decade earlier, the speed with which they arrived and the international controversy around the Soviet invasion meant they had a big practical and psychological impact on the West. The logistical challenge was concentrated in Austria, where 180,000 refugees had arrived within two months of the uprising.<sup>42</sup> Most, though, saw Austria as a stepping stone to a new life elsewhere in the non-communist world and moved on over the coming months. The most popular destinations were the United States and Canada, with around 20,000 moving to Britain and smaller numbers to Switzerland, the Netherlands, Australia, and elsewhere. Most of the refugees had been permanently resettled by 1960, including the 20,000 or so who chose to return to Hungary.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to the absence of international support for expellees, the speed of the resettlement for Hungarian refugees was partly due to the active role played by the UNHCR, although its involvement was not without controversy given that the persecution suffered by Hungarian refugees fell after the period specified in the organization's original mandate.<sup>44</sup> Hungarian refugees were also offered support by secular groups such as the Red Cross (both individual national branches, and the Geneva-based International Committee) and the UK-based British Council for Aid to Refugees (which later became the Refugee Council). But once again, it was churches and Christian NGOs which were most active in providing refugee relief on the ground. In countries like the United Kingdom that meant Protestant-led groups such as Christian Aid. But in contrast to post-war expellees and escapees who had represented a fairly equal mix of Catholics and Lutherans, the majority of Hungarian refugees came from Catholic backgrounds and were therefore supported primarily by Catholic NGOs, both on the ground in Austria and overseas in countries like the United States. Relief programmes in Vienna involved the French group *Secours Catholique*, Catholic Relief Services, Belgium and Swiss Caritas, Hungarian Catholic Action, and the Vatican-based *Päpstliche Hilfswerk*.<sup>45</sup> Co-ordination of Catholic relief efforts was led by Caritas Internationalis, the umbrella agency for national Caritas branches. Much of the resettlement abroad was arranged through groups such as the NCWC and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC).<sup>46</sup>

Hungarian refugee relief demonstrated the ability of 'victims of communism' to mobilize support from across the West, especially in cases where those victims belonged to a national community which could be clearly linked

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Churches, and the Hungarian refugee crisis, 1956–1957', *American Review of Canadian Studies*, 38 (2008), pp. 295–316; Maximilian Graf and Sarah Knoll, 'In transit or asylum seekers? Austria and the Cold War refugees from the communist bloc', in Günter Bischof and Dirk Rupnow, eds., *Migration in Austria* (New Orleans, LA, 2017), pp. 91–111; James P. Niessen, 'God brought the Hungarians: emigration and refugee relief in the light of Cold War religion', *Hungarian Historical Review*, 6 (2017), pp. 566–96.

<sup>42</sup> Graf and Knoll, 'In transit', p. 95.

<sup>43</sup> Niessen, 'God brought the Hungarians', p. 590.

<sup>44</sup> Gatrell, *Free World*, p. 53.

<sup>45</sup> ADC, 167 Caritas Diaspora Aid, 388.80 Hungarian aid.

<sup>46</sup> ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 39, folder 24.

to the history of Western Christendom. The campaign for Hungarian refugees was strikingly successful at mobilizing public support, provoking rapid and large-scale donations from across Europe, North America, and Latin America. In the words of one of the directors of Catholic Relief Services, 'The free countries of the world declared themselves ready to help.'<sup>47</sup> Both relief organizations and refugees themselves linked this success to Hungary's Christian identity and history. As the representative of Hungarian Catholic Action argued in early 1957:

at the beginning of the freedom struggle in Hungary, the whole world rose spontaneously for the brave patriots...The West felt that Hungary belonged to it as a brother people, that the West owed a great debt to Hungary, but also that every Hungarian, besides for the freedom of his fatherland, also risked his life for the ideals of the Christian West [*Abendland*].<sup>48</sup>

If Christian humanitarianism on behalf of expellees and escapees was used to help reintegrate Germany into the post-war West, support for Hungarians was mobilized around a message of Western unity built on a shared Christian history and identity.

From the 1950s, Christian NGOs also began to turn their attention to the relief of refugees outside of Europe. In the decade following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, 1 million refugees fled to Hong Kong, of which a small proportion were Christian converts. A number of Christian NGOs, particularly Catholic groups in the United States and Germany, established local health and social services for refugees, often building on existing missionary initiatives.<sup>49</sup> The mass movement of Koreans from North to South both before and during the war only provoked a limited humanitarian response in the West, but much of the relief that was provided came from US Catholic NGOs alive to the possibility of winning local converts.<sup>50</sup> More relief was offered to refugees moving from North to South Vietnam following the first Indochina War and the subsequent partition of the country in 1954. Significantly for Western NGOs, a large proportion of the approximately 1 million people who made the journey were Catholics, many of whom had enjoyed privileged positions under French rule and were now encouraged south by the regime of Ngo Dinh Diem (himself a Catholic), with the active assistance of the US government through the navy's 'Operation Passage to Freedom'. Private relief efforts came primarily from the United States, including from Catholic

<sup>47</sup> James J. Norris, 'Hungarian refugee emergency', *Migration News*, 1 (1957), AUNHCR, International Catholic Migration Commission, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 105.

<sup>48</sup> Karl Paulai, 'Motivierung und Beweggründe zur Intensivierung der Ungarnhilfe', ADC, 167 Caritas Diaspora Aid, 388.80 Hungarian aid.

<sup>49</sup> MISEREOR-Archiv, Aachen, Materialien für Allgemeinheit und Zielgruppen 1959 & 1961.

<sup>50</sup> Gatrell, *Free World*, pp. 28–9; ACUA, NCWC/USCCB-OGS / Executive Department, Office of UN Affairs, box 170, folder 5: Korean Relief: Memos: 1950–3.

Relief Services, the Mennonite Central Committee, and the ecumenical World Church Service.<sup>51</sup>

But it was Cuban refugees who were the first group from outside of Europe to provoke a mass relief campaign in the West. Refugees began to leave in large numbers after Castro's regime won power in 1959, another example of Christians fleeing communist rule. In contrast to Hungary, however, these refugees continued to arrive over an extended period of years rather than in response to a single moment. Also unlike the Hungarian case, where refugees initially arriving in Austria were eventually settled across the West, the vast majority of Cuban refugees sought to settle in the south-eastern United States, although many initially went to Spain as will be discussed later in the article. Settlement of Cuban refugees in the United States was supported by the federal government's Cuban Refugee Program. But once again much of the relief and resettlement work on the ground was carried out by religious NGOs, funded both by private donations and by federal resources. Principal among those were the NCWC, reflecting the Catholic faith of the vast majority of refugees, working alongside the Church World Service, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and nominally secular groups such as the International Rescue Committee. Together, they provided medical, housing, and employment services in Florida, as well as helping to resettle refugees elsewhere in the United States. By 1966, 200,000 Cubans had arrived in the United States, rising to almost half a million by 1973.<sup>52</sup>

The Cuban refugee crisis expanded the geographical scope of Christian relief efforts beyond Europe. But both Christian NGOs and Cuban refugees were again keen to emphasize Cuba's 'Western' identity, and its roots in Western Christendom. One exile group complained that under communism 'Our way of living inspired by Christian beliefs...; our national character intimately developed within Western culture...; our moral and psychological values rooted in our Ibero-american ancestry...have been deviated forcibly from their natural course.'<sup>53</sup> Their stories aimed to extend the imagined community of the West beyond Europe and North America. And the proximity of Cuba lent it particular resonance for an American audience. A similar expansion of sentiment was evident in refugee relief campaigns in Hong Kong, Korea, and Vietnam. Although relief focused narrowly on Christian refugees, publicity efforts often draw parallels between these countries and events in Europe. Descriptions of refugees were used to cement the link between the Iron Curtain in Europe and the Bamboo Curtain in Asia. Places like Hong Kong were frequently compared to Berlin, islands of freedom in a sea of communist totalitarianism. As one US Catholic relief worker described it, Korea and Hong

<sup>51</sup> Jessica Elkind, "'The Virgin Mary is going south': refugee resettlement in South Vietnam, 1954–1956', *Diplomatic History*, 38 (2014), pp. 987–1016. On the experiences and attitudes of Vietnamese refugees, see Phi Van Nguyen, 'Fighting the first Indochina War again? Catholic refugees in South Vietnam, 1954–1959', *Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia*, 31 (2016), pp. 217–46.

<sup>52</sup> Bon Tempo, *Americans at the gate*, pp. 108–24; ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>53</sup> Cuban Medical Association in Exile, undated, ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

Kong were 'the last outposts in the Far East in which our western world still has some influence'.<sup>54</sup>

### III

Refugee relief in the early Cold War, then, was often provided by Christian NGOs to Christian victims of communism. This humanitarianism was explicitly linked by relief organizations and workers to the global political struggle against communist powers. And it also served to promote a particular understanding of the Cold War across Western Europe and North America, one in which the West was defined by its Christian identity and values, and menaced by the aggressive atheism and anti-religious policies of communist states. As the director of the NCWC's immigration programme told the US Senate in 1966, the arrival of Cuban refugees had

brought dramatic awareness to our American public of the devastating effects of a totalitarian regime which compels its citizenry to give up all their resources, their homes, their jobs, and everything which they hold dear in their burning desire to establish a new life for themselves and for their children.<sup>55</sup>

But for the American public, or the publics of other Western states, to draw these particular political conclusions, the experiences of refugees had to be publicized in particular ways. In other words, what mattered was less the refugees themselves than the *stories* told about them. The story of Little Karl reproduced at the beginning of this article is a good example. It comes from a teachers' handbook distributed by the US Catholic church for its Lenten appeal in 1953, part of an annual series, each filled with stories about the experiences of Christians around the world who had been persecuted and forced to flee their homes by communist regimes. The stories were accompanied by discussion questions: 'Why are Communists so anxious to make people forget God?'; 'Who are the Expellees and why were they uprooted?'; 'What are some of the spiritual values for which the people who break through the Iron Curtain are willing to risk their lives?'; 'What can Christians who have not been deprived of freedom do to show their own belief in spiritual values?'.<sup>56</sup> Most of the stories involved children, and many described the work of Christian charities and relief organizations trying to help them. Stories about children written for children were designed to hammer home the stakes involved in the Cold War – if this could happen to good Christian children abroad, they implied, it could also happen to you and your friends if the fight against communism is lost. Sitting in American classrooms, students were encouraged to reflect on the evils of communism, its attacks on the Christian faith, and the

<sup>54</sup> Right Rev. Edward E. Swanstrom, 'A journey to the homeless', *NCWC News Bulletin* (Spring 1953), ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49 – Refugees.

<sup>55</sup> John E. McCarthy, Mar. 1966, ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

plight of the refugees who were its victims. What they were doing, in effect, was using refugees and their stories to 'think' the Cold War world, to imagine themselves as part of a transnational (primarily trans-Atlantic) community united by its Christian faith and facing an existential threat from the materialist ideology of communist regimes. Christian NGOs filled their publicity and campaigning material with stories of refugees explicitly designed to encourage people to link refugees to the Christian struggle against communism. And these stories followed very consistent patterns.

Most frequently, refugees were painted as innocent victims of communist persecution. Publications such as the NCWC's handbooks for teachers were filled with stories of churches in communist countries attacked or desecrated, of priests and nuns persecuted and dismissed from their positions. Thomas Dooley, an American Catholic naval medic and humanitarian who enjoyed widespread fame in the 1950s, wrote a book about his experiences helping Christian refugees in Vietnam.<sup>57</sup> His account included stories of men whose ears had been torn off for listening to the Lord's Prayer, and of priests who had had nails hammered into their skulls as a parody of Christ's crown of thorns. Such accounts often focused on stories and images of child refugees, particularly orphans. Children combined the innocence of youth with the emotive victimhood needed to attract donations. And stories of children were seen as an important way to educate Western children about the dangers of communism. As one of the Catholic teachers' guides explained, stories personalizing victims were important 'because children find it difficult to become interested in great masses of people'.<sup>58</sup>

As well as being innocent victims, refugees were also frequently presented as heroes or brave freedom fighters. One account of an early Catholic refugee orphans programme, for example, boasted that one of the first Polish orphans bought to the US during the Second World War had later enlisted in the US army to fight communism in Korea.<sup>59</sup> Others told of Lithuanian fishermen who had imprisoned the Russian crew on their ship and sailed to Sweden.<sup>60</sup> Certain stories emphasized the bravery of those fleeing, such as the widely publicized case of Armando Socarras, a Cuban who stowed away in the wheel well of a plane to Madrid, and arrived unconscious and half-frozen, but alive.<sup>61</sup> Elsewhere, heroism was identified with those who defended their faith in the face of hardship and persecution. Dooley, again, lingered on stories of refugees forced to flee with only the clothes on their back, but who still managed to carry pictures of the Virgin Mary along with them; or

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Dooley, *Deliver us from evil* (New York, NY, 1961: orig. edn 1956).

<sup>58</sup> 'Handbook for Teachers: The Bishop's Fund for the Victims of War in Europe, Asia, the Near and Far East, 1952 Appeal', ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

<sup>59</sup> Emil Komora, 'The orphan program: future citizens', *NCWC News Bulletin* (Spring 1953), p. 6.

<sup>60</sup> George Warren, 'United States escapee program', *NCWC News Bulletin* (Spring 1953), p. 20.

<sup>61</sup> AUNHCR, fonds 11, series 2, classified subject files 1871-1984, box 172. See also 'Un joven cubano viaja desde la Habana a Madrid oculto en el tren de aterrizaje de un avión de Iberia', *ABC*, 5 June 1969, p. 38.

on the story of the Vietnamese refugee boat which, on realizing it was approaching a French ship, hoisted a battered and long-hidden papal banner on its mast.<sup>62</sup>

Finally, refugee stories frequently emphasized the role of refugees as respectable, hard-working future citizens of the West. Again, children were particularly useful as innocent figures who could be easily bought up to uphold Western values – ‘future citizens’, as they were described.<sup>63</sup> But stories of adults often lingered on their skills, their willingness to work hard, and their conformity with traditional family norms. This was particularly the case for Cuban refugees in the United States. Catholic welfare leaders described Cuban migrants as ‘the cream of the professional and trained classes...now staffing our hospitals, manning our assembly lines and constructing our buildings’.<sup>64</sup> Cuban resettlement newsletters were filled with pictures and stories of contented Cubans who had made their homes in various parts of the US and had become productive members of society – Cuban teachers retraining to work in US public schools, workers on factory lines supporting their families and attending night school to develop their skills, and so on. Part of the motivation behind these stories was the well-founded fear that local residents would resent the relatively generous support made available to Cuban refugees by the federal government and relief agencies. Often, those relief agencies chose to emphasize the reluctance of refugees to accept support, their self-reliance, and the self-help networks organized by earlier generations of Cuban migrants to support new arrivals.<sup>65</sup>

These stories were potentially powerful tools. They could help build ties of empathy and solidarity between different national groups, dramatize the threat posed to ordinary people by communist regimes, and mobilize support behind the Cold War policies of Western government. But the purveyors of these stories were often more concerned with getting across their chosen political message than they were with accurately representing the views of refugees themselves. An example from the German Caritas archives reveals this distinction particularly well. In December 1956, a group of Hungarian refugees arrived in South Baden, where they were met by representatives of the regional government and the archbishop. One refugee stepped forward to address the group in Hungarian, thanking them for their reception and saying that they now just wanted ‘to work shoulder to shoulder with locals’ in their new home. It was a straightforward message, focused on everyday concerns and eschewing any overt political arguments. But their interpreter, a Hungarian chaplain, rendered it into a statement about ‘common spiritual struggle against Marxism’.<sup>66</sup> The political story here was told about, not by, the refugees themselves.

<sup>62</sup> Dooley, *Deliver us from evil*.

<sup>63</sup> Komora, ‘The orphan program: future citizens’.

<sup>64</sup> John E. McCarthy, Mar. 1966, ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>65</sup> See for example ‘Cuban refugee “pioneers” credited for Cubans-helping-Cubans project’, *Resettlement Re-Cap* (July 1966), ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>66</sup> ‘Ankunft des ersten Flüchtlingstransportes nach Südbaden’, 7 Dec. 1956, ADC, 167 Caritas Diasporahilfe, 388.80 Ungarnhilfe, allgemein, Laufzeit: Fasz. 4.

Indeed, the Hungarian refugee crisis was the one in which the distinction between stories told *about* refugees and stories told *by* refugees were most obviously at variance. As the previous section showed, Christian relief efforts for Hungarian refugees were used to promote the idea of Western unity in the face of communist persecution. In 1957, researchers from Columbia University interviewed hundreds of Hungarian refugees, and began each interview by asking what they thought people in the US should know about events in Hungary.<sup>67</sup> In certain ways, the answers which refugees gave echoed the messages promoted by Christian NGOs, emphasizing anti-communist sentiment and the reaction against communist persecution across Hungarian society, and arguing that Soviet communism posed a threat to the entire world. But they also described the uprising as a particularly Hungarian event, rooted in Hungarian history and culture. And rather than lauding the Western unity demonstrated through refugee relief, they sharply criticized the lack of military support offered by the Western powers. ‘Having heard Western radio propaganda for the last twelve years’, one young woman complained, ‘everybody expected Western help. The people of Hungary could not understand why the West failed to act.’<sup>68</sup> From this perspective, the need for refugee relief was a sign of Western failure, not a triumph of Western unity.

The distinction between refugees themselves and the stories told about them became particularly apparent on the frequent occasions when refugees failed to live up to the innocent or heroic narratives crafted by their Western supporters. This became a particular problem with Hungarian refugees, a majority of whom were men in their early teens and late twenties.<sup>69</sup> In the US, the UK, and Germany, Christian NGOs had to field frequent complaints that the heroic freedom fighters which supporters had expected to receive into their homes and communities were in reality apolitical, materialistic troublemakers, fighting with local youth and flirting with local women. A 1957 report from German Caritas in Freiburg estimated that 70 per cent of the Hungarian refugees were ‘juveniles’, and only 20–5 per cent had been actively involved in the uprising.<sup>70</sup> Most, it argued, had been motivated by their idealistic and over-optimistic ideas about life in the West, which quickly turned to disappointment in the face of more prosaic realities. Many others had simply been fleeing ‘the normal disorders of life’ – family troubles, ‘juvenile troublemaking’, etc. ‘The behaviour of many refugees’, the author complained, ‘was not in keeping with that of a person who had barely escaped with his life. Their behaviour resulted in much strife and disappointment, and

<sup>67</sup> Donald and Vera Blinken Collection on Hungarian Refugees of 1956: Transcripts of Refugee Interviews; Open Society Archives at Central European University, Budapest.

<sup>68</sup> ‘CURPH Interview 11-F with a 1956 Hungarian Refugee: 23 Years Old, Female, Teacher’, 1957, HU OSA 414-0-2-4, electronic record, <http://hdl.handle.net/10891/osa:49ff6373-bc03-4e41-ae3d-bf48a71b24a2> (accessed 19 Apr. 2022).

<sup>69</sup> On the problem of ‘undeserving’ Hungarian refugees, see Becky Taylor, ‘“Their only words of English were “thank you””: rights, gratitude and “deserving” Hungarian refugees to Britain in 1956’, *Journal of British Studies*, 55 (2016), pp. 120–44.

<sup>70</sup> Alexander Sagi, ‘The juvenile refugees from Hungary in Germany – a report’, 18 May 1957, ACAU, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

affected their relationships with those who cared for them'.<sup>71</sup> Individual refugee stories brought the Cold War to life. But they were political cyphers – not real people. Where individuals became too 'real' – competing for local jobs, not being sufficiently 'heroic' or anti-communist – they undermined the ideological role which had been assigned to them.

The stories of refugees were important in helping to bring the threat of communism to life for Western audiences. But equally significant was the opportunity which refugee relief offered the public to actively participate in the struggle against communism, and by extension in the Cold War. And these relief efforts certainly enjoyed mass support. Christian NGOs enjoyed a particular advantage over their secular rivals in that they could piggyback on church organizations for their fundraising efforts, with refugee campaigns and stories frequently promoted in church sermons and services. And they could make use of religious publications, organizations, networks, and funding to spread their message. This was the period in which NGOs were also developing many of the humanitarian marketing schemes we are familiar with today.<sup>72</sup> Individuals moved by the plight of refugees could simply donate money. If they wanted to go further, they could offer to foster an orphaned child, or invite a Cuban or Hungarian refugee to stay in their home. But they could also, by this time, sponsor individual refugees, or even 'adopt-a-priest'.<sup>73</sup>

By participating in these programmes, Christian NGOs argued, donors were contributing to the defence of the Christian West. 'One of the characteristics of the [Hungarian] drama', argued one Catholic relief worker in 1957, 'is that we are very much a part of it. The battle involved not only those who fought in the streets, but all of humanity.' Donating to refugee relief meant taking on 'the organized forces equipped for slaughter' threatening the Hungarian people who had risen in 'faithful adherence to the human values of liberty and justice'.<sup>74</sup> And Christian NGOs emphasized that even those who could not give money could provide equally important spiritual support. One of the Catholic teachers' handbooks which began this article told the story of Anna, the daughter of an expellee family from Silesia living as refugees in western Germany in the early 1950s, and the tensions with the local family they had been sent to live with. The story ends with the following message from the local priest about how those in the West could help refugees:

Those we can't help by giving food, clothing or shelter we can help with prayers. They need prayers to keep up their courage and not to lose faith or hope. They feel very discouraged and sometimes come very near to losing all the hope that they will ever have a chance to live normal lives again.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> On one aspect of this humanitarian marketing, see Heide Fehrenbach and Davide Rodogno, eds., *Humanitarian photography: a history* (Cambridge, 2015).

<sup>73</sup> *Resettlement re-cap* (July 1966), ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>74</sup> Norris, 'Hungarian refugee emergency'.

<sup>75</sup> 'Handbook for Teachers, 1953: Bishops' Fund for the Victims of War in Europe, Asia, The Near and Far East', ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

Through the power of prayer, Christians in the West of all ages and in all material circumstances could participate in the support of victims of communism. Prayer, like aid, transcended borders and promoted solidarity. At its most extreme, such stories suggested that faith and Christian charity would itself be enough to defeat communism.

#### IV

These refugee stories served to paint a picture of the Cold War West and its values. But they were used to promote certain values more than others. Religious freedom, for example, was held up as a key human right which could only be protected in the West. But beyond the question of religious liberty, Christian humanitarians had very little to say about liberalism or democracy. Writing Franco's Spain back into the history of early Cold War refugee relief helps to illustrate how far these values of Christian anti-communism differed from competing liberal, secular narratives of Western identity.

The Christian anti-communism promoted through refugee relief was built around the right to religious liberty. Discussions of refugee groups focused on the extent to which the freedom to practise their religion had been limited under communist rule. A Peruvian diplomat argued in the NCWC bulletin that the Cuban government's expulsion of priests and nuns and its restrictions on Christian youth groups demonstrated its 'anti-Christian and antireligious' character, and amounted to an imposition of 'spiritual slavery'.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, a German Caritas publication during the Hungarian refugee crisis described freedom of belief as 'the core of their struggle for freedom'.<sup>77</sup> Religious freedom was presented, not as one right among many, but as *the* principal human right, reflecting a particular Christian vision of human rights which differed in important ways from more secular human rights traditions. For many Christian intellectuals, NGOs, and relief workers, human rights were understood as 'god-given'. As the Catholic scholar Albert Verdoodt argued in the journal of the ICMC, the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights had undoubted value, but was less complete and philosophically sound than the papal encyclical *Pacem in terris*. Taking an example relevant to the refugee question, he argued that while the Universal Declaration cited a right to leave and return to one's country, *Pacem in terris* added the right 'where there are just reasons for it', to emigrate to another country and take up residence there.<sup>78</sup> The violation of an individual's religious freedom, under this vision, justified that individual's right to leave their country for a place where such freedoms would be respected.

So the idea of the Cold War West promoted through refugee relief and NGOs was one of a united Christian community built on a specific understanding of human rights rooted in religious freedom, contrasted against the materialism

<sup>76</sup> NCWC News Service bulletin, 23 Oct. 1961, ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>77</sup> 'Wir brauchen unsere Mäntel nicht', KNA, 30 Nov. 1956, ADC, 167 Caritas Diaspora Aid, 388.80 Hungarian aid.

<sup>78</sup> Albert Verwoodt, 'Fifteenth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights', *Migration News*, 6 (1963), pp. 1-4.

and anti-religious persecution of the communist world. One thing that was largely absent from this vision was an emphasis on the democratic character of the West. Andrew Preston has argued that, at least in the early Cold War United States, religious freedom was understood as indivisible from democratic freedom.<sup>79</sup> But in the case of Christian refugee relief, the two ideas do not seem to have been conflated. Very occasionally, oblique references to democracy appeared in relation to refugees, such as the American Catholic relief worker Eileen Egan's argument that refugees coming from East to West Berlin were 'cast[ing] their vote with the Western world'.<sup>80</sup> But beyond this, the idea that refugees were fleeing communism because of a lack of democracy, or that democracy was a defining feature of the Christian West they were fleeing to, was notably absent from the writings of relief workers and organizations.

The extent to which democracy was a secondary consideration to the anti-communism evident in early Cold War refugee relief can be seen in the prominent role played by Franco's Spain – both its government and Spanish Christian NGOs – in relief efforts. Spain's involvement has largely been overlooked in histories of post-war refugees and refugee relief, aside from the high-profile cases of the various European fascists and collaborators who made their home in the country following the Second World War. But beyond these individuals, most of whom made their way to Spain between 1943 and 1945, around 1,000 political refugees arrived from Eastern European states which had fallen under communist rule following the end of the war.<sup>81</sup> Among them was Archduke Otto von Habsburg, who formed a close relationship with Franco and was active in efforts to reintegrate Spain into the post-war world through networks of right-wing politicians committed to the idea of a Christian Europe.<sup>82</sup> These political refugees were joined by around 800 Eastern European students, who were supported by the international Catholic youth organization Pax Romana.<sup>83</sup> When the Hungarian uprising was put down by the Soviets in 1956, Spain was vocal in its denunciations.<sup>84</sup> The Spanish foreign ministry set up a committee to support Hungarian refugees, which included representatives from Spanish Caritas, and which sent millions of pesetas-worth of food and clothing donations to support refugees in Austria during 1956.<sup>85</sup> An estimated 5,000–7,000 Hungarian refugees made their way to Spain, including

<sup>79</sup> Andrew Preston, 'The spirit of democracy: religious liberty and American anti-communism during the Cold War', in Joel Isaac and Duncan Bell, eds., *Uncertain empire: American history and the idea of the Cold War* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 141–64.

<sup>80</sup> Eileen Egan, 'Berlin today', *NCWC News Bulletin* (Spring 1953), ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 49.

<sup>81</sup> The information about Eastern European refugees in this paragraph is taken from Matilde Eiroa San Francisco, 'España, refugio para los aliados del Eje y destino de anticomunistas', *Ayer*, 67 (2007), pp. 21–48; and Matilde Eiroa, 'From the Iron Curtain to Franco's Spain: right-wing Central Europeans in exile', *Central Europe*, 16 (2018), pp. 1–16.

<sup>82</sup> Johannes Großmann, *Die Internationale der Konservativen: Transnationale Elitenzirkel und private Außenpolitik in Westeuropa seit 1945* (Munich, 2014).

<sup>83</sup> On Pax Romana, see Glicerio Sánchez Recio, ed., *La internacional católica: Pax Romana en la política europea de posguerra* (Madrid, 2005).

<sup>84</sup> Ádám Anderle, 'La intervención española en la revolución húngara de 1956 según las fuentes hispano-húngaras', *Historia Actual Online*, 10 (2006), pp. 115–23.

<sup>85</sup> 'Ayuda del pueblo español a los refugiados húngaros en Austria', *Cáritas* (Mar.–Apr. 1957), p. 5.

the high-profile Hungarian footballers Ferenc Puskás (who signed for Real Madrid), and Zoltán Czibor and Sándor Kocsis (who signed for Barcelona). By 1961, the UNHCR reported that almost 1,500 Eastern European refugees remained in Spain, the majority of whom were Hungarians.<sup>86</sup>

But the biggest group of refugees who came to Spain during the period were from Cuba.<sup>87</sup> Refugees began to arrive following Castro's seizure of power in 1959, initially richer Cubans with existing family ties to the country. But numbers began to rise sharply from 1961, when Cuba and the US broke off diplomatic relations, and particularly from 1962, when direct flights between Cuba and Miami were suspended. Up to 10,000 Cuban refugees arrived in Spain every year throughout the 1960s, with the majority intending to emigrate onwards to the United States. Although many of them were ultimately able to do so, access to US visas was often difficult, affected by medical screenings and by ever-changing US immigration rules. As a result, many Cubans ended up spending years in Spain, with some settling there permanently. By 1972, it was estimated that 15,000 Cubans had chosen to settle in Spain, with a backlog of 23,500 still awaiting a visa to travel on to the US.<sup>88</sup>

Support for these refugees was provided by a combination of Spanish welfare organizations and local and international religious NGOs. Welfare services – canteens, accommodation, healthcare, clothing, etc. – were run primarily through the falangist welfare body *Auxilio Social* and by Spanish Caritas.<sup>89</sup> Caritas already had a close working relationship with the NCWC, with the two organizations having jointly run a food programme in Spain since the early 1950s which Cuban refugees were now given access to.<sup>90</sup> In addition to this immediate welfare, support to arrange ongoing migration to the United States and elsewhere was offered by a group of Christian refugee and migration charities, including the NCWC, the Spanish Catholic Migration Commission (the local branch of the ICMC), the ecumenical Church World Service, and the International Rescue Committee.<sup>91</sup> Underpinning many of these services were grants from the UNHCR, which began funding support for Cuban refugees in Spain in 1961 and by 1972 had donated \$1.2 million.<sup>92</sup>

Why was Franco's Spain apparently so interested in refugees and refugee relief? It was not because of a humanitarian commitment to refugees per se.

<sup>86</sup> AUNHCR, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 260.

<sup>87</sup> All the figures in the following paragraph are taken from the AUNHCR, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 260, and fond 11, series 2, box 172.

<sup>88</sup> 'Notes on the situation of Cubans in Spain', AUNHCR, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 173.

<sup>89</sup> On *Auxilio Social*, see Angela Cenarro, *La sonrisa de Falange: Auxilio Social en la Guerra civil y en la posguerra* (Barcelona, 2006).

<sup>90</sup> David Brydan, 'Starving Spain: international humanitarian responses to Franco's famine', in Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco and Peter Anderson, eds., *Franco's famine: malnutrition, disease and starvation in post-Civil War Spain* (London, 2022), pp. 137–58.

<sup>91</sup> Consuelo Martín Fernández and Vicente Romano, *Le emigración cubana en España* (Madrid, 1994).

<sup>92</sup> 'Notes on the situation of Cubans in Spain', AUNHCR, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 173.

The Franco regime had itself forced thousands of Spanish refugees to flee the country at the end of the Civil War. It refused to sign the 1951 Refugee Convention because it made reference to support for Spanish Republicans in exile.<sup>93</sup> And partly as a result of this, refugees were not formally recognized in Spanish law. Rather, the idea of the Christian West that became associated with these refugee groups and promoted by Christian humanitarians elsewhere in Western Europe and North America was closely aligned with the way the Franco regime understood and sought to portray the post-war world. As such, support for refugees complemented the regime's efforts to establish its international status and legitimacy after 1945.

Spain's close relationship with the defeated Axis powers, rooted in the events of the Spanish Civil War, left the regime in a difficult position after 1945. Denounced as an unsustainable vestige of pre-war fascism, it was excluded from the UN and the Marshall Plan, and was subject to a diplomatic boycott by most of the major Western powers. One of the key goals of Francoist foreign policy over the following decade was to reverse this isolation, something which it largely achieved through a series of pacts and agreements with the United States and the Vatican, culminating in full UN membership in 1955.<sup>94</sup> Central to this strategy were efforts to challenge the accusation of fascism by presenting Spain as a key anti-communist defender of the Christian West. In the context of the emerging Cold War, the regime could present the Spanish Civil War as a defence of Spain against communist incursion, and its own ideology as rooted in Spain's Catholic identity, committed to stability, social harmony, and a defence of Western values.

As Matilde Eiroa has shown, refugees from Eastern Europe helped the Franco regime to promote its humanitarian, anti-communist credentials.<sup>95</sup> Members of Eastern European aristocracy and high society who came to Spain, such as Otto von Habsburg, helped to promote the regime to other European elites. Their social status and conservative credentials made them much more effective in this task than the high-profile fascists and collaborators such as Léon Degrelle or Otto Skorzeny who also moved to Spain after the war. The regime could also use refugees to demonstrate its political commitment to the fight against communism behind the Iron Curtain. It supported the establishment of various informal embassies and government delegations in exile some of which came together in a 'Committee of Nations Oppressed by Communism', mirroring similar groups established in West Germany and the United States. And it permitted foreign language broadcasts by these exile groups on national radio, with programmes in Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, and other languages aimed at populations behind the Iron Curtain in a similar way to Radio Free Europe. Support for Hungarian refugees fit well with Franco's ostentatious efforts to rally Western resistance to Soviet intervention, coming as it did shortly after Spain's admission to the UN. The arrival of Cuban

<sup>93</sup> Garrigues Walker to Brissimi, 31 July 1968, AUNHCR, Records of the Central Registry, fonds 11, series 1, box 289.

<sup>94</sup> Florentino Portero, *Franco aislado: la cuestión española, 1945-1950* (Madrid, 1989).

<sup>95</sup> Eiroa, 'España'.

refugees after 1959 helped the regime to reinforce the portrayal of Spain as a part of the 'Free World', a bastion of anti-totalitarian liberty rather than a dictatorship in its own right. The Spanish press, for example, talked excitedly of Cuban refugees gaining 'freedom' on their arrival in Madrid.<sup>96</sup> And many of the resolutely anti-communist Cuban refugees were happy to reinforce this idea, such as the Cuban nun who ran refugee welfare services in Madrid and who argued that Cubans came to Spain for 'freedom, freedom. Cuba is a totalitarian country.'<sup>97</sup>

Admitting and supporting refugees also enabled the Franco regime to promote its apparent commitment to humanitarianism and social welfare. This was another important aspect of its campaign for political legitimacy – countering criticism of its undemocratic nature and repressive policies with claims that it was in fact committed to social justice, promoted through its welfare services, housing policies, and social security system.<sup>98</sup> This argument was particularly successful in the regime's efforts to gain membership and participation of international humanitarian and social bodies, often as a stepping stone towards entry into broader political organizations. By the time Spain began to receive money to support Cuban refugees from the UNHCR, its period of international isolation had largely ended. But Francoist officials continued to trumpet Spain's commitment to humanitarianism in discussions with the UNHCR, and very few questions were raised either about the nature of the Franco regime which was receiving so much funding, or about its ongoing refusal to sign the international conventions which underpinned the organization's work. This was helped by the fact that UNHCR money for Spain was largely channelled through the religious NGOs which delivered relief on the ground. Spanish charities such as Caritas were deeply integrated with international Catholic organizations and networks, for example through their affiliation with Caritas Internationalis and the ICMC, and through their work with the NCWC. They offered a route for international organizations to fund Spanish welfare programmes without donating the money directly to the Franco regime, and often participated in meetings with international organizations like the UNHCR on Spain's behalf. Their understanding of refugee relief, like that of the Franco regime, was perfectly aligned with their partners abroad, grounded as it was in Christian anti-communism. Their role in integrating Spain into these Western networks mirrored the broader contribution of Catholic organizations and activists in the international rehabilitation of Spain after the Second World War.<sup>99</sup> Catholic internationalism offered a key path for Francoist elites to engage with the outside world during the peak years of Spain's diplomatic isolation, and to support the regime's arguments

<sup>96</sup> 'Barajas: encuentro con la libertad', *Blanco y Negro* (7 Mar. 1964), p. 29.

<sup>97</sup> Quoted in Vicente Romano, *Cuba en el corazón: testimonios de un desarraigo* (Barcelona, 1989), p. 43.

<sup>98</sup> David Brydan, *Franco's internationalists: social experts and Spain's search for legitimacy* (Oxford, 2019).

<sup>99</sup> Sánchez Recio, ed., *La internacional católica*.

that it was a respectable member of the Cold War West rather than a dangerous fascist power.

Franco's Spain, then, was seamlessly integrated into Christian refugee relief during the early Cold War. The similarities between Francoist ideas about the Christian West and those promoted by Christian humanitarians in Western European and North American democracies suggests that Spain can be understood, less as an undemocratic outlier, than as an exemplar of the Cold War West and its values.

Indeed, the only difference between Spanish and non-Spanish perspectives revealed by the history of Christian refugee relief lay in attitudes towards ecumenical co-operation and religious freedom. The Franco regime, particularly after 1945, was defined by a 'National Catholic' ideology rooted in a deeply conservative tradition of Catholic thought and which granted the church and its institutions a central role in public life.<sup>100</sup> The vast majority of refugees who came to Spain were not just Christians, but Catholics. Their ability to practise their religion freely in ways they could not under communist rule was predicated on this Catholic identity, and any Protestant refugees would have faced far greater difficulties. Protestants represented an internal 'other' in National Catholic Spain, not persecuted to anything like the same extent as the Franco regime's political opponents, but distrusted and marginalized nonetheless.<sup>101</sup> Anti-Protestant rhetoric still emerged frequently from organizations such as *Acción Católica* and from the Spanish church, which did not embrace the ecumenical spirit evident elsewhere in post-war Europe, and Protestant chapels and congregation were still frequently attacked up until the late 1940s. Indeed, treatment of Spain's Protestant community and its religious freedom was one of the only major sources of tension between Spain and the United States during the late 1950s, driven in part by conservative US politicians who publicized these examples of anti-Protestant persecution as assaults on religious freedom.<sup>102</sup> It was not until the late 1960s that the Spanish church and the Franco regime formally accepted the idea of religious liberty and pluralism.

These inter-confessional tensions point towards the limits of Christian anti-communism as a basis for Western unity. Refugee relief was certainly used to promote the rhetoric of Christian unity. Despite the denominational division in relief efforts between Catholic and Protestant groups, the language used around refugees almost always referred to 'Christians' and the 'Christian West'. Even someone like Thomas Dooley, whose accounts of refugees and refugee relief were deeply infused with Catholic theology and iconography, tended to refer to Vietnamese refugees as 'Christians' rather than 'Catholics'.<sup>103</sup> But even in the more naturally ecumenical field of refugee relief, tensions between Catholic and Protestant groups remained. *Caritas Internationalis* officials, for

<sup>100</sup> Alfonso Botti, *Cielo y dinero: el nacionalcatolicismo en España* (Madrid, 1992).

<sup>101</sup> Mary Vincent, 'Ungodly subjects: Protestants in National-Catholic Spain, 1939–1953', *European History Quarterly*, 45 (2015), pp. 108–31.

<sup>102</sup> National Archives at College Park, MD, Record Group 59, Department of State, Dec. file 1945–9, series 852.5, box 6347.

<sup>103</sup> Dooley, *Deliver us from evil*, p. 56.

example, expressed concerns about Catholic Hungarian refugees being sent to Scandinavian countries or Protestant cantons in Switzerland because of the 'problem of religious support' they would face.<sup>104</sup> And a few years later, NCWC officials in the United States worried that Protestant groups were using federal funding to try to convert Cuban Catholics.<sup>105</sup> Attitudes like these, to say nothing of the overt anti-Protestantism of Franco's Spain, suggest that building a Western community around Christian humanitarianism and refugee relief during the early Cold War might be better understood as a Catholic project rather than a genuinely cross-confessional one.

## V

By the 1960s, the nature of Christian refugee relief in the West had changed in a number of ways. World Refugee Year, held between 1959 and 1960, had been launched in an attempt to resolve the fate of those European refugees who remained in post-war camps. In its aftermath, the focus of the international relief community became fixed more firmly on the plight of refugees beyond Europe whose circumstances were largely unconnected to the Cold War. When the Vatican made a major donation to the UNHCR in 1961, for example, over half of the money was earmarked for the support of Palestinians and Algerians.<sup>106</sup> And in the era of decolonization and the aftermath of Bandung, religious NGOs were increasingly focusing their attention on questions of global development rather than emergency relief and communist persecution. Their worldview was increasingly North–South rather than East–West.<sup>107</sup>

For the first decade and a half of the Cold War, however, Christian refugee relief helped to shape ideas about the nature of the West and Western identity. These visions of the Christian Cold War West existed alongside others, and refugee relief was only one of many ways in which ideas about the Cold War were promoted by institutions and encountered by ordinary people. They were neither hegemonic nor unchanging, receding somewhat during the period of détente but resurgent during the 1980s, particularly in the United States.

In considering their impact on the creation of the Cold War West, we can take inspiration from the developments in recent scholarship on the socialist world. Rather than seeing the construction of the socialist 'bloc' as a top-down process driven purely by the Soviet Union, many of these works have explored the transnational networks of friendship and solidarity which united the socialist world.<sup>108</sup> These are complicated histories full of conflict and

<sup>104</sup> Caritas Internationalis to Caritas Germany, 22 Nov. 1956, ADC, 167 Caritas Diaspora Aid, 388.80 Hungarian aid.

<sup>105</sup> ACUA, USCCB-OGS, series 1, box 36.

<sup>106</sup> AUNHCR, PRE box 3 (HQ press releases) ARC-2/B4, fonds 10c, box 3.

<sup>107</sup> Bastiaan Bouwman, 'From religious freedom to social justice: the human rights engagement of the ecumenical movement from the 1940s to the 1970s', *Journal of Global History*, 13 (2018), pp. 252–73.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Elidor Mehilli, *From Stalin to Mao: Albania and the socialist world* (Ithaca, NY, 2017); Rachel Appelbaum, *Empire of friends: Soviet power and socialist internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca, NY, 2019).

misunderstanding, and they do not deny the coercive realities of Soviet (or indeed Chinese) empire-building. But they have helped us move beyond the idea of a monolithic 'socialist bloc', and to shift the focus towards the experiences of ordinary people and the bottom-up construction of socialist communities, highlighting the ideas, ideologies, organizations, and networks which linked people across borders. Refugee relief offers a comparable way to think about the construction of the Cold War West: not as a top-down process or necessarily a US-dominated one, and neither one built around ideas of democracy or liberalism beyond the specific case of religious liberty; but rather as a transnational community enjoying popular support and participation, built around a faith-based identity and ideas about Western history and Christian civilization, and committed to the defence of religious freedom more than the promotion of democracy.

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