

'Human Interest Stories': An Aspect of the History of Refugees and the Refugee Regime

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Reckoning with Refugeedom Project

It would be unthinkable for any humanitarian organisation to solicit donations and gain support for their cause without dramatizing human need. This is a widespread practice in the field of refugee relief and by extension the operation of the international refugee regime. No website or newspaper advert is complete without a 'human interest' story, pinpointing the suffering of individual refugees. A major intergovernmental organisation such as UNHCR, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, advertises its presence by offering supporters and prospective donors a dramatic vignette or compelling 'human interest' story that foregrounds the distress of refugees. Stories can help to sustain public interest and trigger generosity at times of emergency. At the same time, they serve to highlight the success of aid agencies.

This is not a recent development, and we do not maintain that there is anything unusual in the use of 'human interest' stories per se.

Our research, as part of the AHRC funded project 'Reckoning with Refugeedom: Refugee Voices in Modern History, 1919-1975', explores how refugees wrote to and petitioned various authorities across the globe and throughout much of the twentieth century. Through extensive and ongoing archival research we have established that refugees consistently petitioned the humanitarian and international organisations tasked with their care, often telling and re-telling their life-stories in their efforts to gain aid and assistance.

Given this wide diversity of refugee voices, we have been led to ask why and how it was that only certain of these stories were collected, packaged, and distributed to the public as 'human interest stories' in fundraising campaigns? Who selected stories for circulation, and according to what criteria? And how did refugees respond to the appropriation of their life stories in this way? Through an academic research article, currently in draft form, we hope to explore historical issues around the supply, demand and ownership of refugees' 'human interest stories'.

Our current focus is on how three key players in the international refugee regime – the League of Nations, the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation

Administration, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – engaged in these practices. We hope to widen the lens by taking into account a number of non-governmental organisations. Our aim is to shed light on the historical precedents of a now widespread strategy in humanitarian fundraising.

We are well aware that our case studies are partial and selective. As such, if any readers of *Displaced Voices* have insights or expertise they may be able to offer on this topic, we would be keen to engage with them at the drafting stage.

Further Details

Reckoning with Refugeedom: -

<https://reckoningwithrefugeedom.wordpress.com/>

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