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Civil Society

Britain has been the starting place and home of many of the largest and most active humanitarian pressure groups and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). From the campaign against slavery in the 18th century, through the Anti-Corn Law League and the efforts to revive the Olympic Games in the 19th century¹ to the Peace Pledge Union in the 1930s, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) in the Second World War, Amnesty International and dozens of other organisations subsequently, British culture spawns NGOs. Today, Oxfam and its kind offer aid to countries suffering from famine or civil war and try to encourage economic development, others try to prevent mistreatment of political prisoners, female circumcision, torture, damage to the environment and cruelty to animals. Benevolent as their intentions are intended to be, they involve interference in other cultures; Japanese resent being encouraged not to kill sharks and whales, Koreans not to eat dogs, Chinese not to use ivory as an aphrodisiac, Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan, dislike being criticised for mutilating thieves and for their treatment of women, dictatorial governments everywhere object to being pressed to treat their citizens with more consideration. Very often the targets of such campaigns suspect ulterior motives and point to the deficiencies in the British or Western record. When at the start of the 21st century Western media were filled with stories about atrocities committed in the Darfur region of Sudan by militia supported by the government, the Islamic media and officials derided such reports as variously designed to damage the Islamic world, to enable the United States to gain control of Sudan's oil or to divert attention from Israeli mistreatment of the Palestinians and from US disasters in Iraq.²

NGO pressure is often motivated by some of the feelings which encouraged, or justified, imperialism and particularly the desire to

'improve' the behaviour of other nations. The sort of adventurous, idealistic young people who went out to govern parts of the Empire in the 19th century now join UN development agencies or NGOs working in the Third World. As communities in the West become more aware of what is happening in other continents, so the culturist urge to interfere becomes greater. Moreover this interference is often with age-old behaviour. As the philosopher T. E. Hulme once put it:

There are certain doctrines which for a particular period seem not doctrines, but inevitable categories of the human mind. Men do not look on them merely as correct opinions, for they have become so much a part of the mind, and lie so far back, that they are not really conscious of them at all.³

The problem in a globalised world is that what seems self-evident in one country can be very different from what seems irrefutable somewhere else. In one part of the world many believe insults to the Prophet Mohammed should be punished by death, in another part many insist free speech means the right to criticise or satirise any doctrine or belief.⁴ The Western NGOs believe that their views on freedom, torture, corruption, standards of imprisonment, women's rights, treatments of animals and the environment reflect absolute standards. But they are far from universal and they inevitably lead to friction.⁵

Thus, some humanitarian pressure groups have played a major part in sustaining the interventionist ethic over the last 200 years, while others have been the voice of those most opposed to war and to the exploitation of power by the Anglo-Saxon nations. The dilemma over the use of force is inescapable; oppose the use of force, as the free-trade movement did in the mid-19th century, and you ignore the slave trade; oppose the use of force in the 1930s and you close your eyes to the creeping spread of right-wing totalitarianism across Europe, North Africa and East Asia; oppose Britain's membership of NATO and you leave the world wide-open to the expansion of communism; oppose peacekeeping missions and you allow massacres in Rwanda or expose the Bosnians and Kosovans to ethnic cleansing by the Serbs. On the other hand, Western governments and peoples only have limited knowledge of areas outside Europe and their interventions are often supported by poor intelligence and have unintended consequences; it proved, for example, impossible during the Cold War to distinguish between the Third World nationalists and the anti-Western communists, while the removal of Saddam Hussein from control of Iraq in 2003 unleashed a violent civil

war between Shiites and Sunnis. Some argue that the Western desire to encourage Third World states to develop economically leads to constant military intervention to stabilise and culturist efforts to 'improve' weak governments.

From the 1830s onwards wave after wave of anti-war movements broke over British governments in attempts to limit British interventionism in particular and war in general. Consciously, or more often unconsciously, they tried to emulate the success of the movement against slavery which led to the liberation of the slaves in Britain itself in 1772, to the banning of the slave trade in British ships in 1807, to the freeing of slaves in British Trans-Atlantic colonies in 1834 and finally to the ending of the open international trade in slaves. Slavery – the absolute possession of one human by another – was a human institution as old as war. Indeed it was a substitute for massacre after victory and, if it could be ended despite its longevity, it seemed that war could be abolished in the same sort of way. But Britain, as the leading power outside Europe, had used, or threatened to use, force against other states to stop the slave trade; ending war was not within British power and logically dependent on the willing cooperation of other states. Obviously such cooperation would not be given by Social Darwinist states, such as Japan and Germany in the 1930s. Nor would it be given by states or peoples who believe that war is the only way to achieve justice, as the Palestinians do today; nor would it be given by those who fear imminent attack. But, even if all these specific problems were overcome, war would still be the ultimate recourse of the state, just as rebellion or internal war is the ultimate resource of the persecuted subject. The United Nations has tried to make warfare illegal unless authorised by the Security Council or in defence, but there have been countless undeclared wars since 1945, while the United Nations itself had to decide between watching its peacekeepers humiliated, or turning to peace enforcement and the employment of lethal force.⁶ In some ways, it must be said, the 'abolition' of slavery has followed the same course, for whilst it appeared to have been abolished more than a century ago, 'people trafficking' has actually increased in Europe since the collapse of communism, and women and children are still treated as virtual slaves in many poor countries.

Mass pressure groups began to emerge in the 18th century as the politically involved community, or civil society, expanded. The expansion was due to industrialisation, the spread of education and improvements in communications.⁷ One campaign emulated another, though their methods were gradually refined and extended as experience accumulated. Those who believed passionately in the abolition of the slave

trade or the establishment of free trade, and the widening of the franchise, had to mobilise the public if they were to have any impact on Parliament, not least because they were confronted with powerful vested interests. The slave owners and traders, and others who benefited from the prosperity of the East Indies, bitterly resented moves to abolish slavery; the great landowners generally opposed the repeal of the Corn Laws and Tories looked with dread on the widening of the franchise which they believed 'must accomplish the entire overthrow of the existing constitution'.⁸ On the other hand, governments were willing, in the end, to cede ground to public opinion, hence the importance for the pressure groups of giving the impression that they were representative of a substantial minority; some historians have claimed, for example, that perhaps one in five British males signed anti-slavery petitions, an astonishing proportion given the primitive communications at the time, the predominantly rural population and the illiteracy of the vast majority.⁹ Apart from the impact which such campaigns had on elections, governments had a very reasonable fear of civil unrest and their instinct was to compromise with the rising manufacturing interests and the ever-growing mass of urban workers. Home secretaries kept the ultimate resource of the state, the army, in the background as a last resort for maintaining order; they knew that the promiscuous use of force could provoke ever greater fury, an assessment reinforced by experience from the 'Peterloo Massacre' in Manchester in 1819, when several protesters were killed by soldiers.¹⁰

It has not been easy for historians to explain why the first great mass movement, the campaign against slavery, emerged in Britain at the end of the 18th century rather than in some other country at some other time. Even if it was attributed to the rise of the Evangelical movement and particularly the Clapham Sect and its leaders, this left unanswered the question why the Evangelicals became so involved when their main interest was in the general diffusion of Christianity at home and abroad and in the reform of the Anglican Church. Moreover, there were always commentators who loathed the Evangelical movement for its alleged self-righteousness and hypocrisy, and who disliked attributing any achievements to its actions. Prominent amongst these was the radical commentator William Cobbett, who argued that the Evangelicals ignored the sufferings of the British working class, a criticism also voiced by the slavers' leaders. After the end of the Second World War the Trinidadian Prime Minister and former Oxford student Eric Williams saw the anti-slavery movement as simply a reflection of the interests of the new capitalists. Others argued that African protest

and revolt, together with popular opposition to slavery in Britain, did more to abolish the hated institution than the actions of a handful of Evangelicals. The most prominent abolitionist, the MP for Hull and Yorkshire, William Wilberforce was accused of monomania, racism and self-righteousness.¹¹

Until the late 18th century most British people were hardly aware of the issue or simply accepted slavery as a fact of life though, ever since Britain began trading in slaves, there had been some educated people who did react with dismay. One such was Granville Sharp, who almost single-handedly forced the Chief Justice Baron Mansfield to reverse his view that slavery was legal in Britain and to announce in 1772 that 'the state of slavery . . . is so odious that nothing can be suffered to support it but positive law'. Sharp had been discouraged by his own legal advisers but had set out to teach himself the relevant laws and to disprove the conventional wisdom about the legality of slavery. As a result of his campaigns, several thousand slaves, who had been brought to Britain by their owners, were suddenly emancipated.

Anti-slavery sentiment was particularly prevalent amongst Methodists and Quakers. But their first instinct was to try to convert the slaves to Christianity; some even argued that the trade was beneficial because it made such conversions possible. Churchmen who attempted to convert slaves were generally better received in the American colonies than in the West Indies where planters tried to shut them out altogether.¹² But, after the American colonies broke from Britain, the British Churches could focus their attention on the remaining colonies. Recent scholarship has therefore stressed the vital importance of the War of Independence for the campaign against slavery.¹³

It was the Reverend James Ramsay's *Essay on the Treatment of African Slaves*, published in 1784, rather than Mansfield's verdict, which first drew the issue to the attention of the wider public. He was encouraged to write by the deeply religious Anglican group centred round the Kent village of Teston, including the authoress Hannah More, Bishop Porteus of Chester and Sir Charles Middleton, the comptroller of the Royal Navy and his wife. What made Ramsay's book so effective was that he could document the conditions which slaves endured because he had lived for many years in the West Indies and had actually owned slaves himself. He forced the slave owners and traders onto the defensive. Many retaliated by attacking Ramsay, others stressed the value of slavery and its importance to Britain.

The Evangelicals took up the subject for a variety of motives; they saw the evil of slavery, they wanted to waken the Anglican Church

to its moral mission and to compete with the Nonconformists. They were profoundly culturist, they wanted to convert the slaves but they were stymied by the racism of the planters who did not want the slaves to be treated as men. Thus emancipation was the only hope and they struggled to end the slave trade through the French wars, when anything that could be represented as revolutionary was suspect and when any weakening of Britain's economic or naval power was bitterly resented. Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce and their colleagues spread information about slavery by articles in the press, pictures of Africans in chains and songs about the issue. And finally they were successful.¹⁴ In January 1807 British ships were prohibited from carrying slaves and the decree was enforced on British ships by Royal Navy cruisers; in 1811, a further law sentenced any British subjects who broke this law to transportation to Australia and in 1824 slave trading became a capital offence. The abolitionists had been challenged to duels, they had been ridiculed inside and outside Parliament but they had persevered in their determination.¹⁵ In 1834 overt slavery itself was abolished in the British Empire, the plantation owners were given £20 million, equivalent to 1 billion in modern terms, to ease the transition and the ex-slaves were asked to work as part-time 'apprentices' for the plantations for another 12 years.¹⁶

British anti-slavery patrols to stop foreign slave ships continued, despite intense domestic opposition. Mr Hutt, the MP for Gateshead, complained that by 1848 patrols had cost £21 million and worsened the slaves' conditions:

In their solicitude for the welfare of the people of Africa, they had sacrificed in untold numbers the lives of their countrymen... [yet] the slave trade was more extensive now than before they undertook to suppress it.... The world never saw such horrors as were being perpetuated in these regions in consequence of their interference.¹⁷

Hutt claimed that the slaves often starved or were murdered if they became too weak to move because they were kept on the African coast until the British squadron departed and the slavers could make the Atlantic crossing. The French were unwilling to cooperate, while the Spanish and Portuguese authorities were deeply implicated in the trade, which was so lucrative that it turned paupers into grandees in a matter of months. MPs warned of the dangers that British merchant vessels would be accused by foreign officers of preparing to take slaves on board.

One such ship had been condemned by the Portuguese simply because it had more water on board than seemed justified by the size of the crew.

In the later years the struggle against the slave trade was maintained by the bombastic Lord Palmerston, both as foreign minister and as prime minister, who insisted on keeping British cruisers off the African coast to catch British and foreign slave ships. Alongside those with an interest in the trade, the free traders and Quakers also opposed him because they objected to the use of force. It was indeed a perfect example of the perennial dilemma; do nothing and you may allow mass infringements of human rights and even murder; use force and you may initiate a prolonged war. In the February 1848 debate Palmerston disputed Hutt's claim that the conditions in the slaving ships were worse than they had been before the British began their efforts to interdict the trade and he denied that anti-slavery patrols were ineffective by pointing to the high cost of slaves in Brazil and the United States. If the cruisers were withdrawn, 'we should have the disgrace of being the authors of the crimes and barbarities which the people of this country would shudder to behold'.¹⁸ Conversely, the leading free traders Richard Cobden and John Bright agreed with those who believed that the costly and 'futile' anti-slave patrols hindered the growth of normal trade, which they believed would lead to the demise of slavery, and threatened to involve Britain in wars. They also knew that the anti-slavery campaigners Thomas Clarkson and Granville Sharp had been behind the founding of the first British colony in Africa, Sierra Leone, where they landed slaves freed in Britain or escaped to Nova Scotia from the United States, and that they hankered after wider British intervention. Such activists believed that colonisation would develop the African continent and hamper the hated trade. In the meantime, the anti-slave patrols antagonised the slave-importing states led by Brazil and could, indeed, have led to war.¹⁹ As one of Palmerston's critics put it:

[The government] had set at nought justice and law – they had trampled upon the independence of sovereign states – they had endeavoured to fix the name and character of piracy upon acts which the law of nations recognised... They had scorned the warnings of the greatest modern judicial authorities... The consequence had been to disgust the nations with this philanthropic cant...²⁰

One looks in vain in the index of John Morley's biography of Richard Cobden for references to slavery or the anti-slavery campaign.²¹ The

man who has gone down in history as the archetypal realist, Palmerston, took the moral high ground in this case against the liberal free traders.²²

The free trader's pressure group, the Anti-Corn Law League was founded in 1839. It was dedicated to ending agricultural protection and thereby making food cheaper for the new urban working classes, thus helping industry at the expense of the landed interests. The League's methods owed much to the earlier anti-slavery movement and to the Chartists who campaigned for the widening of the franchise, but it was constantly developing new propaganda techniques or improving on old ones.²³ It sent tens of thousands of leaflets to local organisers who passed them on to potential supporters, it arranged lecture tours by its chosen speakers in all corners of the British Isles, had mugs and other presents made to publicise the League, and its supporters constantly lobbied Parliament to end agricultural protection.

The League's leaders had a semi-pacifist agenda – one reason for their opposition to the Royal Navy's anti-slavery patrols – and they insisted that increased trade would lead to peace between nations. They saw the Tories, the landowners, imperial interests and the armed forces as their enemies. Cobden told one of his colleagues in April 1842 that the economic isolation, produced by tariffs, had to be broken down by free trade so that war between economically dependent states would become more difficult; free trade would also erode colonial ties which in his view had been the chief source of war for the previous 150 years. In sum, 'free trade, by perfecting the intercourse, and securing the dependence of countries upon one another, must inevitably snatch the power from the governments to plunge their people into wars'.²⁴ In this Cobden and other free traders have been over-optimistic; Germany and Britain had very strong trading ties before the two World Wars and Japan's extensive trade with the British Empire increased antagonism between the two countries in the 1930s. Such trade was only too often seen as threatening and unfair rather than advantageous to all.²⁵ It may be, sometimes, that contact between financiers and businessmen does gradually reduce misconceptions and misunderstandings and pave the way to greater international harmony, but this depends upon general acceptance of the view that the trade is mutually beneficial.

Cobden and other free traders stoutly opposed the British decision to go to war against Russia to protect Turkey in 1854 and they were subjected to the same sort of obloquy which Bishop Bell received for his opposition to bombing in the Second World War. But humanitarian feelings were not entirely cast aside and a new sort of pressure group emerged to help wounded British soldiers. Protests over their poor

treatment grew so loud that the Secretary for War Sidney Herbert tried to improve the situation by encouraging nurses to go to the front.²⁶ Amongst these was Florence Nightingale, then already known for her nursing abilities. At Scutari Nightingale and her 37 colleagues are said to have dramatically reduced the death rate amongst the wounded by buying the necessary medicines and improving the hygiene. Subsequently, Nightingale helped Herbert with the Royal Commission on Army Medical Conditions, which established an Army Medical School to train specialist military doctors and drew up sanitary rules for barracks.

Increased media coverage of warfare, even if the newspapers played down the sufferings involved, and the ease with which civilians could now journey to the battlefield and report on their observations internationalised pressure to improve the treatment of the wounded. The Red Cross was founded by the Swiss doctor Henri Dunant in 1864 in reaction to what he had seen of the battle of Solferino between the French and the Austrians in 1859, when many of the wounded received no treatment and no food or water.²⁷ Humanitarian pressure groups thus flourished in response to press reports and they, in turn, encouraged further public and media pressure to reduce the suffering involved. Thus the St John Ambulance Society and the Society for Aiding and Ameliorating the Condition of the Sick and Wounded in Time of War emerged from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871. The British National Aid Society, which was also started in response to that war in August 1870, quickly raised over £294,000 under the patronage of Queen Victoria and her son, the future Edward VII.²⁸ Similarly, the Quakers set up a War Victims Relief Fund which provided food to civilians in Alsace and Lorraine, the provinces transferred from France to Germany.²⁹

Each great war in Europe produced a corresponding increase in the activity and a number of humanitarian pressure groups, and the First World War heralded the emergence of societies popularising the 18th-century idea of preventing the outbreak of war by developing international organisations. Many radical intellectuals blamed the Liberal government's policy of balancing German power by aligning Britain with the French and Russians for the country's intervention in the First World War, if not for the war itself. This anti-war group included two future Labour leaders, Ramsay MacDonald and Arthur Ponsonby, who established the Union of Democratic Control to campaign for a 'new', more idealistic foreign policy. This policy was to be more open to public scrutiny and thus more democratic. The Union was critical of the aristocratic and secretive Foreign Office and of its failure to follow

'true' liberal principles which were anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and anti-militaristic. Despite the hostility it evoked during the fighting, the UDC deeply influenced subsequent Labour party policy and contributed to the idealistic atmosphere in which foreign policy was debated during the inter-war period, the deeply felt support for the League of Nations and the opposition towards helping to preserve the European balance of power.³⁰

Many UDC members worked during the war years for the League of Nations Society, which advocated establishing such an eponymous international body. They believed that the members of the League should agree to settle all their disputes either through judicial arbitration or through a Council of Inquiry; they should protect each other if attacked by a non-party and admit any 'civilized' state to membership.³¹ The Society flourished after the United States entered the war in 1917 and President Wilson encouraged their activities. Members had long been in touch with parallel bodies in the United States, now they could exhort more people within the British elite, such as the Archbishop of Canterbury and General Smuts, to back their campaign. There is no doubt that their discussions and public meetings helped to create the general atmosphere in which the seminal idea of replacing the informal concert of Europe with a permanent international organisation to coordinate international affairs became acceptable to the British and other governments.

Meanwhile, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) was founded at a conference in The Hague, which brought together some 1200 women from 12 countries in April 1915. The delegates wanted the neutral countries to mediate an end to the war. They also demanded the extension of the franchise to women and the representation of women at the post-war peace conference. In other words, just as some who opposed the extension of the franchise believed that it would empower the allegedly xenophobic working class, the League believed that enfranchising women would reduce governments' propensity to go to war and bring greater security to international relations. Public opinion polling has now confirmed that Western women are less interventionist than men. For example, in November 1940 Gallup apparently found over 56 per cent of US males, who responded to its polls, believed that the time had come for the United States to take strong measures against Japan, but only 42 per cent of women felt so.³² On the other hand, once the war had begun, the gap between male and female opinion narrowed; Gallup found that 86 per cent of American men and 83 per cent of women supported the dropping of the

atomic bombs in Japan in 1945.³³ The WILPF was right that women are generally less willing to accept the idea that war may be a lesser evil than doing nothing in some circumstances, though the gap between the two sexes is not always as wide as the organisation suggested.

In the inter-war years the WILPF added its voice to the UDC and others who denounced the Paris peace settlement for allowing the conquerors to expand their territories, allegedly denying the principle of self-determination and disarming only the defeated powers. They criticised the dominance of the League of Nations by the Great Powers and sent missions to areas of conflict to investigate conditions and seek out mediators. The League's members objected to British policy in Ireland, the US occupation of Haiti and the Franco-Belgian intervention in the Ruhr, and campaigned constantly for disarmament. In 1935 the WILPF condemned the persecution of the German Jews, and protested against the Japanese annexation of Manchuria and the Italian seizure of Abyssinia. However, when the democracies began belatedly to arm to meet Fascist aggression, WILPF campaigned against British and French preparations. Once war broke out, following the German attack on Poland, the League's members continued to call for mediation by the neutral nations, while its own headquarters was moved to the United States when Washington was still neutral.³⁴

In 1934, as Hitler's control on Germany tightened, Dick Sheppard, the Canon of St Paul's, founded the Peace Pledge Union. The Union, whose members pledged to renounce war and never to sanction another, attracted the support of Arthur Ponsonby, the leader of the Labour opposition in the House of Lords from 1931 to 1934, George Lansbury, the leader of the Labour party from 1931 to 1935 and writers such as Aldous Huxley, John Middleton Murray, Bertrand Russell, Storm Jameson and Siegfried Sassoon.³⁵ The Union's ideas were spread through its journal, *Peace News*, as well as lectures and articles in the general press. The Union drew up a memorandum which was read by George Lansbury during the debate on the National Government's defence policy in March 1938. It argued that:

Just as it is impossible to end war by war, so to-day it is morally and materially impossible to defend national democracy from fascism by war. Democracy itself must perish in that process. . . . Fascism flourishes because of the belief that in the world as it is violence is the only means by which the intolerable injustices under which nations suffer can be redressed. The ringed fence of arms which the democratic nations provide against fascism encourages it in its evil ways.³⁶

In fact, unfortunately, the perennial moral dilemma about intervention could not be escaped so easily. The Nazis planned to dominate their neighbours by force and the Japanese to lord it over Asia. Only the massive armies deployed by the United States, Britain and Soviet Union could halt their tide of aggression. The pacifists focused on the horrors of war, not the horrors which would occur without it. When war did break out, the peace movements were temporarily stunned; as Christopher Driver pointed out in his sympathetic study of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), 'the opinion forming classes of Britain had lost their faith in political utopias'.³⁷

Thus it was not until 1958 that a powerful new wave of anti-war feeling developed into the CND. Like the anti-slavery movement, this was essentially a moral crusade; 'if Britain could no longer rule by force then surely she might exert moral and cultural, and therefore, political, influence'.³⁸ Like the Peace Pledge Union, CND came to include large segments of the intellectual elite including artists and writers such as E. M. Forster and Henry Moore, historians such as A. J. P. Taylor, philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, clergymen such as Canon Collins, and journalists such as James Cameron. It is Cameron's memoirs which, perhaps, best capture the movement's urgency and passion. He ascribed his views to reporting on two US nuclear tests in the late 1940s, though, no doubt, his observation of subsequent crises increased his fear that they would 'escalate' out of control. He wrote afterwards, 'in those days there seemed to me nothing of comparable importance. Looking back, I see no reason to change my mind.'³⁹ While CND effectively captured the headlines by its marches on the nuclear weapons research centre at Aldermaston, these tactics may also have alienated other people. Polling data suggests that many oppose demonstrations, even when they support the cause and thus CND polarised opinion by its methods.⁴⁰ CND failed to convert the Labour party to its views and split in 1960 over the best way of bringing pressure to bear on the government. A minority, including Bertrand Russell, set up the Committee of 100 leading figures who would employ passive resistance tactics, such as blocking the roads outside airbases.⁴¹

In retrospect, there was little disagreement between the campaigners and the successive governments in the 1950s about the threat to Britain's safety which the use of nuclear weapons represented. According to his doctor, Lord Moran, Winston Churchill worried constantly about mankind's chances of survival and the *White Papers* on defence were extremely blunt about the prospects: 'If global war were to break out it would... be a struggle for survival of the grimmest kind.... Whatever

the preparations made, an attack on this country would involve loss of life and destruction on an unparalleled scale.⁴²

The CND's supporters simply disagreed with the government about means and risks; in their view there was no time to wait for agreement with the Soviets on disarmament or to rely on deterrence, Britain should reject continental interventionism and abandon its nuclear weapons forthwith in order to avoid becoming a target in the event of a war between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. This disagreement was often also a consequence of conflicting analyses of the Soviet Union; the government's supporters saw it as a totalitarian state similar to Nazi Germany, whereas many of CND's supporters saw it as much less threatening.⁴³ Again, a historian might say that they both were partly right; Stalin exercised tighter control and was more brutal to his people than Hitler was to the non-Jewish Germans, but Moscow's rulers were also more cautious in their foreign policy.⁴⁴

Even after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, it is hard to assess the CND's impact on the course of events. On the one hand the movement never weakened government support for the maintenance of the British nuclear deterrent, on the other hand it encouraged the government to put its nuclear force 'off-shore' by deploying the weapons in submarines. James Cameron argued that CND played a significant role in bringing about the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, prohibiting tests in the atmosphere, although this probably exaggerates the movement's influence in the United States.⁴⁵ The very fact that Western pressure groups were demonstrating in favour of unilateral disarmament may have generated a more benevolent or, at least, more divided image of the West. The Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, for example, appears to have seen Western society as profoundly split between warmongers and peaceful elements.⁴⁶ The peace movements emphasised Western idealism in the 1930s and the Axis took advantage of apparent Western weakness and divisions to push their aggression. In the nuclear age and confronted with the combined strength of the NATO allies, Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev could only push the West so far without bringing NATO and the Warsaw Pact to the brink of a mutually disastrous war.

The richest pressure groups since 1945 have been those concerned not so much with ending wars as with feeding and generally assisting civilians afflicted by war, earthquake or famine. During the First World War the Commission for Relief in Belgium, encouraged by the American millionaire Herbert Hoover, helped to keep thousands of Belgian and French citizens alive under German rule despite the indifference of the

occupation forces and the British naval blockade. Already by December 1914, 200,000 people in Brussels, one-third of the city's population, were receiving food in Hoover's free canteens.⁴⁷ In the Second World War Nazi rule bore even harder on the occupied peoples and the danger of starvation was particularly acute in Greece, which was still trying to incorporate refugees expelled by Turkey after the First World War.⁴⁸ During the winter of 1941–1942, 200,000 Greeks starved and, altogether, half a million may have died of starvation and resulting diseases during the war as a whole. Grass was boiled for its minimal food value, children scavenged in rubbish dumps, and the middle classes sold everything they possessed in an effort to survive.⁴⁹ Several famine-relief committees were established in response, encouraged by Bishop Bell and others, and on 5 October 1942 they were joined by Oxfam. The efficacy of such organisations was, however, limited by the British government's reluctance to take away the Nazis' legal responsibility for looking after the occupied peoples and the shortage of food in Britain itself.

Once the war ended, Oxfam joined the campaigns for famine relief in Germany and elsewhere to channel the funds they raised through the Friends' Relief Service. Despite the continued reluctance of the government, which was only too well aware how short rations were in Britain, such efforts helped offset some of the worst effects of the food shortages and cold devastating the continent. Rations in the British zone of Germany were set at 1000 calories a day against 2800 in Britain and this meant that many were poised on the brink of starvation.⁵⁰ One British army officer noted, 'I saw clearly the pallor, lassitude, listlessness and that apathetic resignation which accompanies early starvation... I was pestered by children for food. I saw women cry for bread in the streets. I saw numerous people collapse by the wayside.'⁵¹ The economy recovered only very gradually and the threat of mass starvation slowly receded.

Oxfam made history when it established its first shop in the City of London in November 1947. This grew into the network of charity shops selling second-hand clothes, books and other items which are a familiar sight on the streets of British towns. The Committee advertised its objective as 'the relief of suffering arising as a result of wars or of other causes in any part of the world'. Over the years it helped to reduce famines in India and Africa, as well as the sufferings from the civil war in China, the Korean War and the Hungarian uprising. Oxfam also established the pattern for a whole series of humanitarian NGOs which have found fertile soil in Britain and elsewhere since 1945.⁵² They act partly as pressure groups trying to persuade governments to give more help to poor

countries and partly as relief organisations with their own funds and staff. They also moved from trying to bring relief to starving peoples to trying to help them develop economically so that famines would not occur and endemic poverty would be reduced or even disappear.

While anti-war pressure groups have become much less visible and less wealthy than those involved in helping the Third World, there are signs of a swing in the other direction. Some analysts have begun to criticise the whole idea of development, arguing that it produces 'unending' wars of intervention by the West and that it underplays or even destroys the self-reliance of the Third World. They suggest that during the Cold War 'NGOs expanded as petty sovereigns in the limited space between corrupt and inefficient Third World states on the one hand and complicit and bureaucratic Western governments on the other.'⁵³ This, in turn, encouraged Western (and UN) military intervention when, as in Iraq or Afghanistan, the Third World states deviated too obviously from Western hopes by, for example, harbouring terrorist groups or resorting to drug production. In other words NGOs were part of a new imperialism and limited sovereignty for the Third World states. The critics call instead for a greater acceptance of cultural differences between nations and thus much reduced Western intervention in the Third World. Despite their different political orientations, there is, in fact, agreement between such critics and Samuel Huntington's suggestions in his widely read and controversial analysis of *The Clash of Civilisations*, in which he also urged Western governments to recognise that all peoples do not want to become like the West and to accept that 'Western intervention in the affairs of other civilisations is probably the single most dangerous source of instability and potential global conflict in a multi-civilisational world'.⁵⁴

The perennial dilemma for British governments is thus posed in new forms. Is it possible for Western governments and NGOs to help the Third World develop or should they confine their energies to assisting distressed people when summoned by the Third World governments after earthquakes or other natural disasters? Should they send peace-keepers to try to end civil wars or should they 'allow' civil wars to continue in the Third World even though they know the suffering these are causing? Even if humanitarian NGOs push for intervention, the choice remains with governments because the influence of such pressure groups has declined in recent years. The very increase in numbers of NGOs has ensured that no single group has the effect which the anti-slavery movement, the anti-Corn Law campaign or the Union of Democratic Control had when they were at their height. British political

society is particularly receptive to moralistic pressure groups, which are often co-opted into the elite, but their numbers today mean that they can be marginalised if the government wishes to ignore them.⁵⁵ Secondly, the appearance of public opinion polls shows governments what the public think and polls have thus removed one of the most important functions of earlier pressure groups. The days have passed when MPs impressed the House of Commons and astonished foreign visitors by unrolling documents containing the names of hundreds of thousands of petitioners.⁵⁶ Mass demonstrations continue and, indeed, the protest against the March 2003 war with Iraq was said to have been larger than any in British history. Frustrated by their inability to make headway against the government's determination, marching seemed the only way to vent the activists' anger and fears. But, significantly, it did not force the government to change course.

In human affairs there are no panaceas. The prohibition of overt slavery has not abolished slavery in all its forms and the anti-slavers were unable to help the former slaves economically, the Caribbean islands and Sierra Leone remain poor and unstable 200 years later; the introduction of free trade by Britain did not avoid wars as Cobden and Bright had hoped it would; the establishment of the League of Nations after the First World War was certainly a step forward in international affairs, as the Union of Democratic Control had predicted it would be, but it did not prevent the outbreak of war and it discouraged support for the balance of power, which alone might have deterred Axis aggression in the 1930s; humanitarian NGOs have saved countless lives after floods, famines and earthquakes but they are increasingly accused of neo-imperialism; campaigns to protect animals or the environment are also attacked for being blind to the needs of the poor. All cultures and societies resent criticisms; the Australians were irritated by Norwegian and German threats to halt Australian lamb imports in 2008 because of the Australian farmers' alleged ill-treatment of sheep, but a poor and weak country would feel even more diminished.⁵⁷ Finally, many states accuse countries with a culture of interference as hypocritical; the Japanese have responded to Australian criticisms of their whale harvest by protesting against the Australian destruction of kangaroos. More seriously, Amnesty International's campaigns for political prisoners and parallel struggles against the use of torture in the Third World will, unfortunately, be similarly dismissed as patronising and hypocritical following the defence of the use of water torture by President George W. Bush during the 'war on terror' which followed the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington.