

SOBOCINSKA, AGNIESZKA. *Saving the World? Western Volunteers and the Rise of the Humanitarian-Development Complex*. [Global and International History.] Cambridge University Press, Cambridge [etc.] 2021. x, 318 pp. Ill. £7500. (Paper: £29.99; E-book: \$44.99.)

In Agnieszka Sobocinska's terrific book *Saving the World?* on Western "volunteering" in the "Global South"<sup>1</sup> there are "Don Quixotes of development", such as the 1960s Peace Corps representative who murdered a valuable Peruvian donkey in an "American Style" attempt to castrate him. Said "volunteer" next hoped to help local townspeople by offering driving lessons, knocking down a pedestrian in the process (p. 236). But it also features characters like Herb Feith, an Australian "volunteer" who entered the Indonesian civil service in 1951 (disregarding rumours about the indiscriminate slaughter of Europeans in the country), served as President Sukarno's official speech writer during the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference at Bandung, and later became an influential academic, who wrote a "magisterial account of Indonesian politics", according to Sobocinska (pp. 33, 152), a historian and director of the Menzies Australia Institute at King's College London.<sup>2</sup>

In between these two extremes are plenty of well-intentioned, "non-elite" historical actors, who, Sobocinska convincingly argues, shaped the history of development and humanitarianism on a daily basis by participating in, supporting, and/or criticizing the three Western "volunteering" schemes examined in this book: the Australian Volunteer Graduate Scheme, founded in 1950; the British Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO), established in 1958; and the United States (US) Peace Corps, launched in 1961. All three schemes provided stipends (hence the quotation marks around the term "volunteering"), which were fully or partly government funded. These stipends sponsored "cadets" (recent high school graduates), "generalists" (university graduates with a liberal arts education), as well as "technicians" (university graduates with specialized training, e.g. in engineering, medicine, or pedagogy) to work in the Global South for up to two years. "Development volunteering" was no marginal phenomenon: services proliferated in the West and East (p. 13); later, multilateral as well as South-South "volunteering" programmes were launched. At one point, "volunteers" accounted for one fourth of all technical assistance or development personnel worldwide (p. 75), thus representing to various national audiences the public face of international development.

*Saving the World?* chronicles the three Western services' rise from their comparatively humble beginnings in the 1950s, to peak popularity in the 1960s, and serious crisis in the 1970s, sketching their renewed popularity in later decades in the final chapter. It thus builds and expands on Sobocinska's previous research focused on Australians in neighbouring Asia.<sup>3</sup> Her analysis is based on an

<sup>1</sup>Sobocinska uses the term to refer to "those [widely different] areas of the globe plagued by the legacies of colonialism, irrespective of their politics" (p. 26).

<sup>2</sup>I submitted this review in mid-February 2024, before knowing A. Sobocinska well, but have since March 2024 closely collaborated with her in organizing a workshop: <https://www.hsozkult.de/searching/id/event-144055?title=historical-challenges-to-international-development&recno=3&q=muschik&sort=&fq=&total=35>.

<sup>3</sup>Agnieszka Sobocinska, *Visiting the Neighbours: Australians in Asia* (Sydney, 2014).

impressive range of both public and private, published and unpublished sources related to seven countries (Australia, UK, US, Ghana, Nigeria, Indonesia, and Malaysia) in three languages (mostly English, but also including Indonesian and Malay vernacular press accounts), which are expertly contextualized by drawing on recent literature on various topics. Sobocinska is thus able to reconstruct in three parts: (I) Western intentions (why different constituencies – governments, NGOs, religious groups – supported the schemes and what motivated people personally to participate in them); (II) projected images (how the services were covered in Western promotional material and in the press in both origin and recipient countries); and (III) the reality of volunteering (how volunteers lived, worked, socialized, and loved abroad, how they were policed by Western authorities and, crucially, received in host communities, and how they reflected on their postings upon returning to their home countries and what paths they subsequently chose).

Sobocinska's central argument – reflected in the book's subtitle – is that Western "volunteering" helped create and sustain a "humanitarian-development complex", defined as "a nexus of governments, NGOs, private corporations and public opinion that encouraged continuous and accelerating intervention in the Global South from the 1950s" (p. 2), to the ultimate detriment of "aid" recipient countries. The schemes' goals were manifold (thus their success in appealing to very different audiences as laid out in Chapters 1 and 2), but centred around the hope of building friendly relations with Global South countries in the context of the Cold War and decolonization and helping recipient countries "develop" or "modernize". In Sobocinska's verdict, "development volunteering" amounted to a big waste of money, because the lofty goals went unfulfilled. Contrary to the ideal of demonstrating humility and internationalist, interracial brotherhood by living among and working side by side with foreign populations at local paygrades, volunteer communities often practised well-cushioned colonial-style "social apartheid" abroad. Instead of alleviating global and national inequalities, volunteers often catered to local elites (e.g. in private schools or hospitals) or were simultaneously too inexperienced and presumptuous to be of any real benefit to host communities. Other times, they were outright harmful, as the opening vignette suggests. Collectively, they did little to raise the sending countries' standing abroad, as evidenced by the long list of countries that ultimately ejected volunteers (p. 250). Instead, the services cemented problematic assumptions about the needs of the Global South and Western superiority. ("You are useful, we think, just by fixing your own bike or washing the dishes, by talking to a *betjak* [cycle-rickshaw] driver or giving up a seat on the bus", young Australians were told by the Volunteer Graduate Scheme in 1954. "You are helping to give Indonesians an idea of whites as ordinary humans, helping them overcome the inferiority feelings and disdain for work so successfully fostered by centuries of feudalism and of colonialism" (p. 39).) Sobocinska refers to this as a "maximalist" conception of development, which assumes that "not only specialist or technical expertise, but also social, cultural and psychological models had to be imported by the Global North" (p. 18).

So far, so convincing (even if scholars have long criticized the neat distinction between unproblematic, apolitical technical expertise, on the one hand, and presumably more interventionist cultural impositions, on the other). Sobocinska

goes further, however, in arguing that development volunteering personalized and depoliticized the question of global inequality nudging Westerners away from proposals for structural change such as the New International Economic Order (NIEO), or more radically, the redistribution of wealth on a global scale. Along with the human rights paradigm emerging around the same time, she argues, the humanitarian-development complex helped funnel a revolutionary expansion of global concern into limited and manageable channels, thus rendering it safe for neoliberal times (p. 7).

The concluding chapter's title reflects the book's argumentative gist: "To hell with good intentions". I would object to these "maximalist" conclusions regarding "development volunteering". Especially the book's last chapter – focused on returnees' soul searching, activism, and academic reflection – seems to demonstrate that "volunteering" did in fact politicize – Sobocinska herself speaks of "radicalization" – and educate participating Westerners, many of whom became outspoken critics of problematic developmental assumptions and practices. Sobocinska herself participated in a programme directly descended from the Australian Voluntary Graduate Scheme (p. 27) and may well be counted among them. The suggestion that "development volunteering" helped stifle more radical ideas, e.g. the redistribution of wealth on a global scale, by funnelling global concern for international inequalities into limited and manageable channels seems to scramble chronologies, cause, and effect. One might very well come away from reading Sobocinska's book with the impression that "development volunteering" – and the professional government-sponsored advertising apparatus behind it – did in fact do much to help support the postwar "revolutionary expansion of global concern" about "development", on which later initiatives such as the 1970s campaign for a New International Economic Order were able to build.

However, since the book comprehensively analyses "who intervenes, for what reasons, through what relationships, and to what effect",<sup>4</sup> and shows the wide variety of experiences subsumed under "development volunteering" (from the Peru-based Peace Corps "Don Quixote" to the magisterial speech-writer and academic Herb Feith, to the "voluntourism" of the late 1980s), it is in many ways development history at its best: "a record of [...] cynical, heroic, disastrous, occasionally inspired, and benevolent attempts at global humanitarianism in all of their moral and political complexity".<sup>5</sup> *Saving the World?* has numerous strengths, including a close attention to colonial continuities (Chapter 7) and a particularly welcome interest in the "affective landscapes" of international development (demonstrating that "international affairs were not limited to elite actors nor rational calculations of interest and strategy" (p. 99) as well as gendered stereotypes and practices (Chapter 8). Some aspects could have been explored further, for example the back and forth circulation of "volunteer expertise" between sending and recipient countries and the concomitant equation of Western "problem schools" and "depressed areas" with "developing countries" (pp. 48, 233); or how

<sup>4</sup>Frederick Cooper, "Writing the History of Development", *Journal of Modern European History*, 8:1 (2010), pp. 5–23, 20.

<sup>5</sup>Nick Cullather, "Development? It's History", *Diplomatic History*, 24:4 (2000), pp. 641–653, 642.

“development volunteering” fits into a presumably much longer history of (internationalist) volunteering in different societies (p. 10) and why and how it returned after the 1970s crisis “like a bad habit” (p. 274). Overall, however, *Saving the World?* is a highly readable, lean, but substantial book. One final point: there is a slight tension in the book, which repeatedly and rightly criticizes volunteering services’ lack of attention to the desires and specific requests of recipient communities (see Introduction), while itself being mainly concerned with Western protagonists and voices. This is all the more reason to look forward to the publication of Sobocinska’s ongoing research on grassroots resistance and organized opposition to foreign aid projects across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.<sup>6</sup>

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ANDERSON, ELISABETH. *Agents of Reform. Child Labor and the Origins of the Welfare State.* [Princeton Studies in Global and Comparative Sociology.] Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ) 2021. 384 pp. Ill. \$49.98. (Paper, E-book: \$32.00.)

Why did Belgium, the most industrialized nation at the time, introduce a ban on child labour so late in the nineteenth century? It seems an obvious historical fact that industrialization and the awareness of its negative consequences led to regulations to mitigate the effects of industrialization, where child labour was often dealt with first. However, the example of Belgium contradicts this and suggests that other factors must be more important in explaining how a proposal to ban child labour could succeed. About the same time that child labour was banned in Prussia and France, an initiative to introduce a similar ban arose in Belgium, but, as Elisabeth Anderson shows in her thoroughly researched study on the introduction of legislation against child labour, it was unsuccessful because the initiator failed to forge the right alliances.

*Agents of Reform* offers the first large-scale comparative analysis of the emergence of child labour regulations in different countries in the nineteenth century. In all the areas studied – Prussia, France, Belgium, and Massachusetts – regulation arose at a time when workers were hardly organized and had little power to push for change. Anderson looks at this issue from the perspective of “policy entrepreneurs”, creative actor-agents who flexibly negotiated emerging political situations, and “policy fields”, a term she borrows from Bourdieusian field theory. These concepts allow

<sup>6</sup>See Sobocinska’s personal website. Available at: <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/people/agnieszka-sobocinska>; last accessed 16 February 2024, as well as A. Sobocinska, “Giving and Resisting Aid: The UN FAO Freedom from Hunger Campaign as an Institution and at Ground Level”, paper presented at the International Organizations and the Cold War conference, University of Vienna, 2 June 2022.