



# Humanitarianism(s) in socialist Red Cross societies

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September, 2017



The international Red Cross family built up a network of humanitarian aiders that one cannot pass over when thinking about 20th century humanitarianism. This article will cover a chapter in the history of the Red Cross that is often forgotten – namely what happened when a socialist state[\[1\]](#) had permeated apolitical and philanthropic work?

The national Red Cross societies of Poland, Czech Republic and Slovakia



experienced several profound institutional changes throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Founded in the interwar period (1918-1939), they first saw parliamentary democracy, followed by the Second World War and all its corresponding horrors. During the postwar period, they watched socialist regimes arise, which took over for four decades, until democracy returned in the more or less peaceful revolution of 1989. These organizations survived not only different political systems, but also completely different types of a society.

*Today these Red Cross societies usually skip the socialist period while retelling their history as a narration full of continuity.*[\[2\]](#)

In spite of that, the socialist period is especially revealing for a historian when it comes to humanitarian practices and their transmission. On the one hand, the national Red Cross societies of Poland (PRC) and former Czechoslovakia (CSRC) underwent dramatic organizational changes, having to adapt to a new and pervasive ideology. On the other hand, they found spaces in which they continued their usual everyday routine.

In order to understand what sort of humanitarianism was possible under state socialism, we need to identify spaces in which self-organization was possible. As a matter of principle, let us assume that Red Cross work is humanitarian.

*Thus, the vital question is: to what extent and where exactly was socialism visible in the humanitarian work of PRC and CSRC?*

After having looked through a huge stock of archival material, I would suggest that the answer to this question is surprisingly simple. Maybe historians would argue that it is not even surprisingly simple – just simple in a way that needed extensive archival proof: In a socialist system with so little room for civic commitment humanitarianism must have shown up in grassroots forms.

The Red Cross was the one well-known humanitarian organization that survived



as socialist regimes came into power in East Central Europe. International alliances increased the organization's significance, giving it an image of prestigious progressiveness. In spite of its formal recognition as a socialist mass organization, the Red Cross found tolerance for its self-organization.

*Therefore, I would like to emphasize that, even if Red Cross was a mass organization, it was also involved in grassroots forms of humanitarianism.*

The national Red Cross societies are structured hierarchically, with a central committee usually seated in the country's capital city, and with regional and local units. This is a traditional structure which had characterized all national Red Cross societies from their beginnings. Accordingly, the headquarters of the PRC were located in Warsaw and the headquarters of the CSRC in Prague. This is where the organizations communicated with state institutions, where they dealt with political changes, negotiated with the state or sometimes confronted it. This was also where PRC and CSRC networked with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) from Geneva. That is why PRC and CSRC used their headquarters primarily for strategic purposes, rather than for giving aid.[\[3\]](#)



[Map \(cropped\) by Bacon, G.W. \(1830-1921\)](#) [Public domain],  
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Compared to the headquarters, regional and local Red Cross units rarely experienced surveillance. During state socialism, they continued their regional and local work which was not disturbed by the state. For them, local needs and local problems were important - this led to locally efficient, but limited networks between Red Cross activists, municipal and regional authorities, schools, hospitals, sometimes companies, and the local people. We can find evidence of lived humanitarisms in these local networks.<sup>[4]</sup>

The differences between headquarters and local units of PRC and CSRC can be easily illustrated by the example of voluntary blood donation. In central campaigns, blood donation was primarily promoted as a constant need of medical facilities. As soon as the state had realized how well blood donors fitted with the socialist *New Man*, campaigns also promoted disciplined, responsible, socially active and healthy behavior.<sup>[5]</sup> The image of a *New Man* who helps to establish a *New Society* was one of the central features of socialist ideology. Blood donors embodied this *New Man* in several ways. First, they demonstrated health and





strength. Second, blood donors demonstrated a general solidarity with the “masses”, or “the people”, which the state highly appreciated.[\[6\]](#) Third, blood donation was not limited to men, but was also very pronounced among women. In the socialist rhetoric, blood donors were the working-class people, both men and women.[\[7\]](#) Fourth, blood donation – with its focus on advanced medical care and the idea of constantly growing supplies at the national blood bank – perfectly served as an image of progress.

*The socialist regime used blood donation as a powerful rhetoric device in times of political stagnation, when a humanitarian distraction was needed for mass mobilization.*[\[8\]](#)

For instance, after the Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, the Czechoslovak state exercised distinct control over the CSRC. Accordingly, central campaigns for voluntary blood donation sprung up at this historical moment.[\[9\]](#)

Blood donation in municipalities was something of an organizational challenge. The local Red Cross offices had to provide rooms and local staff for assistance. They also used cars, in order to transport medical staff and equipment from one place to another.[\[10\]](#) They needed to set up a fixed date for a blood donation, because not everyone went for donation together with fellow workers at the factory (e.g. housewives, pensioners). The organization of such an event required a channeled communication with institutions. Still, the success of the humanitarian action depended to a huge extent on individual relations and trust.

Blood donation presents one example of vernacular humanitarianism. The blood donation actions were both highly institutionalized and based on local traditions and experiences (that sometimes could be traced back to the pre-war period). Local practices of blood donation differed from one another and developed autonomously from the headquarters, in the process depending less on the institutional framework and more on the locals’ willingness to donate. Local Red Cross offices cultivated personal relations with people who were ready to help. They supported humanitarian aid on the ground: they shaped how people cared



for others and motivated voluntary actions.

*Furthermore, blood donations were not socially exclusive, but based on universal solidarity and sympathy with all human beings.*

In this respect, the official narratives of state socialism and humanitarianism were very similar. Both promoted universal care for others and the idea that every human being is born equal. When organizing local blood donation events, PRC and CSRC reflected these principles and performed basic humanitarian work. Local blood donation practices probably contributed more to the implementation of Red Cross principles than transnational contacts that were run by the headquarters in Warsaw and Prague.

Although PRC and CSRC claimed to be apolitical organizations, some elements of state socialism could be noticed in their work. For instance, the Janského medal was awarded to frequent voluntary blood donors in Czechoslovakia. The medal is related to a state-propagated legend that Jan Janský discovered the existence of different blood groups. The Czech physician Janský had contributed to the classification of blood types, but it was Karl Landsteiner who got the Nobel Prize and international recognition for the discovery of blood types.[\[11\]](#) Rewriting the history of medicine, Czechoslovakian socialist propaganda created a national myth that led the Red Cross to distribute the Janského medal (to this day).





[Photo](#) by [Dominik Gubi](#) (flickr, [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

In Poland, a movement of voluntary blood donors was originally initiated as an expression of solidarity with protesters of the Hungarian Revolution (1956) and the Poznań 1956 protests.[\[12\]](#) This politicized, anti-authoritarian motivation was clearly out of place in the socialist state. This is why the PRC discussed the voluntary blood donations as a part of a systematic effort to support public welfare, avoiding any reference to the political protests.[\[13\]](#) Such systematic efforts can be found in many Red Cross activities of that time. The PRC adapted itself to a certain socialist rhetoric to make sure that all activities appeared to be under their headquarters' – and thus the state's – control.

This points to one of the reasons why the national Red Cross societies in Poland, Czech Republic, and Slovakia today avoid remembering the socialist period.

*National Red Cross organizations under state socialism had to constantly balance between the socialist ideology and the humanitarian principles of the international Red Cross movement.*

They never lost contact to either of them – they were actually active parts of both systems.

Let us take a closer look at the similarities of socialist and non-socialist Red Cross societies by going back to the example of blood donation. In the course of an average donation event, the Red Cross closely cooperated with a hospital in order to take care of between 50 and 100 donors. While PRC and CSRC were usually responsible for three tasks – propaganda, registration, and social care – , the hospital's staff was in charge of medical care, assistance, and treatment. One could say that the Red Cross was responsible for the donor before and after the donation, whereas the hospital took over responsibility for the donor only while the blood was drawn. (The hospital was also responsible for what happened with the blood bag). In what way do these blood donation events differ from non-



socialist contexts?

The blood drawing itself did not show any kind of “infiltration” of a socialist ideology. How could the state possibly intervene into medical procedures? True – the blood donation events were sometimes timed with important dates celebrated in Warsaw or Prague. For instance, on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the 9th congress of the Communist Party in 1979, the CSRC in Pilsen organized a huge blood donation event. At first, this looks like a political decision. However, there was probably another reason: this date was also the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the CSRC in Pilsen.[\[14\]](#)

*For this reason, we need to decenter the image of the Red Cross as an international humanitarian player and to have a look at its local practices.*

In the work of PRC and CSRC we can find both practices motivated by socialism and by humanitarianism. In fact, these Red Cross organizations very well integrated into the socialist states because they combined both moral directions.

The principle of voluntariness illustrates well this combination. Blood donation was voluntary in principle. Still, there was some level of coerciveness: factories organized collective donation events during which their workers gave blood; sometimes they offered a day off for all voluntary blood donors. This coerciveness was related to the idea of a public good and was not particularly socialist. In order to motivate more people to donate blood also contemporary western, neoliberal, non-socialist states offer free meals or drinks. PRC and CSRC balanced between humanitarian principles and socialist methods. In the end both promoted blood donation as a voluntary engagement that incorporated a common social duty. In this respect PRC and CSRC themselves appealed to the responsibility and solidarity of the socialist *New Man*.





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Blood donation is an example that shows how everyday routines went hand in hand with local networking. While political intervention was commonly exercised in the organizational centers, local Red Cross units worked more or less independently. It is perhaps not a coincidence that both the Red Cross and the socialist mass organizations have had a clear hierarchical structure – political influence probably worked in a similar way in the humanitarian and other kinds of organizations during state socialism.

In conclusion, the work of PRC and CSRC proves that humanitarianism could fit not only with the liberal democratic, but also with the socialist ideology – under certain conditions. To study humanitarianism in different socialist contexts indicates that we definitely need to rethink the concept of humanitarianism more broadly.



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[1] Here, I refer to states such as socialist Poland and Czechoslovakia, which had centralized economy and a one-party system. They were largely patron-states that centralized and supervised various aspects of life.

[2] See, for instance: Abramek, Zdzisław (1996, 2001, 2003); Švejnoha, Josef (1990, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2008); Junas, Ján (1989, 1990); Mintalová, Zora (2005, 2006).

[3] AAN 2/284/13 (1950) and NA, archivní fond ČSČK, ka 9-18 (1952-1974)

[4] ANK/III/29/1241 and ANK/IV/29/3029 and AMP, fond ČSČK Plzeň, ka 2840, ka 3690-3691, ka 4295-4298

[5] e.g. Švanda, Miloslav (1978)

[6] NA, archivní fond ČSČK, ka 11 (1956)

[7] ANK/IV/29/3029/74 and Dobrý, Eduard (1957:41)



[8] cp. Bloch, Štefan (1977) and Bečková, Hedviga (1989)

[9] AMP, fond ČSČK Plzeň, ka 4295

[10] AMP, fond ČSČK Plzeň, ka 2840

[11] Štrbáňová, Soňa (2011)

[12] Maciejewski, Stanisław (2011:97)

[13] ANK/IV/29/3029/78

[14] AMP, fond ČSČK Plzeň, ka 4295

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