

Military Humanitarianism: The Nexus of Humanitarian Impulses and Military Means in the Twentieth Century

Tuesday 14 June 2022 15:00 (1h 30m)

Histories of humanitarianism and the military frequently operate in parallel with one another, enriching the other's interpretations of conflict, power, and international hierarchies. However, these fields have yet to fully engage with the points of connection that complicate existing studies of humanitarian organisations and military actors. This panel seeks to address this lacuna and bring together papers which consider this nexus in detail, locating instances of military humanitarianism and transforming conceptions of international interventions. Rather than attempting to pin down a specific definition of 'military humanitarianism', this panel explores the liminality of humanitarian and military action in practice and the fluidity of identity in conflict environments. By engaging the histories of humanitarianism and counterinsurgency, these papers consider both how humanitarian impulses have influenced military strategy and to what extent military means and logic have shaped the evolution of humanitarian response in the twentieth century. Examining this nexus enables a more nuanced understanding of how humanitarians and military actors were far from distinct categories in conflict contexts and that blurring between these groups was common – if unacknowledged. Building on critical humanitarian histories – challenging humanitarians as impartial or neutral in conflict contexts – this panel seeks to emphasise the tension in defining 'humanitarian action' in war and thus provoking the questions: who is a 'humanitarian' and can a military actor act upon a 'humanitarian impulse'? This panel considers these questions in the context of three case studies, tracing the evolution of 'military humanitarianism' in practice: the US military mission to Armenia in the 1920s; formative United Nations military pursuits in the 1940s; counterinsurgency responses to child soldiering in mid-century Kenya and Cyprus; and the humanitarian intervention into Bosnia during the 1990s.

Abstract time zone

Membership

Track Classification: British International History Working Group