

A conference organised on the occasion of the 80th anniversary
of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War

WARRIORS WITHOUT WEAPONS:

**Humanitarian action in the Spanish Civil War
and the Republican exile**



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Louis Jeantet Auditorium, Geneva**

Organisers:

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In 1947, the Swiss physician Marcel Junod (1904-1961) published *Le troisième combattant*, a book that would be translated into English as *Warrior without Weapons* (1951), which collected his experiences as an International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) delegate, from the mustard gas bombing which affected the Ethiopian population during the Italian invasion (1935-1936) to the tragic consequences triggered by the dropping of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima on August 1945, without forgetting his time in Spain during the civil war (1936-1939). By this third combatant Junod meant the humanitarian actors who were not involved in any warring faction -and were, therefore, neither *caballeros* nor *camaradas*-, but figures that were waging a battle in order to bring relief to the war victims by “showing the reality of their suffering”, irrespective of their nationality or their ideological convictions (Junod, 1989: 369). What Junod, however, was avoiding to point out in his narrative was that -in practice- all humanitarian intervention whether it was planned for supplying food, providing shelter or health care, also meant taking part in the war, even if volunteers were fully convinced that they were carrying out their task in strict compliance with the principle of neutrality and impartiality.

Taking Junod’s literary representation as starting point, this conference suggests rethinking the Spanish Civil War, including the subsequent exile of the civil population in the immediate aftermath of the conflict, as a meaningful context in the shaping of modern humanitarian intervention, celebrating in this way, the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of this war. The main aim of the conference is, therefore, to examine the Spanish Civil War from the *warrior without weapons*, a still marginalised figure in the historiography of this conflict, which has gained, furthermore, in prominence during the last decades thanks to the works of Tom Buchanan (1991), Angela Jackson (2002), Linda Palfreeman (2012; 2014 and 2015), Álgar Martínez Vidal (2013), Gabriel Pretus (2013), Sébastien Farré (2014) and Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand (2015). Beyond the literature produced by the own the humanitarian organisations, the voluntary action of these warriors without weapons needs to be interpreted in a broader integrated social and cultural fabric that could help us to demystify their heroic character and understand their political impact in the course of the civil war in Spain.

The plethora of humanitarian organisations mobilised during the conflict, whether they acted simultaneously on both sides or channelled assistance exclusively to the insurgents or the republicans, turned the Spanish Civil War into a stage where solidarity played an essential role, not only as a result of the emergence of modern photojournalism, but also because the world democratic powers officially decided on a policy of non-intervention, encouraging public opinion to manifest its political sympathies through humanitarian initiatives. Foremost amongst the humanitarian agencies involved in warfare that justified their intervention by claiming neutrality were the ICRC, the British Quakers that were organised under the Friends Service Committee or their co-religionists in the United States gathered under the name of the American Friends Service Committee, the Save the Children Fund, the International Save the Children Union (SCIU) and the *Schweizerische Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Spanien Kinder*, better known in Spain as *Ayuda Suiza*. However, other international organisations openly launched fundraising campaigns aimed at helping the Republican cause, such as the International Red Aid, the International Antifascist Solidarity or the *Comité International de coordination et d’information pour l’Aide à l’Espagne Republicaine*. There were also other relevant organisations that raised funds to alleviate the suffering of Nationalist Spain, such as the British Universe Medical Aid Fund or the Belgian *Action et Civilisation*. This war also involved numerous associations on a national scale that offered nursing training courses such as the Spanish Red Cross, the Falangist *Sección Femenina* or those affiliated to the trade unions like the Communist oriented organisation *Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas* and *Mujeres Libres*, which were close to the Anarchist circles.

With the purpose of approaching the great complexity of the humanitarian interventions carried out in the Spanish Civil War and in the context of the Republican exile, we invite all scholars interested in participating in this conference to present an original proposal considering one of the following issues:

- **The agents** that carried out a humanitarian intervention on the ground. Amongst these *warriors without weapons* were activists such as the Italo-American Tina Modotti (International Red Aid) or the British pro-Nationalist Priscilla Scott-Ellis, directors of healthcare institution such as Elisabeth Eidenbenz in Elne (*Croix-Rouge Suisse. Secours aux enfants*), surgeons such as Norman Bethune (Canadian Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy) or Joseph Eastman Sheehan who worked at the General Mola's military hospital in San Sebastián, as well as delegates such as Rodolfo Olgiati (*Ayuda Suiza*) or Frédérique Small who was sent as representative by the SCIU. They recorded their experiences from the conflict through literary representations –journals, notebooks, administrative and clinical reports-, that is to say, by means of “humanitarian narratives” (Laqueur, 1989) as well as through drawings and photographs. We encourage an analysis of these two kinds of documents –written and visual- focusing on the role played by emotions such as compassion, pity or empathy in the constitution of the humanitarian *ethos* of these actors during the civil war in Spain.
- **The humanitarian practices** that characterised relief during the Spanish Civil War and the Republican exile, such as the supply of milk to children by creating refectories, war surgery, as well as food distribution amongst the refugees of the internment camps based in the South of France such as Rivesaltes, Gurs or Argèles-sur-Mer. Special attention will be paid to those practices that have been established under the contemporary designation of “humanitarian medicine” and that have historically evolved, borrowing their knowledge from diverse disciplines, such as military surgery, nutrition or epidemiology (Brauman, 2009). The Spanish Civil War was not only a setting in which new technologies were implemented, such as mobile blood transfusion units (Coni, 2008), and the development of sanitary campaigns such as those funded by the Rockefeller Foundation which were aimed at providing medical assistance to the Francoist troops coming from Morocco, who suffered from venereal diseases and malaria (Barona and Perdiguero-Gil, 2008).
- **The spaces** in which humanitarian operations were contextualised were not only defined by the changing frontiers between the Republican and the Nationalist side throughout the course of the war. They were also shaped following the trails left by the refugees inside the country as well as, abroad to the French Roussillon, Mexico or the URSS. Bombed towns, trenches, prisoner or refugee camps, ambulances, hospitals, canteens and children's colonies are “humanitarian spaces” that allow us to think about the notion of neutrality by integrating it into the materiality of the humanitarian interventions on the ground, just as much in the social and political reality of Spain, as well as into the history of foreign policy led by the major global powers during the civil war.

All those interested in participating in this conference presenting a paper should send a 300 words proposal and a brief biography to colloque-guerracivil@unige.ch before May 15, 2016. Proposals in French, English and Spanish are welcome.

SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE

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