Introduction

It all began with an epiphany. In late summer 1968, when the winds of New Left protest that had swept through the French capital were beginning to calm down, a group of young doctors left Paris to embark on a humanitarian mission. The medics had enlisted with the French Red Cross's relief operation to aid the civilian population of the West African secessionist state Biafra. The former Eastern Region of Nigeria, which had proclaimed its independence a year before, was facing a humanitarian catastrophe of potentially calamitous proportions. In the civil war that followed Biafra's secession, the Nigerian government put a blockade into effect that dried up the food supply of the landlocked breakaway state. When the French doctors arrived in Biafra, large parts of the population were already afflicted by starvation. Appalled by the sight of the sick and malnourished children and mothers, the aid workers decided that they had to alert the world to what they were seeing: genocide. In the hospitals and refugee camps of Biafra, these French doctors discovered the suffering of the "Third World."[1]

Journalists sent into the enclave reacted similarly. As famed British photojournalist Don McCullin later recalled, what he had to witness in Biafra differed widely from what he had experienced in Vietnam, the Congo or any other conflict he had covered before. In the mission stations of Biafra, he saw the "horrors that were to leave the most enduring impression on my mind [. . .] – the orphaned and abandoned children of Biafra."[2] The humanitarian crisis area was no place for adventure, no "stage for heroism." This experience completely changed his "attitude to warfare." McCullin, as he wrote, "lost all interest in photographing soldiers in action and wanted only to show the world the results of man's inhumanity to man."[3] Years later, the photographer still wished to "demolish the memory of it" but could not leave these

[1] See e.g. Berman, *Power*, ch. 4; Bortolotti, *Hope*, introduction and ch. 2. Kouchner, "Préface"; Kouchner, *Charité Business*, 207–23; Kouchner, *Le malheur*, 107–18; Hamon and Rotman, *Génération, Volume II*, 11–20.
[2] McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, 122.
[3] McCullin, *Sleeping*, 78.

gruesome sights behind.[4] Neither could his colleague Stuart Heydinger. No less seasoned than McCullin, after his assignment for the *Daily Telegraph Magazine* in Biafra, he decided that he would never again report from such crisis areas.[5] McCullin drew different conclusions. Making this pain visible was the photographer's task: "like [the] memories of those haunting pictures of the Nazi death camps, we cannot, must not be allowed to forget the appalling things we are all capable of doing to our fellow human beings."[6] Troubling as these assignments were, by mid-1968, when famine hit the enclave, reporters thus began to stream into Biafra. With British newspapers blazing the trail, newsstands across Western Europe and North America were soon plastered with pictures of Biafra's children, of emaciated figures with bloated bellies and vacant eyes. The British broadcaster ITN was the first to televise images from the area, with other stations following soon. Within a few weeks, the Nigerian Civil War was turned into a humanitarian crisis on the newspaper pages and TV screens of contemporaries almost around the globe.

The war became the first postcolonial conflict to engender a global surge of humanitarian sentiment and activism. Contemporaries across the West feared that the Igbos, the dominant ethnic group in Biafra, would become the victims of genocide.[7] The willingness to donate money was remarkable. A host of intergovernmental and nongovernmental organizations organized airlifts to bring food into Biafra. The crisis prompted the establishment of numerous new activist groups: Biafra committees mushroomed in the West, began to raise funds for the relief operation, and lobbied Western governments to change their foreign policy agendas. Some of these ad hoc committees evolved into NGOs that continue to play a critical role in today's transnational human rights regime, like the Irish NGO Africa Concern or the German organization Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker.[8] The most prominent organization that came out of the Biafra campaign was Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF),[9] founded by the young French doctors who served for the French Red Cross in Biafra. Defying ICRC rules that prohibit public actions that may alienate host governments, they formed an activist group, the "Comité de lutte contre le génocide au Biafra"[10] to advocate for the cause of the starving Biafrans. The Comité evolved into MSF, a human rights NGO, which, according to its proponents,

[4] McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, 124.
[5] *Just a Moment*, 92–9. [6] McCullin, *Unreasonable Behaviour*, 124.
[7] I will use the spelling "Igbo," but will leave alternative spellings such as "Ibo" unaltered in sources.
[8] Society for Threatened Peoples. [9] Doctors Without Borders.
[10] Committee to Combat the Genocide in Biafra.

revolutionized humanitarian work in the closing decades of the twentieth century by calling into question the sovereignty of governments that violate the human rights of their populations, breaking ranks with the ICRC and its cautious diplomacy.

This is at least how founding figures of MSF and many other proponents of this "new humanitarianism" narrate their origin myth: the story of the humanitarian aid operation to Biafra. In these narratives, the Biafran War serves as a watershed event, marking the end of the first century of humanitarianism that began with the founding of the ICRC in 1863 and the passing of the first Geneva Conventions one year later. The founding of MSF in the aftermath of the Biafran famine occurred roughly a century later, at the end of this classical era of humanitarianism. The Nigerian Civil War thus ushered in a new form of human rights politics, one that first emerged in the mission stations and hospitals of Biafra and took full shape in the post–Cold War era, the apogee of humanitarian interventionism. Since Biafra, this new generation of humanitarian activists has discarded the "bystander mentality" of their predecessors, waging media campaigns that focus on the victims. Military intervention, too, is on the table: since NATO's intervention in Kosovo against Milošević's Yugoslavia in 1999, military campaigns have been waged in the name of humanity. The Biafran famine initiated a new age of humanitarian catastrophe broadcast by modern media: the "age of televised disaster" had begun.[11]

Two central tropes can be drawn from these narratives: the "revelation" of the suffering of the "other" in the Third World, and the "revolution" of international politics that the humanitarians initiated afterwards.[12] The trope of "revelation" emphasizes the "discovery" of a whole new world of suffering. As a synecdoche, the sight of the other in pain encapsulates the misery of the Third World in toto. For the protagonists of this humanitarian narrative, this "revelation" is an awakening to the cause of human rights. In the self-styled accounts, as well as in the texts of the movement's hagiographers, these individuals then begin to devote their lives to helping others, unable to bear the misery. A sensory impression – the sight of suffering – is all that their empathy needs to be translated into action. A "revelation" is also a common trope in accounts of the Biafran War: the images of famine globally transmitted from the enclave. The power of images to move people to action is widely held to

[11] Ignatieff, *Warrior's Honor*, 124. See also Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*; Fassin and Pandolfi, eds., *Contemporary States*; Finucane, "Changing roles," 247; Forsyth, "Foreword," 7; Harrison and Palmer, *News*; Moorehead, *Dunant's Dream*, 622; de Waal, *Famine Crimes*, 72–7.

[12] On representations of the "other" see Hall, "Spectacle of the 'Other.'"

be the main reason for the emergence of the transnational campaign on behalf of Biafra. Historians of the conflict also follow this simple model of stimulus and response: when the world was suddenly "confronted with the horrors" of Biafra, they explain, "mass efforts to help [. . .]" followed quickly.[13] The "revelation" of the suffering of the Biafran children leads to almost automatic empathic reactions.

This model of natural empathy is embedded within a "revolution": globalization. The trope of "revolution" should thus not be misunderstood as socialist *Klassenkampf*. The proponents of what came to be called *sans-frontiérisme* ventured to revolutionize international politics *tout court*: the sovereignty of governments, the central tenet of post-Westphalian international order, could not be left unchallenged any longer. Concerned citizens would act on behalf of other citizens, often of other states, to subvert the excesses of state power, which had been evinced so brutally during the World War II and now in a world of despotic postcolonial governments. The visual impetus of "revelation" is not absent from the trope of "revolution." The humanitarian activists forged an alliance with the media, in particular television and photojournalism. To transform international relations and to elevate the power of non-state actors, the citizens of the world needed to be turned into witnesses of the suffering of others.

Similar tropes can be seen at work in the historiography of human rights. In classic accounts of the ascendance to their late-twentieth-century apogee of political currency, human rights are described as "visions seen," tirelessly advocated by strong-willed compassionate individuals working toward a "revolution" of human relations and politics. These individuals are presented as possessing a greater gift of empathy than most of their contemporaries: the "revelation" of human rights coming down on them, they will not flinch until their moral utopia is turned into reality.[14] These tropes can be seen as well, even in accounts that focus less on individual actors. Historians like Lynn Hunt ascribe the rise of human rights to a moral revolution initiated by the European Enlightenment, explaining the emergence of human rights as a result of a new emotional order established then, evolving around what she calls "imagined empathy." At the core of this "revolution" is also a "revelation." After their discovery, human rights expand further and further, simply because of their sheer moral force: once their innate truth is revealed, nothing can stop the "cascading logic" of human rights.[15]

[13] Gould, *Struggle*, 78. See also Smith, *Genocide*, 67 and Wirz, *Krieg in Afrika*, 162.
[14] Lauren, *Visions Seen*. See also Glendon, *World Made New*; Winter, *Dreams*, ch. 4; Winter and Prost, *Cassin*.
[15] Hunt, *Inventing*, 32.

The model of "revelation" and "revolution," however, is a weak one: a person's empathic reaction comes naturally as a result of seeing suffering. Yet, this cannot be true as a blanket statement in view of the many crises and wars that do not become the object of humanitarian campaigns. It takes more than a "revelation" to create such a movement. If we recognize that they are more complicated, however, the tropes of "revelation" and "revolution" can be helpful. The sentiment that something is morally wrong – such as the starvation of children – is a prerequisite for a campaign aiming to undo such an injustice. Yet, in order to animate a network of activists, a cause needs to occupy a prominent place within the "complex of aspirations and concerns" of its key actors, as Christopher Leslie Brown has shown in his seminal study of British abolitionism. Humanitarian causes need to relate "to broader needs and aims of particular actors, to their cultural, political and even personal agendas."[16] In other words: the "distant suffering" has to be turned into a close concern.[17]

Recently, younger historians in particular have turned the study of human rights, long neglected by historians, into a burgeoning field of historical inquiry. In a trenchant critique of Hunt's account of humanitarian sentiment and revolutionary rights as a product of the enlightenment, Moyn set the tone for an emergent new human rights history: human rights, Moyn argues, were a product of the late twentieth century.[18] Contrary to their predecessors – "natural rights" and the "rights of man" – human rights were not tied to national sovereignty. For the rights of man in the French revolutionary tradition, the nation-state was the guarantor of rights. The *declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* made this connection explicit: the rights-bearer is man as citizen. In the human rights regime of today, this has substantially changed: now, the nation-state is the supreme violator of human rights from which individuals need protection, and a supranational legal regime is being envisioned as a safeguard against the excesses of sovereign power. In an age when most political ideologies had lost their allure – most prominently revolutionary socialism – the ideal of human rights thus emerged as Western societies' "last utopia."[19] This new explanation for the rise of human rights is connected to a new meta-narrative about the second half of the twentieth century. Skeptical of narratives that focus on especially empathic individuals or on the power of the unveiled truth of rights, the protagonists of this new history of human rights have sought more structural

[16] Brown, *Moral Capital* 2, 25. See also Eckel, "'Magnifying Glass'"; Stevens, "South Africa."
[17] The term is from Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*.
[18] Moyn, "Genealogy." [19] Moyn, *Last Utopia*.

explanations for their ascendancy. Because it emphasizes an unfolding process, the trope of "revolution" has fared much better under the critical scrutiny of historical inquiry than the trope of "revelation."[20] Critical of the periodization of older accounts, most protagonists of the new history of human rights have increasingly built on recent portrayals of the "long 1970s" as a period of global transformation, and argue that this was the breakthrough period of human rights.[21] Only then, as a rather recent invention, human rights have become one of the "lingua francas" of international politics in the age of audiovisual mass media.[22]

As a story of humanitarian disaster globally transmitted through the accelerating flows of electronic and physical communication, the international history of the Biafran war seems to be a perfect fit for this new body of scholarship. Accordingly, one would assume that the conflict features prominently in the currently burgeoning field of human rights history. However, so far, it has played only a minor role in the field.[23] Moyn, for example, mentions Biafra only once. Then, however, his judgment is unambiguous: humanitarian crises like in Biafra did "not spark the creation of the international human rights movement." Characteristic of this literature, he further contends that the breakthrough for human rights in the late twentieth century "occurred in striking autonomy from humanitarian concern, particularly for global suffering": according to Moyn and others, humanitarianism was an entirely different project that only attained momentum after the end of the Cold War.[24] Viewing human rights as an invention of the 1970s, as these historians do, creates a sharp break between them and the longer history of humanitarian activism, such as abolitionism or the humanitarian interventions of the colonial era, which largely did not use the language of rights. Although, at first glance, human rights and humanitarianism seem connected, historians of human rights widely agree that humanitarianism constitutes an entirely distinct phenomenon.[25] And scholars of humanitarianism conversely distinguish their field from human rights: humanitarianism is a "discourse of needs", human rights a "discourse of rights."[26]

[20] See e.g. Iriye et al., eds., *Human Rights*; Keys, *Reclaiming*.
[21] Moyn, *Last Utopia*. See further Eckel, *Ambivalenz*; Eckel and Moyn, eds., *Breakthrough*; Keys, *Reclaiming*, and, for the wider narrative about the 1970s Schulman, *Seventies*; Ferguson et al., eds., *Shock*; Geyer and Bright, "World History," Maier, "Consigning"; Osterhammel and Petersson, *Geschichte*, chs. 6–7; Rodgers, *Age*.
[22] Cmiel, "Emergence," 1248.
[23] There are no articles dealing with Biafra in "Human Rights," ed. by Grossmann and Sachse; Hoffmann, ed., *Human Rights* or Akira Iriye et al. (eds.), *Human Rights*. Eckel, "Utopie der Moral," 461–2 mentions Biafra briefly. For an exception see Heerten, "Dystopia."
[24] Moyn, *Last Utopia*, 219, 220.
[25] See also Eckel, *Ambivalenz*, 244–8.
[26] Barnett, *Empire of Humanity*, 16.

But, if we create a sharp distinction between human rights and humanitarianism, how can we understand their collective transformational effect on international politics? This does not only run counter to the common-sense association of human rights politics, genocide prevention, and humanitarian interventionism. More importantly, the history of humanitarianism can also be seen to follow a trajectory very similar to the one outlined by the new historians of human rights. Scholars of humanitarianism like, for instance, Philippe Ryfman argue that the late 1960s and the 1970s – when Biafra's global moment occurred – represent a caesura in the history of humanitarianism.[27] The history of humanitarianism can thus be seen to share a periodization with the history of human rights as it is currently narrated. However, because of the compartmentalization of historiographical debates, the proponents of the new history of human rights have not felt the need to delve deeper into the history of conflicts that are mostly associated with the emergence of humanitarian crises, such as the Nigerian Civil War, for example. However, during the crisis in Biafra, contemporaries around the globe suffused the languages of human rights and humanitarianism, of self-determination, of genocide and references to Nazi crimes. These different semantic threads were deeply intertwined. In the following, I will hence argue for a form of conceptual history which focuses on the interplay of a number of terms and concepts. A perspective incorporating a number of related terms and concepts such as human rights, genocide, self-determination, sovereignty as well as the larger field of humanitarian practice can help to make the new forms of politics and activism visible that were characteristic for the Biafran campaign – and for global politics since.[28]

The dominant focus on human rights in the literature sometimes eclipses an assessment of deeper structural changes. What is striking about the rise of human rights is not that it happened in the 1970s, but that it happened at the moment when decolonization was principally over.[29] Even if decolonization itself was not a human rights movement – anticolonial nationalists were primarily interested in the right to self-determination rather than the longer catalogue of human rights, which leads some historians to disentangle the two[30] – it, in effect, cleared the

[27] Ryfman, *histoire*.
[28] My thoughts are based on forms of conceptual history that analyze specific terms and wider semantic fields. See Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*; Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft*; Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*.
[29] As introductions to the history of decolonization see Betts, *Decolonization*; Rothermund, *Dehli, 15. August 1947*; Shipway, *Decolonization*.
[30] Moyn, *Last Utopia*, ch. 3. For the vivid debate about the connection between decolonization and human rights see also Burke, *Decolonization*; Eckel, "Human Rights";

way for the rise of human rights to global prominence. In colonial times, for anyone susceptible to the power of Western European governments, the embrace of human rights was impeded by imperial interests. Colonial powers had often used this rhetoric as a part of their "civilizing mission."[31] However, to circumvent the universal applicability of human rights, European powers tried to exclude their colonial possessions from the UDHR.[32] As John D. Kelly and Martha Kaplan emphasize, decolonization was not only the end-point of a historical process. It also, and this is perhaps more important here, marked the emergence of something new: a postcolonial world of states.[33] Only in this UN world, where sovereignty is – at least symbolically – allocated horizontally and universally to governments around the globe, did human rights become the powerful political idea we know it as today. They became a source of empowerment for citizens as well as for the curtailment of governments' sovereign rights. In a postcolonial world, Western governments could adopt the language of human rights without having to worry about the "boomerang effect" of this rhetoric in their colonies.[34] Activists employing this language could now muster the support of Western states that had previously feared human rights' potential effects. Human rights – and associated concepts – became a global political leitmotif exactly at that historical moment when colonial rule was deleted "from the repertoire of polities that were legitimate and viable in international politics."[35] Colonial forms of interventionism were taboo. But through the language of human rights and humanitarianism, projections of Western power could still be powerfully pursued. In that moment, human rights and humanitarianism began to garner more political legitimacy, legal power, and moral force: they became the only remaining languages left to legitimize interventions in the internal affairs of other states.[36]

In many ways, Biafra stands at the beginning of the genesis of a new postcolonial world order. In the following, I develop a structural argument about the relationship between the rise of political forms associated with human rights and humanitarianism and the demise of imperial rule. The Biafra campaign needs to be situated within larger transformations of global order in the second half of the twentieth century, fostered by the end of empire. As I will argue, the postcolonial condition was decisive for the emergence of new forms of political exchange between

Eckert, "African Nationalists"; Jensen, *Making*; Imlay, "International Socialism"; Klose, *Menschenrechte*; Maul, *Menschenrechte*.

31 Conklin, *Mission*; Conklin, "Colonialism." 32 Burke, *Decolonization*, 114–21.

33 Kelly and Kaplan, *Represented Communities*.

34 The term is from Keck and Sikkink, *Activists*, 24.

35 Cooper, *Colonialism in Question*, 19. 36 Hoffmann, "Human Rights."

actors from the global North and the South – and indeed for a reformulation of power relations between "the West and the rest" (Stuart Hall). These transformations were connected to a new political imagination that evolved around notions of human suffering. Perceived as the first major postcolonial humanitarian crisis, Biafra was a decisive step in the re-imagination of the Third World within a postcolonial world order. This new politics could be expressed in the de-politicizing language of human rights – but did not necessarily need to be.

When the Nigerian Civil War was internationalized in a transnational sphere of humanitarian politics, the Nigerian Civil War – a political conflict – was transformed into "Biafra": a humanitarian crisis. Through the languages of humanitarianism and human rights the conflict was depoliticized, and a regional civil war was turned into a human tragedy on the world stage. That the conflict became internationally visible in this manner is, in the first place, a metaphor. Yet this trope also points to the central role that images played in the conflict. The publication of pictures of the starving "Biafran babies" – and their creation as an icon of Third World misery – was the watershed moment that turned the conflict into a global media event. The analysis of the concepts, ideas and semantics that contemporaries employed to account for the conflict needs to be combined with an analysis of the images that moved the conflict from the unseen edges of international politics into the limelight of contemporary concern. In the age of audiovisual mass media, the internationalization of remote Third World conflicts has become increasingly dependent on images of suffering.[37] In the recent literature on the histories of human rights and humanitarianism, however, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the visual histories of human rights.[38]

In 1967, the year that Biafra and Nigeria entered their calamitous civil war, the French Marxist theorist Guy Débord published his analysis of how, in modern societies, social life is increasingly replaced by its representation. Capitalism fosters what he calls the "society of the spectacle." The spectacle is more than a collection of images: "it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images."[39] In that sense, the images of human suffering that represented the Nigerian Civil War as a humanitarian crisis also signify a social relationship: they denote the relationship between the global North and the global South in a postcolonial world. Biafra became a *pars pro toto* visually encapsulating the

[37] See Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*; Linfield, *Cruel*, esp. ch. 2; Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue*; Sliwinski, *Human Rights*; Sontag, *Regarding the Pain*; Zelizer, *About to Die*. None of these studies analyzes the Biafran images in any detail.
[38] See now, however, Fehrenbach and Rodogno, eds., *Humanitarian Photography*.
[39] Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, 12.

misery of the Third World. Moreover, these evocations of global society's children of sorrow also give a role to Western societies: that of the savior. In the Western gaze, postcolonial conflicts turn into spectacles of a suffering that the observers wish to alleviate. Biafra's global moment was thus connected with a shift in dominant forms of politics aiming to alleviate suffering in the Third World, which, with Hannah Arendt, can be understood as a new form of internationalism, characterized by the shift from solidarity to a politics of pity.[40]

Almost as quickly as the Nigerian Civil War burst into the limelight of international attention, it receded into the shadows again after mere months. The war still dragged on for more than a year of fighting and military stalemate, but the interest of most contemporaries began to decrease quickly in late 1968, and media coverage tapered off. A number of activists continued to lobby governments, to publish pamphlets and other accounts of the crisis, and to organize protest rallies. But, as an issue of international interest, the humanitarian crisis in Biafra was only a short-lived episode, a page one story in the summer of 1968, but relegated to minor status thereafter. In hindsight, the same is true: Biafra has become, at best, a footnote in the international history of the twentieth century.[41] The conflict does not play an important role in narratives about the history of the 1960s and 1970s, neither in popular, nor in academic accounts.[42] Today, the Nigerian Civil War is widely forgotten outside of Nigeria. In this book, I will show why the Biafran War was nevertheless a crucial episode to understand the emergence of our contemporary postcolonial world order – and also why the quick making *and* unmaking of Biafra's global moment are important in this regard.

These observations open up a set of questions about intervention and non-intervention, the act of witnessing and the reformulation of international relations in a postcolonial world: how and why was the Nigerian

[40] Arendt delineates the origins of a modern politics of pity in Rousseau and, in particular, the French Revolution. Arendt, *On Revolution*, ch. 2.

[41] This may also be due to the fact that a sound global history of the twentieth century still needs to be written in monograph-form. Nolte, *Weltgeschichte* – not a satisfactory effort in this direction – mentions Biafra in passing, but confuses the dates. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, does not mention the conflict, and Goedde, "Global Cultures," 567 does so only in passing. Textbooks on twentieth-century history neither deal with the conflict in any depth. Biafra is mentioned in passing in Bulliet (ed.), *Columbia History*, in the chapter Mayall, "Nationalism," 196. Antony Best et al., *International History* do not mention the war. Introductions to international relations since 1945 mention the conflict more regularly, especially those penned by British scholars. See Robbins, *World Since 1945*, 124 and, with some more detail, Young and Kent, *International Relations*, 380–5.

[42] See for instance Gitlin, *Sixties*. One exception is DeGroot, *The 60s Unplugged*, which tries to break with conventional narratives and also mentions Biafra.