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TOBIAS KELLY

Pacifist utopias: humanitarianism, tragedy and complicity in the Second World War

In war, the utopian and the dystopian converge. What could be more dystopian than a world of endless violence, and what more utopian than perpetual peace? Yet, at the same time, utopianism has itself been accused of brutality, and those who are opposed to war charged with perpetuating dystopian bloodshed. This paper examines the relationship between war, peace and utopia, by focusing on the ethical conflicts of opposing violence. It does so through the particular example of humanitarianism. Contemporary humanitarianism seeks to oppose the violence of war, but does so by placing limits on war rather than abolishing it, and is therefore often seen as complicit with violence. For many humanitarians, the response to this complicity has been a widespread sense of ethical crisis. In contrast, this paper examines a particular utopian humanitarian tradition, in the shape of British pacifist ambulance workers in the Second World War. This is a form of humanitarianism that recognises complicity, but also retains a utopian commitment to human perfection. The central argument of this paper is that the ethical conflicts of humanitarianism need to be put back into the diverse visions of the human that have run through humanitarian histories.

Key words utopia, war, pacifism, tragedy, complicity

Introduction

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends. (Fussell (2000 [1975]: 7)

In war, the utopian and the dystopian converge. We might think that what could be more dystopian than a world of endless violence, and what is more utopian than perpetual peace? Yet, the lines can be hard to draw. Utopianism has itself been accused of brutality, as wars are waged in the name of messianic or totalitarian visions; and those who are absolutely opposed to war have also been charged with perpetuating dystopian bloodshed in other times and other places (Devji 2011: 270; Orwell 1942). As the editors of this collection suggest, we can therefore read the utopian and dystopian alongside one another, with violence and its opposition among the tangled threads that link the two.

This paper examines the relationship between war, peace and utopia by focusing on the ethical limits and possibilities of opposing violence. It does so through the particular lens of humanitarianism. Contemporary humanitarianism seeks to oppose the violence of war, but it does so by placing limits on violence rather than abolishing

it, and is therefore often seen as distinctly non-utopian, limiting its aspirations to the reduction of suffering and little more, in a 'second best world' (Asad 2015; Lepora and Goodin 2015; Terry 2002: 216; Redfield 2013). Although humanitarianism bases its claims to legitimacy on opposition to suffering, it can also be deeply involved with the deployment of force and coercion (Barnett 2011; Fassin 2007; Redfield 2013). As such, humanitarianism is profoundly implicated in violence.

Humanitarian complicity with war has often been understood in tragic terms, both opposed to war and caught up within it (Cabot 2014; Feldman 2007; Halpern 2018; Malkki 2015; Redfield 2013). As Alex De Waal has argued, for example, the 'humanitarians' tragedy is both the tragedy of goals that cannot be reconciled among themselves and the inevitable outcome of pursuing ideals amid the most horrific constraints of war and violent social upheaval' (2010: 130). For humanitarians, the response to complicity in seemingly inevitable violence has been a widespread sense of ethical crisis (Malkki 2015: 54; see also Feldman 2007; Redfield 2013). Violence here is seen as an irredeemable part of life, and despair or cynicism the only possible responses to the failures of humanitarian commitments. If humanitarianism has a structure of feeling, it is one marked either by regret and disappointment or a self-conscious hard-headed realism that can easily slip into an instrumental embrace of violence.

The history of humanitarianism has been marked by a secularised or post-Christian language of suffering and witness (Fassin 2011; Redfield 2013). And the idea of inherent humanitarian tragedy resonates with what Marshall Sahlins has called elsewhere 'Judeo-Christian dogmas of human imperfection' (1996: 395; see also Cannell 2005; Mayblin 2012). For Sahlins, the sense of the 'doleful abyss' lurks behind social science theorising, particularly in relation to violence (see Balibar 2009; Nordstrom and Robben 1995). However, the vision of imperfection that runs through a sense of humanitarian tragedy is far from universal, even within Christianity (Cannell 2005). This paper opens up an alternative utopian genealogy of humanitarianism, by focusing on the particular example of the pacifist Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU).

In the early 1940s, the FAU, made up of a group of British anti-war activists, found themselves in the midst of war-torn China, ferrying medicine and the wounded across Nationalist-controlled territory. As millions of British citizens were serving in the armed forces, building weapons and losing their loved ones in the battles of the Second World War, the pacifists of the FAU refused to fight, arguing that the cause of peace could be better served by carrying out humanitarian work to relieve suffering. The Unit had its roots in largely Quaker traditions that stress the human capacity to live at peace in the world. In this context, the pacifists of the FAU were more absolute – utopian even – in their opposition to violence than many other traditions of humanitarian action – they sought to abolish war not simply to tame it after all – but, as we shall see, were also more sanguine about their compromises and failures.

There is no inherent link between humanitarianism and pacifism, and indeed the relationship has often been fraught. But pacifists have played an important role in the history of humanitarian action and the FAU is a particularly illuminating place to explore humanitarianism's relationships with violence (Feldman 2007; Haskell 1985). After the Second World War, members of the Unit would go on to play a central role in the history of British humanitarianism, human rights and international development (Kelly 2018a). The Second World War has also been understood as a key moment in the growth of international humanitarianism (Barnett 2011). Parts of the ethic of the FAU has been woven through post-war British humanitarianism, even if it is sometimes

fraying around the edges. While from one perspective it might be argued that pacifists lost the argument about the Second World War, as it was armed force that defeated mid-20th century fascism, at another level many of the broadly liberal institutions of the international order were made in their image. The UN and the EU after all put the preservation of peace at the top of their formal and informal objectives. Examining the quandaries of this small group of British pacifists therefore has the potential to shed light on the tensions of the contemporary humanitarian juncture, with its entanglements in the dystopian terrains of violence.

The central argument of this paper is that the ethical conflicts of humanitarianism need to be put back into the diverse visions of the human that have run through its history. The ‘human’ of humanitarian work is often associated either with a ‘minimalist bio-politics’ (Redfield 2005: 329; Ticktin 2011) or the ability to feel compassion (Fassin 2011: 250). The history of the FAU reveals another – utopian – vision of the human, one that retains a space for human perfection. Without such a commitment, humanitarian action can seem perpetually tied to a sense of moral failure that slips into cynicism.

This paper is set out as follows. It begins with a brief history of the FAU and the tradition of Quaker service. It then examines the forms of violent and non-violent sacrifice that ran through the political culture of mid-20th century Britain, within which the members of the FAU tried to operate, before moving the focus to the doubts and struggles involved in trying to tread the line between war and peace. The final section explores the relationship between the ‘tragic’ dimensions of humanitarianism and specific visions of human perfection.

This paper is based on letters, diaries, unpublished memoirs, newsletters and oral history interviews with members of the FAU, held in the archives of the Friends House and the Imperial War Museum. The members of the FAU left behind a rich record as they attempted to make their conscience legible (see Feldman 2007). Although many of the sources are contemporary, all sources have to be read in the light of hindsight of the popular sense of the Second World War as a ‘good war’. What we have access to is the relatively public efforts at justification and persuasion, as pacifists sought to explain their commitments to themselves and to others.

A brief history of the Friends Ambulance Unit

The Friends Ambulance Unit started life in the First World War carrying out medical work for the British troops in the trenches of northern France and Belgium. With the declaration of the Second World War and the reintroduction of military service, tribunals were given the power to grant full or partial exemptions from military service on the grounds of conscience. Over 60,000 people applied for such exemptions, with two thirds successful on the condition of some kind of alternative service (Barker 1982: 145). In this context, veterans from the First World War re-established the FAU in order to provide opportunities for conscientious objectors to fulfil their commitments to service. Over 5,000 people enquired about membership, with close to 1,300 eventually joining.

By 1939, Christian pacifism, albeit one with a heavy socialist influence, had become a powerful stream within British anti-war activism (Kelly 2018b). As violence spread over large parts of the globe, it was clear to many pacifists that they could not prevent the fighting. However, they also tried to show that a pacifist society was

possible. Peace was understood here as more than simply being about the absence of war, but also as a productive contribution to social life. The expressed formal aim of the FAU was to ‘undertake ambulance and relief work in areas under both civilian and military control, and so, by working as pacifists and civilian body ... to demonstrate the efficacy of cooperating to build up a new world rather than fighting to destroy the old’ (Davies 1947: 5–6). In short, they tried to show that dystopian violence was not inevitable.

Members of the FAU had to be broadly Christian and pacifist. Quakers though were outnumbered by non-Quakers, and the unit was not formally affiliated with Quakers, as it was seen as working too closely with the military. However, a loose Quaker ethos still ran through the unit’s activities, even as members often deviated from many of the finer points of Quaker theology. In doing so, the unit was in dialogue with a much longer Quaker history of providing a ‘fellowship of service’ and testimony against war. This was part of a tradition that had moved from a focus on the suffering of members of the Society of Friends, to relieving the suffering of others. Almost all members of the FAU were men in their 20s, and a small women’s section was only established after intense resistance, with the male members apparently worried that the introduction of women would be a ‘first sign of softness creeping in’ (Davies 1947: 42). One former member recalled that the ‘FAU were a bourgeois group. Very few members were identifiably from any other class. But not only so’.¹

The first years of the Second World War were a source of frustration for many in the FAU. They had joined up imagining that, like the First World War, they would be serving near the front line. However, the initial Allied defeat in mainland Europe meant there was no front line on which they could serve. Working in British hospitals and with families affected by the blitz provided some opportunities, but according to the official history of the Unit, this work was seen as ‘dull but useful’ and only an ‘apprenticeship to work abroad’ (Davies 1947: 30–1). Members were particularly keen to travel beyond Britain. As one put it in the Unit’s newsletter ‘what we need ... (is) adventure into new paths of service’.² The FAU therefore started to look for overseas opportunities, and the possibility of work in East Asia as part of what became known as the ‘China Convoy’ was enthusiastically embraced. By this time the Convoy’s unofficial slogan had become ‘go anywhere, do anything’.

In its early years the China Convoy worked under the auspices of the Chinese Red Cross and was attached to the Kuomintang Nationalist Army of Chiang Kai-Shek. Funding was provided by the British Foreign Office and American Friends Service Committee. The work of the China Convoy included setting up mobile clinics and working in hospitals, but the bulk of its activities consisted in transporting medicine – and quinine in particular. A central garage was set up in Kutsing and Kweiyang, with trucks going out over Yunnan, Kweichow and Szechwan. A shortage of fuel meant that the trucks were converted to work on charcoal burners, but long-range trips were made to oil wells of the Gobi Desert, as the trucks could still not be started without petrol.

¹ Interview with John Duncan Wood, 8 July 1986, Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (IWMSA).

² *China Convoy News Letter* 29, October 1942, Archives of the Friends Ambulance Unit (FAU), Friends House, London.

Sacrifice

Before joining, most members of the FAU appeared before the Tribunals that decided whether to exempt people from military service on the grounds of conscience. In doing so, it was common for applicants to claim that they wanted to work for the ‘greater good’. Roy Ridgway, for example, a clerk at a London bakery in his early twenties who volunteered for the Unit’s work in Europe, wrote that ‘my chief reason for joining the Unit is to help to alleviate suffering’.³ The people who joined the FAU were part of broader group of conscientious objectors who were eager to stress that they were not passive in their pacifism. In his memoirs, David Morris, the privately educated son of a Baptist minister, recalled that he joined the FAU in order to demonstrate that he was not a coward (1948: 22). Duncan Wood, a Quaker, who was head of the personnel office for the China Convoy, recalled that ‘one wanted to counter the notion that the conscientious objector is just running away from it ... one needs to have some evidence that the conscientious objector is prepared to get into the thick of things’.⁴

More broadly, sacrifice was a key trope through which collective responsibility was understood in Second World War Britain – as it has been in liberal democracies more generally (Kahn 2008). War presents perhaps the ultimate form of sacrifice – the taking of life to save other lives – and the nation-state has often been highly efficient at getting its citizens to die, not simply kill, in its name. The First World War had provided deep and profound evidence of this point. By the late 1930s though, the popular cultures of sacrifice were also linked with small-scale mundane acts, such as supporting a family, rather than spectacular acts of heroism (Rose 2004). In this context, as long as they appeared to live up to such ‘tempered’ masculine virtues, it was possible for pacifists to try and make publicly persuasive claims about the moral virtue of their own sacrifices.⁵ The pacifists of the FAU sought to participate in this wider culture of tempered sacrifices, and therefore demonstrate their similarities and obligations to other British citizens, rather than their differences.

Suffering alone though was not enough for many members of the FAU. The negative injunction not to kill had to be given a positive content, and their sacrifices had to have what they saw as beneficial outcomes. In the commitment to be of ‘service’, there was a stark contrast with so-called ‘absolutist’ conscientious objectors, who refused to undertake any form of alternative work directed by the state.⁶ Pacifists who took up alternative forms of service could be highly critical of absolutists, seeing in them a self-centred martyr complex, or a naive attempt to cut themselves off from the world. Roy Ridgway, for example, saw those pacifists who spent the war in prison as wasting their time.

Speaking more broadly, sacrifice, including self-sacrifice, has been understood as an end in itself, or as a mean to other ends (Mayblin and Course 2013). In the first perspective, the suffering of sacrifice is beyond utility, whereas in the second it is

³ Diary of Roy Ridgway, 28 November 1940, papers of Roy Ridgway, Imperial War Museum Archive (IWMA).

⁴ Interview with John Duncan Wood, 8 July 1986, IWMSA.

⁵ By way of a comparison, in her ethnography of Israel, Erica Weiss describes how Jewish conscientious objectors’ sacrifices stand in stark relief to the dominant forms of military sacrifice (2014: 4).

⁶ Interview with Reginald Bottini, 15 July 1980, IWMSA.

inherently productive. The members of the Unit were caught in the midst of this split. On the one hand, a pure, non-utilitarian sacrifice would result in no obvious service to others, coming close to pointless suffering and loss. But, if their self-sacrifice was treated as utilitarian, they were in danger of either appearing self-interested, or having to face the complex task of assessing the often intangible outputs of their actions. More broadly, Didier Fassin has argued that humanitarianism is marked by a sacrificial economy that distinguishes between lives to be saved and lives to be risked (2007). But, as we shall see below, at stake were also the questions of what it meant to save life in the first place, and of what these sacrifices were for, leading to considerable uncertainty over the virtue and value of their actions.

Doubts

The positive outcomes of humanitarian service could often remain far from self-evident. Their training, for example, often left them unprepared to deal with the scale of injury and disease they encountered. The lorries involved in much of the China Convoy's work were also constantly breaking down, and amid the day-to-day concern of getting engines to work, there was a worry that the unit was getting further and further away from their core mission. Quentin Boyd, an FAU doctor, wrote in the Convoy's newsletter that 'we are getting into a mental and spiritual rut ... complacently jogging along without bothering to think about what our aims should be or to consider whether our present work in China is the best we can find for the expression of our ideals ... Only a radical advance in interpersonal, social and personal relationships can save the world'.⁷ Boyd would later commit suicide in Calcutta after suffering an acute period of depression.

The scale of the problem could be overwhelming. Hadley Laycock, one of the few surgeons in the Convoy, wrote that 'Anything we may do for suffering humanity in China seems like a very small drop on a very large bucket'.⁸ In the face of a possible cholera outbreak, Bill Brough – who went on to be a doctor and psychoanalyst – would later recall that he 'felt shocked at my monumental inadequacy, which I always knew would sooner or later catch up with me' (2001: 37). David Morris wrote that 'the inadequacy of our effort' as ambulance workers 'was appalling' (1948: 86). Morris described a 'general sense of uneasiness that all was not well was always in the background, haunting the minds of even the most complacent members of the unit' (1948: 130). Even the official history of the FAU concludes that in 'the welter of suffering amid the displaced and distressed millions ... the efforts of a few voluntary workers over a year or two appeared puny and insignificant' (Davies 1947: 367). The humanitarian means available to members of the Convoy could have appeared inadequate to their goals, and their sacrifices too small.

We are often told – not least by humanitarians themselves – that humanitarianism is an issue of conscience (Haskell 1998; Redfield 2013). It is important though not to treat the content and meaning of such claims to conscience as self-evident, but rather to understand them in the context of specific political and cultural histories (Kelly

⁷ Quentin Boyd, *China Convoy Newsletter* 38, 24 December 1942, FAU.

⁸ Hadley Laycock, *China Convoy Newsletter* 39, 9 January 1943, FAU.

2018a). For the members of the FAU, conscience was both an issue of individual interior integrity and mutual obligations. It did not require them to stand alone against the world, but to work together and alongside others. For these pacifist conscientious objectors, their self-sacrifices helped to make an otherwise intangible conscience concrete and visible. This was an ethic driven by the desire for social recognition. The similarities between British pacifists and Max Weber's anxious Calvinists are evident (2005). However, while Weber's ascetics were most concerned, ultimately, with divine recognition, these British pacifists were principally worried about acknowledgement from their fellow citizens. And this led to doubts not about divine election, but an ability to act effectively and peacefully in the world alongside others.

Conscience is often seen as an 'unambiguous expression of morality, a clear-cut example of moral convictions' – in the mode of 'here I am, I can do no other' (Levi 1997: 199). However, if the members of the FAU were driven by conscience, this was conscience that was fraught. Writing about pacifist humanitarians shortly after the Second World War, Ilana Feldman has suggested that for such people 'action in the world' is necessarily compromised and discomfiting (2007: 690, 692). The pacifist humanitarians of the FAU were constantly aware of how far their actions – both in terms of method and result – fell short of the pacifist ideal. This is a vision of conscience that is hesitant in the face of ethical demands that are not met. As Hannah Arendt has argued elsewhere, it might be that only a really bad person has a good conscience, as to act conscientiously is to constantly reflect on the limits of your own virtue (1972). Either way, the humanitarian conscience of these Second World War pacifists, as in so many other humanitarian contexts, was marked by guilt. And this sense of guilt was most acute as the pacifists tried to walk a line between violence and non-violence.

War, peace and complicity

Against the background of questions about the consequences and virtues of humanitarian action, attempts to participate in a wider culture of mutual self-sacrifice created very particular problems for members of the FAU. In particular, the desire to participate in society that had been mobilised for war could mean working closely alongside the military, and China Convoy members had to decide just how far, and in what ways, they would do so.

Working with the military meant that at times pacifists could get very close to what seemed like an almost military ethos. The memoirs, diaries and interviews of pacifists are full of claims about how well they got on with military people and how much they admired one another.⁹ Indeed, for Duncan Wood, ambulance work was a 'way of performing active service which isn't actually active military service but was as near as the pacifist could get to active service in the military sense'.¹⁰ Training for ambulance work, in particular, could take on what appeared to some as a near martial tone, with drills and exercises. The FAU also wore what looked like military-style uniforms.¹¹ On occasion this could lead to them being saluted by soldiers. At one point it seems that an

⁹ Interview with Mervyn Taggart, 5 May 1980, IWMSA.

¹⁰ Interview with John Duncan Wood, 8 July 1986, IWMSA.

¹¹ John Wood, Unpublished Memoir, 27, papers of John Wood, IWMA.

FAU convoy avoided an attack by bandits when their would-be attackers assumed they were soldiers due to their uniforms.¹²

There were real tensions though as the pacifists worked with the soldiers. David Morris recalled in his memoirs, for example, that after delivering medical supplies to a Kuomintang-controlled hospital some items belonging to members of the unit were stolen (Morris 1948). The army commander invited the ambulance workers to his barracks, and they sat drinking beer, while in the background some soldiers dug a trench. A voice then called for the soldiers to finish and, before the FAU apparently knew what was going on, the soldiers were lined up and shot. The military commander later claimed that the soldiers had been responsible for the thefts. The leadership of the China Convoy thereafter decided to stop reporting any thefts.¹³

However, the problem was not simply one of preserving life in the face of killing, but also of avoiding directly benefiting from the use of violence. The FAU depended on the military for supplies and transport and, in order to get into China, members would be given lifts by the American Air Force or the British military mission. In China, the logistical support of the Nationalist Kuomintang was essential. At a practical level, funding was also an issue for the Convoy, and it was decided that on the return journeys the trucks could be used to transport goods for profit that would then be ploughed back into their work. However, this decision meant that they could no longer seek the formal protection of the Red Cross, which stipulated that ambulance work had to refrain from commercial activities. One of the most controversial of the China Convoy's cargoes was tungsten – a metal often used in bullets.¹⁴ The Convoy leadership took a decision not to pressure any driver to carry the metal, but warned its members that a refusal to carry the metal 'might lead to financial collapse'.¹⁵

Quite how close the relationship should be with the military was always a contentious issue. For some members, the compromises made by the FAU were compromises too far. One member wrote to the China Convoy newsletter complaining that 'it seems as if we are ... fitting in very nicely, oh so nicely, into the world that has been organised as one great war machine'.¹⁶ Several members left the Unit to join the armed forces. David Morris, for example, joined the army after finding himself hitting a Chinese soldier. Morris had refused to give some soldiers a lift, on the grounds that the unit could not support uninjured military personnel, and the soldiers had thrown stones at his truck. Enraged, Morris stopped the vehicle and hit one of the attackers. It was at this moment, he would later recall in his memoir, that he realised he was not a 'true pacifist' (1948: 200). Similarly, in later life, Bill Brough recalled that by the end of the war, that:

For some time, I had become increasingly uneasy about my position as a conscientious objector. From the beginning it had never been black or white ... I always knew, whatever I might say, that were I to be faced with someone, invading soldier or otherwise, who was harming some helpless person in my care it

¹² *China Convoy Newsletter* 80, 23 October 1943, FAU.

¹³ Minutes of Executive Committee 9–10 October 1942, FAU.

¹⁴ *China Convoy Newsletter* 82, 1 November 1943, FAU.

¹⁵ *China Convoy Newsletter* 79, 16 October 1943, FAU.

¹⁶ *China Convoy Newsletter* 81, 30 October 1943, FAU.

would be difficult for me not to intervene and try to stop it ... Although I still objected to war as a method ... at a personal level I saw myself a failure as a pacifist ... (2001: 59)

Brough eventually left the FAU and joined a medical team in the nearby US Army.

In a world at war, the distinction between pacifist and military action could be hard to pin down. Above all, pacifists, like humanitarians, are haunted by possible complicity. In their refusal to fight during the Second World War, for example, pacifists were accused of allowing fascist violence to continue (Devji 2011: 270; Orwell 1942). Like humanitarians, pacifists can therefore be seen as sharing with those who would wage war the willingness to accept death for the sake of life, to sacrifice others for their principles. In this context, for the members of the FAU, the line between conscientious pacifist witness and participation in war was far from self-evident. But, if they did nothing, pacifists could be accused – not least by themselves – of letting others die. If pacifist humanitarianism was understood as the absolute injunction ‘not to kill’, and much, if not all contemporary social life was understood as directly or indirectly implicated in the killing of war, there was little room left to act. In response, the FAU had decided to cooperate with the military in order to act as a ‘witness for peace’, as part of a ‘slender contribution to the welfare of humanity’.¹⁷ Compromises were therefore constantly made between the refusal to be involved in violence and the attempt to prevent violence and remedy its effects.

The possibility of complicity and compromise is a tension that runs through all projects of radical change (Eagleton 2015). If attempts at radical departures from the present are not rooted in the here and now, they risk being consigned a future always yet to come. However, if projects are too firmly grounded in the status quo they risk constant accommodation and concession. Such complicity can be understood as a form of moral deficit. However, there is another way of looking at complicity, not as a failure, but as recognition of mutual entanglement and therefore mutual responsibility (Sanders 2002; Wright 2018). For the members of the FAU, the fact that their lives were caught up in violence did not mark a moral gap, but rather produced a stronger sense of obligation to fight against war. FAU volunteer Roy Ridgway, for example, wrote in his diary that only by committing suicide could a pacifist become entirely uninvolved in the war, and as that was against Christian principles, it was not an option.¹⁸ For the members of the Convoy, there was no pure position to take, and complicity was an inherent part of engagement with a world as it was.

The injunction ‘thou shalt not kill’ should therefore be seen as the basis for an appreciation of the value of life, rather than an absolute principle of moral purity (compare Critchley 2014: 211; Butler 2006: 219). As such, the prohibition of violence was not just a mandatory rule or norm, but a form of practical judgement (Lambek 2010: 14). Ronald Sly, for example, a Christian pacifist, would later recall that deciding whether to take up humanitarian work was a ‘knife-edge decision’.¹⁹ As FAU member John Wood would similarly recall, ‘it’s very important for the pacifist to recognise his

¹⁷ Airgraph from Richard Wainwright to all members of the FAU from Staff meeting in London, June 1942, FAU.

¹⁸ Diary of Roy Ridgway, 10 April 1940, papers of Roy Ridgway, IWMA.

¹⁹ Interview with Eric Sly, 23 April 1990, IWMSA.

dilemmas and face them. And a dilemma after all is a choice of action'.²⁰ The injunction not to kill was deeply enigmatic, raising questions about the different values placed on life, and the unequal distribution of sacrificial losses and gains.

Tragi-comedy

The tensions found in a desire for peace in a world of violence can produce a deep sense of unease. Veena Das (2014) has written, for example, that for those opposed to violence, life itself produces a feeling of melancholy, as our very existence can be a source of coercion and bloodshed. And as James Laidlaw has also argued, the acceptance of our own imperfectability when striving not to harm the world is experienced as a perplexing challenge (2014: 127). Laidlaw and Das both write about the particular context of Jainism, but the attempts of the Christian pacifists of the FAU to live at peace in the midst of war were also marked by a similar widespread sense of anxiety.

Such humanitarian angst is often, although not universally, understood in tragic terms (Cabot 2014; Fassin 2011; Feldman 2007; Malkki 2015; Redfield 2013). The word 'tragic' is sprinkled across texts about humanitarianism, although often simply used to signal misery. However, the 'tragic' is about more than the misery. As Richard Halpern (2018) has argued, for example, the term also implies particular forms of agency, and can be used to disavow responsibility by creating a sense of inevitability. In one of the most nuanced analyses of the relationship between humanitarianism and tragedy, Heath Cabot has described the ways in which humanitarian action is caught up in forces beyond its control, and subject to conflicting demands where even the 'right' choice can result in suffering and death (2014: 74). As she also shows though, such tragic situations can also be generative of new possibilities for action.

If we return to the FAU, amid all the angst, the letters, diaries and newsletters left behind were also often very sanguine. The reports are marked by a distinctive ironic sense of humour that is quick to puncture any over-developed sense of pride and to point out the absurd and the ridiculous. This could take on highly developed forms, and towards the end of the war, members of the Unit self-published a collection of their poems and songs. One song, for example, with instruction that it is to be sung to the tune of the Scottish folk song 'Loch Lomond' goes as follows:

The adjutant said 'Damme! It looks as if I am be-

Coming rooted to my desk in this city;

I think I'll try my luck on a Unit Diesel Truck,

And to Hell with the Executive Committee.'

Chorus: Oh ye'll take a diesel and I'll take a charcoal

And I'll be in Kutsing before ye.

²⁰ Interview with John Duncan Wood, 8 July 1986, IWMSA.

But the Executive Committee will never meet again

On the bonnie bonnie graves by the go-down ...

After the war, one member of the Unit, Donald Swann, went on to be one half of the popular comedy singing duo Flanders and Swann. This is a very particular type of humour, rooted in the British, masculine middle-class environments of the mid-20th century, and its mode is slightly dry and ironic rather than heroic.

However, in the middle of all this absurdity, there was still a sense that it was worthwhile. The official history of the FAU, for example, begins with a quote from Clement White, who died in China while working with the Unit: ‘the vastness of the need inevitably leads members to put emphasis on tangible results, on statistics of patients treated, operations performed, tons of drugs haled and delivered. But that does not blind them to the truth that what is done is less important than the spirit on which – the Spirit by which – it is done’ (Davies 1947: vi). In the face of apparent complicity with violence, angst did not go all the way down. And to understand the tone of the FAU, it is necessary to think carefully what we mean by the tragic and its relationship to violence.

Tragedy does not necessarily imply despondency. In George Steiner’s influential, if controversial, definition, tragedy arises ‘out of the sense that necessity is blind’ and the tragic person is ‘broken by forces which can neither be fully understood nor overcome’ (1961: 6, 9; see also Carson 2009). Tragedy, in this vision, is irreparable, and is therefore deeply anti-utopian or even dystopian. Christianity, for Steiner at least, is therefore inherently non-tragic, as the Christian God is ultimately just and rational (1961). In contrast, Terry Eagleton has offered an alternative reading of tragedy and its relationship to both Christianity and violence (2015). In Eagleton’s pithy formulation ‘tragedy does not necessarily involve a sticky end. It may simply mean that one has to be hauled through hell in order to have a modicum of well-being’ (2015: 71). Tragedy is therefore not inherently a synonym for failure.

Both Steiner and Eagleton though write about Christianity in very broad-brush terms, ignoring significant points of conflict and difference, and the particular commitments of the members of the FAU need to be understood in the context of the traditions within which they were in conversation. This is a largely Quaker vision of humanity – which is also found within Wesleyan Methodism – that stresses the potential for human perfection, going against the notion of the inherent sinfulness of humans that dominated much Protestant theology of the period in which the FAU was formed. The English historian Richard Overy (2009) has described the 1930s as the ‘morbid age’ because of its pessimism about the human condition. For Reinhold Niebuhr, for example, perhaps the most influential Protestant theologian in the first half of the 20th century, and a former First World War pacifist, ‘the dream of perpetual peace and brotherhood for humanity is one which will never be fully raised’ (1932: 21). From such a perspective, humanity is not capable of living harmoniously, and conflict and even war are inevitable. The only hope lies in the grace of God. In contrast, the emphasis of the Quakers from which many of the FAU emerged was on the potential of humans to live without sin and violence (Angell and Dandelion 2013).

Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to talk about Quaker orthodoxy, especially in its particularly liberal British form, there are several important theological points of departure. One is that although war and violence might have their origins

in human lust, these are vices that it is possible to overcome. It is possible to live a redeemed life in this world. War and violence are therefore not seen as inevitable, and humans are seen as having the capacity to live in peace. This is not an other-worldly form of Christianity marked by the attempt to bridge the gap between God and humanity in a state of original sin (Cannell 2005). Faith by itself is seen as empty. Instead, the Quaker tradition emphasised the work that was required to bring salvation. The theological focus is also not on the violent sacrifice, death and resurrection of Christ, but on the type of life he lived. There is a distinctively worldly emphasis on the importance of good works and deeds. Salvation is to be found through human blood, sweat and witness, rather than divine intervention. The crucial implication of all this is that the aspiration for peace is not a tragic impossibility – in the sense that it is fighting against the inevitability of the human turn to violence – but as a real and distinct possibility.

A group of pacifists trying to carve out a space of peace in the middle of a war that killed millions of people around the world might be read as deeply utopian, in the particular sense of an impractical idealism. George Orwell, for example, famously lumped mid-20th-century pacifists together with ‘sandal wearers and bearded fruit juice drinkers’, and charged them with imagining ‘that one can somehow “overcome” the German army by lying on one’s back’ (1968). However, if the pacifism of the FAU was utopian, it was utopian in a minor key and in a very practical mode. Elsewhere, Davina Cooper has argued for attention to what she has called ‘everyday utopias’ (2013; see also Levitas 2013; Thaler 2019; Winter 2006). This is utopia not as a distant and fully formed objects beyond the horizon, but an incomplete and emergent process rooted in the ‘everyday’ (Cooper 2013). As the editors of this special issue write in their introduction, this is also a form of utopianism that focuses less on the future than the present, and has clear resonances with forms of ‘prefigurative politics’ more generally (Rasza and Kurnik 2012; Wright 2016). For the members of the FAU, a commitment to peace, however grand, even utopian that might seem, was run through and made manifest in much smaller scale interactions, in putting on a bandage, in driving a truck, in delivery medicine, or simply in conversation over a meal.

Despite all the practical challenges they faced, members of the China Convoy insisted that the value of their work should not be assessed simply in terms of its material utility; the number of lives saved, the number of people bandaged, the amount of medicine delivered. Rather, the focus was on the quality of that work itself. Duncan Wood would recall that ‘it is difficult to say that we saved a large number of lives, or how many we saved ... in the end what is there to show for it in positive results? ... I think if you ask ... they would say “they were trying to help”. That is all one can say.’²¹ The importance of alternative service was in the small-scale social interactions that it created, and the quality of the social bonds that it helped to form. Rather than being futile, humanitarian actions had a value in and of themselves.

The utopianism of the FAU was immanent rather than transcendental. It contained a deep optimism that human beings could solve their own problems through their own efforts. It therefore did not rely on external intervention, divine or otherwise (Deneen 1999). A sense of human potential for perfection drove the members of the FAU on, in the face of uncertainty, contradiction and disappointment. For David Morris, for

²¹ Interview with John Duncan Wood, 8 July 1986, IWMSA.

example, pacifism was a matter of ‘ordinary human beings trying to live extraordinary lives’.²² In the face of setbacks and continued violence, the Convoy members remained committed to the possibility of humans living better, more peaceful lives. As such, the mismatch between a world at war and a commitment to peace did not inevitably produce a sense of overwhelming disappointment.

The members of the Convoy might have had their doubts and anxieties, but to doubt is not the same as disbelief or scepticism. It was possible to recognise the violence and compromises of the present, and maintain a commitment to the potential for peace. In the Quaker tradition, humans have a propensity to error and failure. Humanity is not sinless and the Light can be resisted and rejected. And it is here that humour comes in as the way that ethical conflicts are both ‘staged and assuaged’ (Critchley 2007: 85). A sense of the absurd can be seen as a response to ethical conflict, looking at ourselves and finding ourselves lacking. Laughter was not a callous response to the suffering of others, but a check on hubris. If conscience is torn and guilty in the space between ethical demands and practical reality, humour becomes a way of commenting on and moving through that split (Freud 1905 [1974]). Importantly, such irony is very different from cynicism, as it contains a moral commitment, implying complicity rather than estrangement (Steinmuller 2013). Ironic humour can imply inadequacy, but an inadequacy precisely because goals that are missed are still aspired to.

In their commitment to human potential the members of the FAU were therefore both realist and utopian, practical and principled. The stress on potential allowed a move beyond rigid binaries of violence and non-violence, means and end, principle and consequence, as utopian commitments and practical concerns became productively caught up in one another.

Conclusion

What happens when utopian commitments to peace come up against complicity with violence? This question is as pertinent in the early 21st century as it was in the 1940s, as humanitarians come up against seemingly endless war.

There has probably never been a moment when humanitarianism was not said to be in crisis, but the humanitarian sense of inadequacy might well now be particularly acute, playing out across a dystopian period of ‘forever war’, where humanitarianism is used to justify violence, but is also unable to prevent suffering, from Syria, to Iraq and the DRC, and beyond. A ‘hard-headed realism’ has led humanitarianism down some dark dead ends. At the same time, we also have a public crisis of personal moral rectitude – and the sexual misconduct of staff at Oxfam, Save the Children and UNAIDs, among many others. If humanitarians seek to cultivate particular forms of virtue (Redfield 2013: 130–1; see also Malkki 2015), their virtues are currently widely placed under question.

What then might we recover from the small-scale utopian history of the FAU? The members of the China Convoy foregrounded a sense of moral virtue based in conscience, witness and service (Redfield 2013). In focusing on such culturally thick forms of virtue we should not forget that the ability to cultivate publicly virtuous selves is not

²² Interview with David Morris, 9 June 1987, IWMSA.

equally distributed (Skeggs 2004). The pacifists of the FAU represented a relatively privileged, almost entirely white and deeply masculine space that promoted narrow visions of the individual. And we should also not assume that individual ethical virtue overrides other moral demands such as utility, collective solidarity or principle. But, we might also ask whether the current sense of crisis within humanitarian virtue is the result of using a moral vocabulary rooted in an ethos of service, witness and suffering, but without the unifying imagination of the potential for human redemption and perfection found in the FAU.

Humanitarianism always contains an implicit or explicit imagination of what it means to be human, whether this is reduced to a biological core or an ability to feel compassion (Fassin 2011; Redfield 2013; Ticktin 2011). The humanitarianism of the FAU contained a vision of humanity that was both conscientious and potentially redeemed in the here and now. That vision, particularly the second part, has been largely either forgotten or put to one side within recent humanitarianism. We can debate about whether we want to recover it or not; but without it, the gap between aspiration and experience can become a source of cynicism rather than inspiration, and any sacrifice can look simply destructive. Without a vision of human perfectibility, little can appear to distinguish humanitarian action from the work of the military. Foregrounding the utopian therefore helps us to imagine the humanitarianism otherwise.

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Utopies pacifistes: humanitarisme, tragédie et complicité dans la Seconde Guerre mondiale

Dans la guerre, l'utopie et la dystopie convergent. Quoi de plus dystopique qu'un monde de violence sans fin, et quoi de plus utopique que la paix perpétuelle? Pourtant, les limites peuvent être difficiles à tracer. L'utopie a été elle-même accusée de brutalité, et ceux qui sont absolument opposés à la guerre ont été accusés de perpétuer des effusions de sang dystopiques. Cet article examine la relation entre la guerre, la paix et l'utopie, en se concentrant sur les limites éthiques et les possibilités de s'opposer à la violence. Il le fait à travers la lentille particulière de l'humanitarisme. L'humanitarisme contemporain cherche à s'opposer à la violence dystopique de la guerre, mais il le fait en imposant des limites à la violence plutôt qu'en l'abolissant, et il est souvent considéré comme nettement non utopique. En revanche, cet article examine une tradition humanitaire utopique particulière, sous la forme des ambulanciers pacifistes britanniques pendant la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Il s'agit d'une forme d'humanitarisme qui reconnaît la complicité,

mais qui conserve aussi un engagement envers la rédemption humaine. L'argument central de l'article est que les conflits éthiques de l'humanitarisme doivent être replacés dans les diverses visions de l'humain qui ont traversé son histoire.

Mots-clés utopie, pacifisme, guerre, tragédie, complicité