For well over a century, humanitarians and their organizations have used photographic imagery and the latest media technologies to raise public awareness and funds to alleviate human suffering. This volume examines the historical evolution of what we today call “humanitarian photography” – the mobilization of photography in the service of humanitarian initiatives across state boundaries – and asks how we can account for the shift from the fitful and debated use of photography for humanitarian purposes in the late nineteenth century to our current situation in which photographers market themselves as “humanitarian photographers.” This book is the first to investigate how humanitarian photography emerged and how it operated in diverse political, institutional, and social contexts, bringing together more than a dozen scholars working on the history of humanitarianism, international organizations and nongovernmental organizations, and visual culture in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and the United States. Based on original archival research and informed by current historical and theoretical approaches, the chapters explore the history of the mobilization of images and emotions in the globalization of humanitarian agendas up to the present.

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A History

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Acknowledgments

Historians are suckers for origin tales, or at least inveterate spinners of them. Here is ours.

The seeds for our volume were first sowed around a dinner table at a London restaurant in May 2011. A group of us – Davide Rodogno, Heide Fehrenbach, Silvia Salvatici, Caroline Reeves, and Francesca Piana – were participating in a conference on humanitarianism at the German Historical Institute organized by Johannes Paulmann. In becoming acquainted and discussing our research interests that evening, we reached a vague consensus that the visual culture of humanitarianism was not only something worth pursuing, but something we should pursue together. Returning home, Davide and Heide fell into a correspondence about the idea and resolved to seek funding for a workshop on the topic. Grant applications were written, a guest list was brainstormed, participants were recruited, and by December 2012, the project germinated at a stimulating workshop at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva, Switzerland – the historical seat of internationalism. Impressed by the topical range and originality of research presented at the workshop, we resolved to publish a book. You hold the harvest in your hands.

For crucial financial and institutional support for the workshop, we thank the Fonds National Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique and the Graduate Institute, Geneva; its director Philippe Burrin; and its International History Department. In addition, we gratefully acknowledge the generous Opportunity Grant provided by Northern Illinois University, along with the ongoing support of Provost Lisa Freeman and Vice President for Research Lesley Rigg, which allowed us to see this project through from workshop to publication.

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