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‘Charity Begins at Home’?: Humanitarianism, the Irish Save the Children Fund and the Volga Famine Campaign in 1920s Ireland

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This article explores the little-known response of the Irish Save the Children Fund to famine in Soviet Russia and Ukraine from 1921, as well as to hunger in the west of Ireland in 1924–5. Drawing on wide-ranging sources from the Cadbury Research Library, the Women’s Library at LSE and elsewhere, it examines the translation of humanitarian relief into different local, national and transnational contexts. The Volga famine was a seismic moment in inter-war humanitarianism and the initial focus of the newly formed Irish Save the Children Fund, itself formed in the context of war and civil war. Humanitarianism in the new Irish Free State had distinctive gendered, class and religious dynamics, as well as connections to Britain and the Irish diaspora. This article argues that tracing relatively small and largely unexamined organisations like the Irish Save the Children Fund offers new angles into the relationship between humanitarianism, nationhood and social change.

In late 1921, the Irish *Catholic Bulletin* declared the ‘deepest sympathy of the Irish people’ to the famine-stricken ‘Russian nation’, arguing that Ireland’s own experience of the Great Irish Famine of c. 1845–52 gave it a unique understanding of the ‘indescribable sufferings’ of the Russian people. For the *Catholic Bulletin*, inaction on the behalf of European governments was a sign of failure and ‘calousness’, which was reminiscent of the British government’s failings during the Great Irish Famine.¹ The *Catholic Bulletin* article formed part of a broader Irish and international response to the Volga famine, a seismic event in the history of inter-war humanitarianism and in foreign relations with the new Soviet state. While generally described by contemporaries and in the historiography as the Volga or Russian famine, the famine was not confined to Soviet Russia and areas of Ukraine were also severely affected.² Following drought and crop failures in the summer of 1920 and spring of 1921, famine developed in the Volga basin, the Urals, the Don basin, Ukraine and the Crimea. Occurring in a region that had endured years of war and civil war, a combination of environmental and socio-political factors meant the famine persisted through 1923 in some regions, causing the deaths of an estimated 1.5 to ten million people from starvation or disease.³ In August 1921 the Soviet government agreed to allow two umbrella international organisations to administer relief: the American

¹*Catholic Bulletin*, Nov. 1921, 665–7.

²Roman Serbyn, ‘The Famine of 1921–1923: A Model for 1932–1933?’, in *Famine in Ukraine, 1932–1933*, ed. Roman Serbyn and Bohdan Krawchenko (Edmonton: University of Alberta, 1986), 147–78.

³Laura Engelstein, *Russia in Flames: War, Revolution, Civil War, 1914–21* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 622–3; Christopher Williams, ‘The 1921 Russian Famine: Centre and Periphery Responses’, *Revolutionary Russia* 6, no. 2 (1993): 277–314.

Relief Administration and the International Russian Relief Committee.⁴ Founded in London just two years before, the Save the Children Fund became a major player within this network of relief organisations.⁵ The Volga famine provided the basis for the first major campaign of the Irish branch of the Save the Children Fund, formed in early 1921. This campaign gained support from a wide range of Irish activists, the Catholic Church and the Dáil (parliament), despite ongoing domestic conflict and the outbreak of the Irish Civil War in June 1922.⁶ The translation of Volga famine relief into the Irish context raises pertinent questions about the scope, motivations and impacts of inter-war humanitarianism.

While the British branch of the Save the Children Fund (SCF) has received considerable historiographical attention, the Irish Save the Children Fund (ISCF) is little known and mostly unexamined, despite the endurance of the Dublin-based branch for over six decades.⁷ Drawing on correspondence, diaries and reports mostly from the Cadbury Research Library and Women's Library at LSE alongside regional, national and international newspapers, this article uses the ISCF as an original case study into inter-war humanitarianism. Through considering Irish connections to Soviet Russia through famine relief, it calls for greater consideration of the Irish Free State (officially formed in 1922) within the history of transnational humanitarianism. Relief travelled in both directions between Soviet Russia and the Irish Free State in the 1920s. This demonstrates the diverse reach of humanitarian networks across Europe in the aftermath of the First World War and the participation of smaller, newly formed states like the Irish Free State in relief operations, sometimes in collaboration with larger, imperial powers and sometimes autonomously. Secondly, this article argues that the ISCF combined traditions of middle- and upper-class Protestant philanthropy with internationalist and Catholic visions of the nation state.⁸ Philanthropy generally refers to domestic charitable work, while humanitarianism is associated with giving to 'strangers' in need.⁹ The ISCF exemplifies the blurred boundaries between forms of charitable giving, as it engaged in domestic and international relief simultaneously. Thirdly, this article shows how humanitarian relief could operate as an assertion of power and sovereignty in local and global contexts. In early Soviet Russia and the Irish Free State, the giving and receiving of international aid was entangled with questions about statehood and international standing.

As Emily Baughan argues, humanitarianism functions as a 'set of practices that express political visions'.¹⁰ Born at a moment of intense domestic and global instability, new, post-First World War humanitarian organisations like the ISCF were the products of multiple conflicting visions and divisions over whether 'charity begins at home'.¹¹ These debates played out internally within organisational committees, meetings and letter-writing and externally in the press and the Dáil (parliament). The stakes were heightened by domestic need and dislocation connected to Irish partition, the Irish

⁴Luke Kelly, *British Humanitarian Activity in Russia, 1890–1923* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 160.

⁵Emily Baughan, *Saving the Children: Humanitarianism, Internationalism and Empire* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), 12, 34–46.

⁶*Freeman's Journal*, 25 Apr. 1922, 4.

⁷Brief mentions of ISCF include: Jérôme aan de Wiel, *Ireland's Helping Hand to Europe, 1945–1950: Combatting Hunger from Normandy to Tirana* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2021), 71–3; Lia Brazil and Melanie Oppenheimer, 'Saving "Ireland's Children": Voluntary Action, Gender, Humanitarianism, and the Irish White Cross, 1921–1947', *Women's History Review* 31, no. 7 (2022): 5, 16; Gerard Keown, *First of the Small Nations: The Beginnings of Irish Foreign Policy in the Interwar Years, 1919–32* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 107–8. On winding up of the fund, see *Irish Times*, 20 Apr. 1983, 5; 21 Apr. 1983, 4. Although a Belfast committee was formed in 1921, the official Northern Ireland branch of the Save the Children was not created until the 1950s (*Irish Times*, 27 Sept. 1955, 7). On the Save the German Children Society see Cathy Molohan, 'Humanitarian Aid or Politics?: The Case of the Save the German Children Society', *History Ireland* 5, no. 3 (1997): 7–9.

⁸Also see Brazil and Oppenheimer, 'Saving "Ireland's Children"', 3.

⁹On 'aid for distant strangers', see Kelly, *British Humanitarian Activity*, 2.

¹⁰Baughan, *Saving the Children*, 9.

¹¹*Irish Times*, 9 Feb. 1921, 6. On 'competing visions' in the US context see Maria Fedorova, 'Bread or Iron? Competing Visions of American Aid to Soviet Russia, 1921–3', *Agricultural History* 97, no. 2 (2023): 245–72.

War of Independence (1919–21) and the Irish Civil War (1922–3), which followed splits in the republican movement over the terms of the Anglo-Irish treaty. Even after the pro-treaty victory in May 1923, civil war divisions continued to reverberate in debates over relief and state responsibilities. After locating the SCF in its international and historiographical context, this article explores the religious, political and class dynamics that shaped the formation of the Irish branch. It then explores two major ISCF campaigns in response to the Volga famine (1921–3) and severe hunger in the west of Ireland (1924–5).

The aftermath of the First World War was a volatile, transitional period in the history of humanitarianism, in both Soviet Russia and Ireland and more widely.¹² Across Europe, anxieties over food supplies and hunger persisted into the early 1920s. Even after the lifting of the allied blockade of Germany in the summer of 1919, the spectre of famine in Central Europe featured prominently in the international news cycle. Hunger was deeply politicised, and the role of food shortages in the 1917 Russian Revolution prompted claims that food relief was a vital bulwark against the development of communism in places like Germany.¹³ Fears about hunger, disease and disorder intensified as the First World War bled over into subsequent conflicts and civil wars, including in Soviet Russia and Ireland. The formation of the SCF and the role of its founder, the British campaigner Eglantyne Jebb, in developing the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child can be seen as prime examples of the ‘transnationalization of humanitarianism’.¹⁴ The Declaration stipulated the rights of all children to ‘normal development’, food, medicine, shelter and emergency relief and was adopted by the League of Nations in 1924.¹⁵ The extent of transformation in humanitarian practices should not be overstated. Previous famines, including the Great Irish Famine and the Russian Famine of 1891–2, also led to extensive transnational relief efforts.¹⁶ Nevertheless, there were distinctive features of 1920s humanitarianism, including the concern with rebuilding after the war and forging healthy citizens. This is seen clearly in a 1924 draft report ‘On Giving to the Save the Children Fund’, which connected famine in Vienna to anxieties related to morality and civilisation:

[T]he S.C.F. contended that it was not in the interests of the world as a whole that the children should suffer physical and mental degeneracy, and the moral degradation which only too often is the inevitable sequence. It was felt that if we allowed in Central Europe a subnormal race to grow up of wastrels and degenerates, this would ultimately become a menace to the whole of Western civilization.¹⁷

The ideas about race and ‘degeneracy’ evoked here raise questions about the SCF’s role in inter-war internationalism: how did the SCF frame its role in local, national and international terms? What impact did it have on wider public attitudes, and what motivated donors to support campaigns like

¹²See Branden Little, ‘An Explosion of New Endeavours: Global Humanitarian Responses to Industrialized Warfare in the First World War Era’, *First World War Studies* 5, no. 1 (2014): 1–16; Tehila Sasson, ‘From Empire to Humanity: The Russian Famine and the Imperial Origins of International Humanitarianism’, *Journal of British Studies* 55, no. 3 (2016): 519–37; Davide Rodogno, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). For debates about periodisation see Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011).

¹³Alice Weinreb, *Modern Hungers: Food and Power in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 27–36.

¹⁴Bruno Cabanes, *The Great War and the Origins of Humanitarianism, 1918–24* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 5, 14.

¹⁵Eglantyne Jebb, *Save the Child! A Posthumous Essay by Eglantyne Jebb* (London: Weardale Press, 1929), 39–44.

¹⁶Enda Delaney, ‘Ireland’s Great Famine: A Transnational History’, in *Transnational Perspectives on Modern Irish History*, ed. Niall Whelehan (New York: Routledge, 2015), 106–26; Anelise Hanson Shroud, *Aiding Ireland: The Great Famine and the Rise of Transnational Philanthropy* (New York: New York University Press, 2024); Kelly, *British Humanitarian Activity in Russia*, 2. On continuities in British famine relief methods from the Great Irish Famine to the Volga famine and beyond, see Tehila Sasson and James Vernon, ‘Practising the British Way of Famine: Technologies of Relief, 1770–1985’, *European Review of History* 22, no. 6 (2015): 860–72.

¹⁷‘On Giving to the Save the Children Fund’, 26 Feb. 1924, Jebb Papers, Women’s Library, London School of Economics, London, 7EJB/C/09, 3.

the Volga famine appeal? While Emily Baughan, Ellen Boucher and others examine these issues convincingly in relation to the British SCF, their relevance to inter-war Ireland is underexplored.¹⁸ Responses to the Volga famine in Ireland have not received the same attention as in Britain.¹⁹ Yet entanglements between Ireland and Soviet Russia are particularly revealing because of the broad synchronicity between the Russian and Irish revolutionary periods and the international association of Ireland, the Russian Empire and Soviet Union with devastating famine. By the 1920s, there was also a long history of Irish interest in Russia and Russian interest in Ireland, which spanned the political spectrum and was shaped partly by attitudes to British imperialism and British–Russian relations.²⁰ Exploring the ISCF adds a new perspective to the literature on international responses to the Volga famine, moving the focus away from big agencies like the American Relief Administration towards lesser-known effects of the famine abroad.²¹ As will be seen, Irish diasporic connections with US relief efforts underline the breadth of transnational humanitarian networks, which spanned beyond the country donating funds and the country receiving aid. Most histories of Irish international humanitarianism focus on the mid- to late twentieth century.²² Separately, there is a rich literature on domestic Irish philanthropy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²³ This article bridges the divide between these historiographies and shows continuities and parallels across domestic and international relief. The role of ‘national sovereignty’ in shaping inter-war humanitarianism has been recognised in relation to major imperial powers like Britain.²⁴ This article offers a much less familiar story of humanitarian relief and how it connected two fledgling, conflict-ridden states in the 1920s.

¹⁸Baughan, *Saving the Children*, 2–15; Emily Baughan, ‘Every Citizen of Empire Implored to Save the Children! Empire, Internationalism and the Save the Children Fund in Inter-War Britain’, *Historical Research* 86, no. 231 (2013): 116–37; Ellen Boucher, ‘Cultivating Internationalism: Save the Children Fund, Public Opinion and the Meaning of Child Relief, 1919–24’, in *Brave New World: Imperial and Democratic Nation-Building in Britain between the Wars*, ed. Laura Beers and Geraint Thomas (London: University of London Press, 2011), 170–88. Earlier mostly hagiographical studies of the SCF include Dorothy Buxton and Edward Fuller, *The White Flame: The Story of the Save the Children Fund* (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1931).

¹⁹Rodney Breen, ‘Saving Enemy Children: Save the Children’s Russian Relief Operation, 1921–23’, *Disasters* 18, no. 3 (1994): 221–37; Linda Mahood and Vic Satzewich, ‘The Save the Children Fund and the Russian Famine of 1921–23: Claims and Counter-Claims about Feeding “Bolshevik” Children’, *Journal of Historical Sociology* 22, no. 1 (2009), 55–83.

²⁰On Irish–Soviet relations see Emmet O’Connor, *Reds and the Green: Ireland, Russia and the Communist Internationals, 1919–43* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2004); Barry McLoughlin, *Left to the Wolves: Irish Victims of Stalinist Terror* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007); Michael Quinn, *Irish–Soviet Diplomatic and Friendship Relations, 1917–91* (Maynooth: Iontas Press, 2017); Maurice Casey, ‘“Save Me From My Friends”: The Transnational Intimacies of an Irish–Latvian Couple within and beyond the Irish Revolution’, *Contemporary European History* 32, no. 4 (2023): 1–17. For a humanitarian angle, see Adrian Grant, ‘“Workers to the Rescue”: Workers’ International Relief in Ireland, 1925’, *History Ireland* 19, no. 1 (2011): 38–41.

²¹For example, Bertrand M. Patenaude, *The Big Show in Bololand: The American Relief Expedition to Soviet Russia in the Famine of 1921* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002). More recent studies include David Hudson, ‘A Woman so Curiously Fear-Free and Venturesome’: Eleanor Franklin Egan Reporting the Great Russian Famine, 1922’, *Women’s History Review* 26, no. 2 (2017): 195–212; E. Kyle Romero, ‘Moving People: Refugee Politics, Foreign Aid and the Emergence of American Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century’ (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, June 2020), chapter 1.

²²On Irish humanitarianism see: Kevin O’Sullivan, ‘Biafra to Lomé: The Evolution of Irish Government Policy on Official Development Assistance, 1969–75’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 18 (2007): 91–107; Kevin O’Sullivan, *Ireland, Africa and the End of Empire: Small State Identity in the Cold War 1955–75* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Mervyn O’Driscoll, ‘“We Are Trying to Do Our Share”: The Construction of Positive Neutrality and Irish Post-War Relief to Europe’, *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 27 (2016): 21–37; Kevin O’Sullivan, *The NGO Moment: The Globalisation of Compassion from Biafra to Live Aid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Rare studies of the earlier twentieth century include Brazil and Oppenheimer, ‘Saving “Ireland’s Children”’; Caoimhe Nic Dháibhéid, ‘The Irish National Aid Association and the Radicalisation of Public Opinion in Ireland, 1916–18’, *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 3 (2012): 705–29.

²³See Maria Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

²⁴Richard Wilson and Richard Brown, ‘Introduction’, in *Humanitarianism and Suffering: The Mobilization of Empathy*, ed. Richard Wilson and Richard Brown (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 18. On the role of the ‘national’ within international humanitarian organisations see also Sarah Stroup, *Borders Among Activists: International NGOs in the United States, Britain, and France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

The Formation of the Irish Save the Children Fund

The SCF developed out of the Fight the Famine Council in 1919 and was initially focused on famine relief efforts in Central Europe. Concentrating on children was partly a strategy to avoid anti-German opposition, as children were seen as less contentious recipients of aid.²⁵ Sisters Dorothy Buxton and Eglantyne Jebb, who were from an upper-class Protestant family in Shropshire, played a critical role in the formation of the organisation.²⁶ While the SCF had links to the suffrage and labour movements in Britain, early organisers sought to create as wide a support base as possible. 1919 and 1920 saw the formation of the Union Internationale de Secours Aux Enfants in Geneva and dominion branches in South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere, followed by the Irish branch in 1921.²⁷ From its foundation, the ISCF was moulded by local, national and international factors and by an ambiguous relationship with the British branch.²⁸

The ISCF's work exemplifies how new humanitarian organisations formed after the First World War modified existing philanthropic traditions. This was deeply personal in the case of the SCF and evident in the relationship between the founder Eglantyne Jebb and her Irish mother, Tye Jebb, who was from Killiney in Co. Dublin. Tye Jebb helped found the Home Arts and Industries Association in the 1880s, which sought to alleviate poverty through skills-based craft classes and exhibitions across England, Ireland and Scotland.²⁹ Although she lived in Shropshire for most of her adult life, Tye Jebb visited Ireland regularly in the 1880s and corresponded with the founder of the Irish Land League, Michael Davitt, about rural education and poverty in Ireland.³⁰ The Home Arts and Industries Association had strong class and gendered associations: for the 'Lady correspondent' of the moderate unionist *Belfast Newsletter*, it was 'one of the most interesting of the useful societies which the energy of ladies has called into existence.'³¹ As one supporter summarised in 1888, the organisation's mission was to 'help the poor to help themselves.'³² The Home Arts and Industries Association's legacies were visible in the SCF. Arguments about restoring the dignity of the poor featured throughout SCF marketing material, based on the premise that 'useful occupations' provided a route out of 'degradation'.³³ Eglantyne Jebb's extensive correspondence with her mother, including about relief work in Ireland, shows the way in which her mother and earlier forms of women's philanthropy influenced her approach.³⁴ While women's philanthropy and activism was already well established within Britain and Ireland by the 1920s, inter-war organisations like the SCF proclaimed more explicitly internationalist ambitions than many of the organisations that preceded them.³⁵

Looking briefly at the Jebb family's ongoing connections to Ireland illuminates some of the social tensions involved in charitable organisations. Alongside an awareness of campaigns against Irish poverty through her mother, Jebb spent periods in Ireland in the 1910s staying with her sister Emily Ussher in Cappagh, Co. Waterford. Ussher married into a landowning, Protestant family in Cappagh

²⁵Boucher, 'Cultivating Internationalism', 170–5.

²⁶Baughan, 'Saving the Children', 3–18.

²⁷Francesca Wilson, *Rebel Daughter of a Country House: The Life of Eglantyne Jebb, Founder of the Save the Children Fund* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967), 24; Buxton and Fuller, *The White Flame*, 3–88; Baughan, 'Every Citizen', 117–22.

²⁸Report on 'Save the Children Fund' meeting; diary of Mrs Downer, Dublin, Jan. 1921, Save the Children Fund Archive (SCFA), Cadbury Research Library, Birmingham, EJ 173.

²⁹Janice Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries 1880–1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 6–8.

³⁰Linda Mahood, *Feminism and Voluntary Action: Eglantyne Jebb and Save the Children, 1876–1928* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14, 29, 43; Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts*, 6, 8.

³¹*Belfast Newsletter*, 4 July 1887, 8; *Leinster Express*, 24 Dec. 1887, 5; *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Nov. 1888, 5; *Drogheda Independent*, 22 July 1889, 4.

³²Bernard Bosanquet, 'The Home Arts and Industries Association', *Charity Organisation Review* 4, no. 40 (Apr. 1888), 136.

³³'On Giving to the Save the Children Fund', 26 Feb. 1924, Jebb Papers, 7EJB/C/09.

³⁴Eglantyne Jebb to Tye Jebb, 13 Mar. 1921, 7EJB/B/01/03/25.

³⁵On women's activism during the First World War, see Fionnuala Walsh, *Irish Women and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

and lived at the family estate from 1914.³⁶ Ussher's local philanthropy included setting up the Cappagh co-operative store in 1918, and she was later active in the ISCF. She also published a novel critiquing the violence of the 'Black and Tans' during the Irish War of Independence.³⁷ The work of this affluent Anglo-Irish woman was not always welcomed in the local community, which included unionist gentry sceptical of her politics and agricultural labourers seeking wage rises, not charity. In her unpublished memoir, *The True Story of a Revolution*, Ussher lamented the 'fate of all philanthropists' to see their 'hopes' become 'frustrated by the very people I had longed to benefit'.³⁸ In May 1922, local trade unionists took over the Cappagh co-operative store during a farm labourers' strike, suggesting the way in which philanthropic projects could be subverted by local class politics. Ussher's work built on traditions of middle- and upper-class Protestant philanthropy in Ireland. This was a group facing anxiety over its future in the early 1920s, encapsulated by the burnings of several 'big houses' in Co. Waterford during the War of Independence and Irish Civil War.³⁹ The Jebb family mostly supported Irish Home Rule and Irish constitutional nationalism. Jebb's letters from Dublin in 1918 criticised republican Sinn Féin and any form of violence.⁴⁰ While this did not prevent republican support for the ISCF, it helped set the tone for early meetings and publicity, in which Jebb promoted building consensus across religious and political divides.⁴¹ From its formation, the ISCF was bound up with uncertainties over the direction of Irish social and political change.

Forming an Irish branch of the SCF in 1921 involved navigating complex political, social and religious dynamics. Jebb influenced this process through visits to Dublin and Belfast and public addresses, which raised the profile of the SCF in the Irish press.⁴² Early 1921 saw the first 'authorized' military reprisals against property in Co. Cork following the extension of martial law.⁴³ It was in this wider context of ongoing military conflict in the Irish War of Independence that a representative of the British SCF, Mrs M.E. Downer, carried out a scoping mission in Dublin.⁴⁴ According to Downer's diary, she was met with warnings about the tense political situation, which made a 'neutral Committee impossible'. Downer spoke to Father Ryan, who had 'worked for 20 years in the slums'. He told her that the proposed meeting venue of the Friends (Quaker) Lecture Hall would invoke the 'suspicion' of the Catholic clergy, indicating the difficulties of securing cross-denominational support. As well as meeting employers and religious leaders, Downer met the often-female heads of existing charitable institutions. The head of the Jubilee nurses, an organisation based at the Queen's Institute in Dublin, which sent district nurses to rural Ireland, was sceptical about forming an Irish branch and told Downer that even established organisations were having to 'keep very quiet now'.⁴⁵ Downer's diary captures the slow and uncertain process of networking and building credibility, which was made more challenging by her lack of local knowledge. Irrespective of the growing international

³⁶Eglantyne Jebb to Tye Jebb, 30 Aug. 1917; 11 Mar. 1918; 11 Apr. 1918, Jebb papers, 7EJB/B/01/03/16; William Fraher, *The Bad Times: Waterford Country Houses during the Revolutionary Period* (Waterford: Waterford County Museum, 2022), 23. On earlier visits to Ireland, see Jebb correspondence, (1906)-9, 7EJB/B/01/03/13.

³⁷'The Hurler on the Ditch' (Emily Ussher), *The Trail of the Black and Tans* (Dublin: The Talbot Press Limited, 1921). Agnes McCullagh to Emily Ussher, 7 Feb. 1932, 7EJB/C/09.

³⁸Emily Ussher, *The True Story of a Revolution, or What One of My Reviewers Called 'The Rushing Tragedy of Munster Life'*. Unpublished memoir, Representative Church Body Library, MS 70,

https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/images/aboutus/AOFTM/2022/April/RCB_Library_MS70.pdf (all links last visited 21 Jan. 2025); Fraher, *The Bad Times*, 23–5, 46–53.

³⁹Fraher, *Bad Times*, vii, 57–8, 101. On the burning of 'big houses' in revolutionary Ireland, see Terence Dooley, *Burning the Big House: The Story of the Irish Country House in a Time of War and Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022).

⁴⁰Eglantyne Jebb to Tye Jebb, 11 Mar. 1918, 7EJB/B/01/03/16.

⁴¹Eglantyne Jebb, 'Report on Belfast', 13 Jan. 1921, SCFA, EJ 173.

⁴²*Irish Times*, 28 Jan. 1921, 2.

⁴³David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–39* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 92, 269.

⁴⁴*Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 1 Feb. 1922, 162.

⁴⁵Diary of Mrs Downer; Elizabeth Prendergast, 'Jubilee Nurses', *Dublin Historical Record* 66, no. 1/2 (2013): 59–66.

scale of the SCF, its work on the ground relied on personal introductions and drop-in visits to those deemed suitably influential and well connected.⁴⁶

Despite its challenging start, the ISCF gathered momentum following a public meeting in the Dublin Antient Concert Rooms in late January 1921, in which Jebb called for greater Irish involvement in the 'organised international movement'.⁴⁷ Following the meeting, a provisional committee of Irish women began ad-hoc fundraising efforts in Dublin and organised a conference to create a larger, more official national committee.⁴⁸ Of forty-four members listed on the initial ISCF committee, around three quarters were women and over half had a public affiliation with an existing philanthropic organisation. It included two Catholic priests and a presbyterian minister, as well as the doctor and republican sympathiser Alice Barry and activist and writer Mary Sheehy Kettle, sister of Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and widow of Irish nationalist MP Tom Kettle. Other committee members with a medical background included the gynaecologist Bethel Solomons, who was a prominent figure in the Jewish community in Dublin.⁴⁹ The British SCF generally cultivated a 'conservative public image', despite having links to the British Labour party and trade union politics.⁵⁰ In contrast, the Irish committee had some radical associations, including through the republican and trade unionist Helena Molony and activist, socialist and medical practitioner Kathleen Lynn. During the 1916 Easter Rising, Lynn was a medical officer for the Irish Citizen Army, a militant body closely associated with Irish socialist James Connolly.⁵¹ Although deeply connected to the British and global contexts, the ISCF was also a product of revolutionary-era Dublin, where many particularly middle-class men and women engaged with multiple social, political and cultural organisations simultaneously.⁵²

Early records of the ISCF provide evidence on attitudes to social welfare in early 1920s Dublin. In Ireland and Britain, there was extensive campaigning over children's rights in the second half of the nineteenth century. This resulted in the 1889 Prevention of Cruelty to, and Protection of, Children Act, which imposed penalties for neglecting or ill-treating children. Despite the well-established nature of 'save the child' campaigns, the ISCF faced pervasive assumptions about the deserving versus the undeserving poor. One doctor told Downer that there was no real starvation among children in Dublin, while a Dublin factory owner argued that the 'Irish character has been ruined by charity' and that all charitable donations must go abroad.⁵³ Despite this, the ISCF gave extensively to domestic organisations in July 1921, including grants to the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, the Irish White Cross, Lady Dudley's Nursing Scheme, the Cork Child Welfare League and the Infant Aid Society. The ISCF also gave a grant to the United Irishwomen's Society, a cross-denominational and mostly

⁴⁶Diary of Mrs Downer.

⁴⁷*Irish Times*, 28 Jan. 1921, 2.

⁴⁸*Irish Times*, 9 Feb. 1921, 6; Draft letter to anon. from Alice Barry, Mary Kettle, Kathleen Lynn and Ella G. A. Webb, (Feb. 1921), EJ 173.

⁴⁹General Committee of the Save the Children Fund, EJ 173. Frances Clarke, 'Barry, Alice Mary', *Dictionary of Irish Biography (DIB)* (2009), via www.dib.ie; Donal Lowry, 'Kettle, Thomas Michael ("Tom")', *DIB* (2009); William Murphy, 'Solomons, Bethel Albert Herbert', *DIB* (2009).

⁵⁰Boucher, 'Cultivating Internationalism', 175; Baughan, 'Every Citizen', 120–4, 130.

⁵¹Lawrence William White and Frances Clarke, 'Molony, Helena', *DIB* (2014); Margaret Ó hÓgartaigh, 'Lynn, Kathleen', *DIB* (2009).

⁵²Senia Pašeta, 'Feminist Political Thought and Activism in Revolutionary Ireland, c. 1880–1918', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 27 (2017): 193–209. See also Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London: Allen Lane, 2014).

⁵³Diary of Mrs Downer; Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy*, 92–5. See also Lindsey Earner-Byrne, 'Reinforcing the Family: The Role of Gender, Morality and Sexuality in Irish Welfare Policy, 1922–44', *The History of the Family* 13, no. 4 (2008): 360–9; Sarah-Anne Buckley, *The Cruelty Man: Child Welfare, the NSPCC and the State in Ireland, 1889–1956* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Ciara Boylan and Ciara Gallagher, eds., *Constructions of the Irish Child in the Independence Period, 1910–40* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

middle-class organisation in which Jebb's sister Emily Ussher was active.⁵⁴ Recipients of ISCF grants had varied political and religious associations. Negotiations in person and by letter helped determine which organisations received funds, reflecting the importance of personal networks in the day-to-day management of relief work.⁵⁵

Within the transnational structure of humanitarian organisations like the SCF, national labels and associations still mattered. Translating the SCF's work into the Irish context was made more complicated by the existence of a separate Belfast committee, also formed in early 1921. While the ISCF was framed as a national committee, the scope of the 'national' was ill defined in the context of the closing stages of the Irish War of Independence and partition, which remained subject to the findings of the boundary commission.⁵⁶ There was anxiety in the London office about Belfast being a 'community to itself', which was 'cut off from the world'.⁵⁷ The initial Belfast meeting was fraught, despite promises that 'Orange and Nationalist and Sinn Fein children will have equal claim on the help of the Fund'.⁵⁸ References to the 'Ulster committee of women' and the 'generosity of Ulster' suggest that, in practice, the organisation developed unionist associations. Jebb wrote to the Lady Mayoress of Belfast, Elsie Millicent Coates, that she was very pleased to see Belfast joining the 'British contingent of the movement', suggesting a much closer alignment with London than Dublin.⁵⁹ Unlike the ISCF, the Belfast committee resolved to prioritise relief for Armenia and Poland, with the option to ' earmark' donations to Ireland.⁶⁰ There were established British and Irish traditions of philanthropy towards Poland and Armenia, which crossed political and denominational divides (even if solidarity with Poland had greater Catholic associations).⁶¹ This selective approach underlined the extensive process of local modification and how SCF organisers could not use a standard template for new committees.

By June 1921, the ISCF had secured affiliation with the Union Internationale de Secours Aux Enfants in Geneva.⁶² As the Belfast SCF had decided to concentrate on foreign relief and gained limited press attention after its initial meeting, the more active ISCF had the double responsibility of international relief and making 'home grants'.⁶³ The early ISCF was riddled with potential contradictions. It was, after all, a branch of an organisation initially founded by members of an elite, Anglo-Irish family in England. It was a domestic and international charity, which had responsibility for 'home' work across the island of Ireland, despite the formation of a more unionist-leaning committee in Belfast.⁶⁴ Affiliation to Geneva provided one way of articulating the autonomous identity of the ISCF. By 1924, the ISCF had its own pages in the directory (*Annuaire*) of the Union Internationale de Secours Aux Enfants. In this handbook, the naming of the ISCF in Irish followed by its English and French names in brackets marked a clear separation from the British SCF.⁶⁵ Revealingly, the ISCF would also use its international work to show its separation from London.

⁵⁴ Extract from Report of Executive Committee of ISCF, 6 July 1921, EJ 173. D.A.J. MacPherson, *Women and the Irish Nation: Gender, Culture and Irish Identity, 1890–1914* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 60–83; Ussher, *The True Story of a Revolution*, 3.

⁵⁵ M. Florence Greeves to Eglantyne Jebb 16 Feb. 1921, EJ 173.

⁵⁶ Hugh Law to Eglantyne Jebb, 25 June 1921, EJ 173.

⁵⁷ 'Report on Belfast', 13 Jan. 1921, EJ 173.

⁵⁸ *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 15 Jan. 1921, 69; SCF Belfast Meeting Agenda, Jan. 1921, EJ 173.

⁵⁹ Eglantyne Jebb to Lady Mayoress, 18 Jan. 1921, EJ 173.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ See Róisín Healy, *Poland in the Irish Nationalist Imagination, 1772–1922: Anti-Colonialism within Europe* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017); Stéphanie Prévost, 'Channelling Ottoman Armenian Refugees during the Hamidian Massacres: Immigration Restrictions and British Liberal Imperial Humanitarianism at Stake (1894–1898)', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 51, no. 6 (2023): 1081–113.

⁶² Hon. Secretaries of ISCF to Eglantyne Jebb, 8 June 1921, SCFA EJ 173.

⁶³ Eglantyne Jebb to Hugh Law, 27 June 1921, SCFA, EJ 173.

⁶⁴ On relations between London and Dublin SCF see letter from Lady Aberdeen to Eglantyne Jebb, 6 May 1921, SCFA, EJ 173.

⁶⁵ First International Congress of Child Welfare. Geneva. Aug. 24–28, 1925. Representation of the Secretariat, League of Nations Archives (LNA) online, R681/12/40,770/34,652, 35.

Responses to the Volga Famine

From the summer of 1921, the SCF was a significant part of the coalition of international agencies involved in famine relief in Soviet Russia. By the end of the year, it was organising the feeding of an estimated 300,000 children per day in the province of Saratov.⁶⁶ For the newly formed ISCF, the Volga famine quickly became a focal point for its activities. Volga famine relief was controversial in Britain and Ireland, partly because of claims that relief could prop up Bolshevism and that the Soviet government was exaggerating the scale of need.⁶⁷ British SCF members recalled acts of intimidation, including one fundraiser who was almost pushed into a river at the Henley regatta 'because she was selling flags to help Russian children'.⁶⁸ In the Irish context, memories of the Great Irish Famine, political and social anxieties and visions of independence helped shape responses to the Volga famine. The adaptation of Volga famine relief to local circumstances was also seen elsewhere; for example, Hakan Kirmli shows how the Turkish relief effort for the Volga famine was a 'unique and meaningful page in the history of the "New Turkey"'. Like Ireland, Turkey engaged in Volga famine relief during a pivotal period in state formation; this shaped both the strategies of relief and the public debate surrounding it.⁶⁹

The high-profile political support given to the ISCF's Volga famine appeal is revealing about the politics of humanitarianism and nationalism. Even on the eve of the Irish Civil War and following its outbreak in June 1922, there was awareness about the potential value of humanitarian relief for expressing Irish sovereignty. In April 1922, Dáil president Arthur Griffith made a widely publicised donation of £1,000 on behalf of Dáil Éireann to the ISCF Volga famine relief campaign.⁷⁰ Advertisements suggested it was the patriotic duty of the Irish people to follow the Dáil's example and donate, linking international giving to good citizenship.⁷¹ The language of national autonomy appeared heavily in fundraising material. An official ISCF pamphlet from March 1922 declared how 'Abroad, Ireland is now represented among the nations which, in default of action by the Great Powers, are labouring to alleviate the horrors of the Russian Famine'.⁷² The ISCF's prominent use of its Irish language name (*Saor an Leanbh*) in letterheads and pamphlets conveyed national autonomy, although the English name was also widely used.⁷³ The desire to assert organisational independence affected methods of resourcing and distributing relief. When it came to buying food to send to Soviet Russia, the ISCF committee emphasised that 'our consignment has to be purchased from Ireland', resulting in separate despatches of Irish condensed milk being sent to the Volga famine regions.⁷⁴ There were also diasporic reverberations of these connections between humanitarian relief and Irish autonomy. The Irish American press praised the ISCF's support for the 'children of Russia' as evidence that Ireland was doing its 'share'.⁷⁵ The notion that Ireland had a responsibility to contribute reflected ideas of Irish nationalism, internationalism and wider trends in global humanitarian thinking in the inter-war period.

⁶⁶ Boucher, 'Cultivating Internationalism', 184; The Save the Children Fund Annual Report, 1921–2, SCFA, SCF/P/1/1/3.

⁶⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 26 Sept. 1921, 7.

⁶⁸ 'Random Memories of the S.C.F. from 1921 by Miss E. Lawrence', Jebb papers, EJB/C/09.

⁶⁹ Hakan Kirmli, 'The Famine of 1921–2 in the Crimea and the Volga Basin and the Relief from Turkey', *Middle Eastern Studies* 39, no. 1 (2003): 37–88.

⁷⁰ Arthur Griffith to Hugh Law, 10 Apr. 1922, Documents on Irish Foreign Policy (DIFP), No. 274, NAI DE 2/269, <https://www.difp.ie/volume-1/1922/save-the-child-committee/274/#section-documentpage>; Dáil Éireann Report on Foreign Affairs, 26 Apr. 1922, DIFP, No. 277, NAI DFA ES Box 1 File 13, <https://www.difp.ie/volume-1/1922/foreign-policy-general/277/#section-documentpage>; Dáil Éireann debate, 26 Apr. 1922, <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/>; *Irish Times*, 6 Feb. 1923, 7; *Irish Independent*, 25 Apr. 1922, 11; *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Apr. 1922, 4.

⁷¹ *Irish Independent*, 3 June 1922, 3.

⁷² ISCF Pamphlet, Mar. 1922, SCFA, EJ 173.

⁷³ *Southern Star*, 29 Apr. 1922, 3.

⁷⁴ E.M. Daly to Eglantyne Jebb, 23 Nov. 1921; Jebb to Law, 13 Oct. 1921; ISCF pamphlet, Mar. 1922, all SCFA, EJ 173.

⁷⁵ *Irish Press* (Philadelphia), 5 Nov. 1921, 6.

National concerns helped to shape the practices of transnational humanitarianism, as seen through the creation of specific Irish relief kitchens. This was part of a so-called £100-kitchen scheme, which allowed groups of donors or national committees to visualise the impact of their donations. Despite only playing a distant role in their logistical operation, the ISCF's promotion of Irish kitchens was highly symbolic given the history of food relief during the Great Irish Famine.⁷⁶ The Irish kitchens were part of a network of over 1,400 kitchens across Saratov, which provided 'staple foods' including 'flour, rice, beans, sugar, milk, cocoa and lard' to children.⁷⁷ In practice, Irish donations were largely absorbed within wider SCF operations, overseen by SCF's Russian operative Lawrence Webster 'with his staff of 19 Englishmen (all of whom speak Russian)' alongside a 'native personnel of over 5,000 men and women.'⁷⁸ The limited 'on the ground' involvement of the ISCF was probably partly a result of the novelty of the ISCF, which was still wrangling over internal committee positions and basic operational questions in the summer of 1921.⁷⁹ Union Jack flags and flags of some other affiliate nations were used in famine kitchens, but seemingly no Irish flags.⁸⁰ A gulf existed between the rhetoric about relief abroad and the reality on the ground, and it seems unlikely that eating at an Irish rather than a British kitchen would have meant much to recipients.

Responses to international relief within contemporary Russian-language accounts were mixed, within both Soviet Russia and the Russian diaspora. A booklet on the famine produced by the Russian Red Cross in New York depicted the SCF as a largely *angliiskii* or English organisation, although it did note some Irish involvement in famine relief.⁸¹ Soviet newspapers *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* reported extensively on international relief efforts, as well as emphasising relief from the Soviet government and workers.⁸² The Soviet organisation overseeing relief, *Pomgol*, monitored international responses and press coverage of the famine through its bulletin *Help (Pomoshch')*.⁸³ Not all Soviet responses were positive and included accusations of espionage and counter-revolutionary activities by international relief workers.⁸⁴ In both the Irish and Soviet Russian cases, Volga famine responses were bound up with foreign and domestic policy. As new states emerged out in the aftermath of the First World War, humanitarian relief became an important site for asserting and defending state autonomy.

As with its distribution methods, national and international concerns shaped the ISCF's fundraising strategies for Volga famine relief. It used an eclectic range of existing models of entertainment and philanthropy, such as charitable bazaars, which were reworked to suit inter-war internationalism.⁸⁵ The ISCF's International Fair at Mansion House in early 1923 had strong echoes of the Home Arts and Industries Association, featuring gifts presented by the Dun Emer Guild, formed in 1902 to promote Irish crafts. Other aspects of the fair had a strong international focus, including a stall with a 'large map, showing the famine area in Russia and the places where kitchens, financed by the

⁷⁶Sasson argues that British responses to famine in Ireland and India in the nineteenth century helped shape responses to the Volga famine, including in terms of use of soup kitchens; Sasson, 'From Empire to Humanity', 523–5; Jebb to Law, 13 Oct. 1921, EJ 173.

⁷⁷'Russian Refugees – Starvation in Russia – Third Conference (Red Cross and the League of Nations) on Russian Relief – 19–20 Sept. 1922 – General Documents', LNA, File C1382/278/R.304/3.

⁷⁸*Ibid.* On Webster see Baughan, *Saving the Children*, 36. While the ISCF's work focused on the sending of goods and funds, there were Irish individuals involved on the ground through other relief organisations, including the Friends' Famine Relief Committee; see *Irish Times*, 10 Dec. 1921, 8.

⁷⁹Report of Executive Committee of ISCF, 6 July 1921, EJ 173.

⁸⁰EJ 284 SCF Council Minutes, June 1923; Baughan, *Saving the Children*, 36.

⁸¹*Golod 1921–2* (New York: Izdanie Predstavitel'stva Rossiiskogo obshchestva Krasnogo kresta v Amerike, [1922]), 101, via Hathi Trust.

⁸²*Pravda*, 17 Aug. 1921, 1; 2 Sept. 1921, 1; *Izvestiia*, 10 Sept. 1921, 1; 15 Mar. 1922, 4, 26; 21 Mar. 1922, 3; 26 Mar. 1922, 2; Iurii A. Poliakov, 1921–i: *Pobeda nad golodom* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1975), 89–90.

⁸³*Pomoshch'*, 22 Aug. 1921, 4; 29 Aug. 1921, 4; Kirimli, 'Famine of 1921–2', 43–5; Poliakov, 1921–i, 32.

⁸⁴E.g., *Izvestiia*, 31 Oct. 1922, 2; Poliakov, 1921–i, 93.

⁸⁵On bazaars see Prochaska, *Women and Philanthropy*, 47–72.

Irish “Save the Children” Fund, are located.”⁸⁶ For the *Irish Times*, the map demonstrated how Ireland, despite ‘suffering so much’, was still capable of helping the ‘little ones of other European countries’ and playing its role among the ‘civilised’ countries of the world.⁸⁷ Tropes from imperial international exhibitions sat alongside Irish nationalist rhetoric and endorsements.⁸⁸ Fundraising events catered mostly for the relatively affluent and those with leisure time, including flag days, ‘At Home’ events, dances and bridge tournaments.⁸⁹ While motivations can be difficult to determine conclusively, emotional responses, personal relationships and political considerations all seemed to play a part in motivating members and donors. For ISCF members, hyperbolic language about the ‘horror upon horror’ in Soviet Russia sat alongside practical discussions about personal expense allowances, as seen in the correspondence of ISCF chairman Hugh Law. Recognising the political dynamics of humanitarian relief does not mean denying any genuine sympathy and solidarity, but emotional responses sometimes had a performative element and were conveyed through clichéd tropes of ‘horror’ and disbelief.⁹⁰

Religious networks were also crucial for fundraising and establishing the legitimacy of new organisations like the ISCF. As Patrick Houlihan argues, the Catholic Church’s role in inter-war humanitarianism and children’s rights discourses has often been overlooked.⁹¹ At the time, the relationship between the Papacy and the SCF was highly publicised, including in Ireland. Following a meeting with Jebb and SCF colleague Dr Hector Munro in December 1919, Pope Benedict XV publicly endorsed the SCF through donations and a 1920 encyclical. The SCF celebrated this as the ‘first time in history that a non-Catholic Society had been commended in a Papal Encyclical’, reflecting a new mode of cooperation between the Catholic Church and international relief organisations.⁹² Irish regional and national newspapers recognised the significance of Papal support, declaring Ireland’s ‘religious duty’ to help ‘fellow Christians’ in Russia.⁹³ Religious organisations played practical as well as symbolic roles, such as the Children of Mary Sodality assisting with a St. Patrick’s Day ISCF event.⁹⁴ Other denominations, including the Presbyterian Church, also supported the ISCF.⁹⁵ Yet it was the backing of the Catholic Church that proved most critical for the ISCF’s ongoing work, as will be seen in relation to domestic relief.⁹⁶ Although inter-war organisations like the ISCF put a strong emphasis on their non-denominational stance, collaboration with Christian churches remained vital for their success, particularly given the social and political power of the Catholic Church in the Irish Free State.⁹⁷

Like other humanitarian organisations, the ISCF relied on a close, strategic relationship with the press. Newspapers provided a platform for members like Mary Kettle to set out the moral and political importance of children’s relief. As part of their coverage of the Volga famine, national and regional

⁸⁶ *Irish Times*, 6 Feb. 1923, 4; 8 Feb. 1923, 3; Elaine Cheasley Paterson, ‘Tracing Craft – Labour, Creativity, and Sustainability in the Home Arts Movement’, *Journal of Canadian Art History* 39/40, no. 2/1 (2018/19): 51–9.

⁸⁷ *Irish Times*, 6 Feb. 1923, 3.

⁸⁸ On wider use of exhibiting in SCF see Siân Roberts, ‘Exhibiting Children at Risk: Child Art, International Exhibitions and Save the Children Fund in Vienna, 1919–23’, *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 1–2 (2009): 171–90.

⁸⁹ *Irish Times*, 29 Nov. 1929, 6, 13 Feb. 1930, 10. On events in early 1930s see Records of the Save the Children Fund, 1932–3, Jebb Papers, 7EJB/C/09.

⁹⁰ Law to Jebb, 27 Aug. 1921, SCFA, EJ 173. Also see *Irish Independent*, 13 Aug. 1921, 4.

⁹¹ Patrick Houlihan, ‘Renovating Christian Charity: Global Catholicism, the Save the Children Fund and Humanitarianism during the First World War’, *Past and Present* 250, no. 1 (2021): 206–8. Exceptions include James Zatko, ‘The Vatican and Famine Relief in Russia’, *The Slavonic and East European Review* 42, no. 98 (1963): 54–63.

⁹² ‘Visit to Pope’, Jebb Papers, 7EJB/C/10; Houlihan, ‘Renovating Christian Charity’, 204–5.

⁹³ *Freeman’s Journal*, 17 Aug. 1921, 19; *Drogheda Independent*, 13 May 1922, 2.

⁹⁴ *Irish Times*, 19 Mar. 1924, 3. On collections in churches see *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 Sept. 1921, 8.

⁹⁵ *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 1 June 1921, 225.

⁹⁶ *Irish Times*, 23 May 1926, 5.

⁹⁷ See, e.g., Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922–37* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2000).

newspapers printed extracts from ISCF speeches, advertisements for events and letters to the editor by ISCF committee members and supporters.⁹⁸ However, the press could be a double-edged sword, as there was little consensus over the causes or appropriate responses to the Volga famine. Divisions reflected varying degrees of anti-communism, rather than substantively different sources of information on the famine. The nationalist *Irish Independent* argued that the allied powers shared the blame for the severity of the famine because of their blockade of agricultural machinery and other goods entering Soviet Russia.⁹⁹ The constitutional nationalist *Freeman's Journal* and moderate unionist *Belfast Newsletter* concluded that the Bolsheviks were 'reaping as they sowed'.¹⁰⁰ The *Irish Times*, which moved away from its unionist position after 1922, suggested the dangers of 'Bolshevik commissaries' stealing food aid, despite elsewhere featuring positive coverage of the ISCF's campaign.¹⁰¹ Irish press debates on the Volga famine mirrored similar discussions in British newspapers and, like the British SCF, the ISCF struggled to keep control of the narrative. Newspapers offered immense opportunities for publicity, but humanitarian organisations remained alert to attempts to discredit their work.¹⁰²

Within international relief campaigns, domestic comparisons were a vital strategy for encouraging emotional investment in crises abroad. This was particularly vital with places like Soviet Russia, which relatively few Irish people had direct experience of and which had connotations with 'disorder' and the threat of 'anarchy' in the mainstream Irish press.¹⁰³ Newspapers made parallels between Irish migration and Russian refugees fleeing famine and civil war, while a 1922 ISCF pamphlet argued that the fate of the 'Russian peasant' was equivalent to that of the 'Irish cottier' in 1847.¹⁰⁴ Comparisons to the Great Irish Famine were used to argue that Ireland could play a unique role in global humanitarian relief, informed by historical experience. Similar claims featured in Irish relief campaigns after the Second World War and during the Biafran crisis in the late 1960s, suggesting how later forms of Irish humanitarianism built on earlier precedents.¹⁰⁵ Other strategies for generating solidarity had racialised aspects, tapping into pseudo-scientific racial theories from this period. Appeals to save 'the lives of gentle, fair-haired children, very like our own' conveyed a perceived ethnic similarity to Russian famine sufferers.¹⁰⁶ Others described Volga famine victims as 'children of no beggar tribe or weakling race', but instead children accustomed to 'the same home care and comforts, the same mother love' as 'our own'.¹⁰⁷ According to this framing, famine relief was not an endorsement of Bolshevism but an act of shared humanity, implicitly connected to a shared European and white identity and a common commitment to family life. There were also reminders of Russia's role as 'our brave Ally' during the First World War.¹⁰⁸ While the ISCF emphasised points of connection with Soviet Russia, some Irish and Irish American reporting on the Volga famine evoked tropes of Russian backwardness and otherness. Drawing on alleged eyewitness accounts, reports described

⁹⁸ *Irish Independent*, 17 Sept. 1921, 6. On ISCF in regional press see *Skibbereen Eagle*, 22 Jan. 1921, 7; *Anglo-Celt*, 24 Sept. 1921, 7; *Southern Star*, 29 Apr. 1922, 3.

⁹⁹ *Irish Independent*, 27 July 1921, 4; 3 Aug. 1921, 4. Ian Kenneally, 'Nationalist in the Broadest Sense: The *Irish Independent* and the Irish Revolution', in *Independent Newspapers: A History*, ed. Mark O'Brien and Kevin Rafter (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2012), 39–51. Arguments about Allied responsibility for the famine were made even more strongly on the Irish left: see Cathal O'Shannon's comments in *Freeman's Journal*, 5 Aug. 1921, 5.

¹⁰⁰ *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 Aug. 1921, 8; *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Aug. 1921, 4.

¹⁰¹ *Irish Times*, 27 July 1921, 4. See Mark O'Brien, *The Irish Times: A History* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2008).

¹⁰² 'Attacks on Save the Children Fund: Press Cuttings', 1921–3, SCFA, SCF/EJ/1/24/1/4.

¹⁰³ *Freeman's Journal*, 25 Mar. 1919, 3; *Irish Independent*, 8 Mar. 1921, 4.

¹⁰⁴ *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Aug. 1921, 3; ISCF pamphlet, Mar. 1922, EJ 173; *Catholic Bulletin*, Nov. 1921, 665–7.

¹⁰⁵ aan de Wiel, *Ireland's Helping Hand*, 2; O'Sullivan, *The NGO Moment*, 23.

¹⁰⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 9 Aug. 1921, 4. On racial theories see Ciaran O'Neill, "'Harvard Scientist Seeks Typical Irishman': Measuring the Irish Race, 1888–1936', *Radical History Review* 143 (2022): 89–108.

¹⁰⁷ *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 Apr. 1922, 8. These tropes also featured in contemporary pamphlets; for example see W. B. Stevini, *Europe's Great Calamity: The Russian Famine: An Appeal for the Russian Peasant* (London: Francis Griffiths, 1922), 8.

¹⁰⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 Apr. 1922, 8.

cases of cannibalism and Russian mothers losing their ‘mother-instinct’ through hunger-induced ‘madness’, killing or abandoning their children.¹⁰⁹ The language of similarity versus difference and tropes about motherhood featured heavily in responses to the Volga famine. Reporting was selective and contradictory, reflecting increasing divisions over Soviet Russia in Ireland by the early 1920s.¹¹⁰

Diasporic religious and press networks also influenced Irish responses to the Volga famine. Irish newspapers used the scale of US relief as a contrast to the British government’s much more limited response; for the *Freeman’s Journal*, ‘America, as usual, has led the way in the work of mercy.’¹¹¹ Diasporic connections provided news information, such as accounts by the Irish writer and relief worker Captain Augustus Patrick Corcoran, who travelled through the Volga famine region with the American Relief Administration in 1921. Corcoran was born just outside Dublin and served in the British army during the First World War, before emigrating to New York in 1916 after a shell injury. Again utilising comparisons to the Great Irish Famine, Corcoran shaped his narration of the Volga famine to Irish and Irish American audiences.¹¹² Irish diasporic involvement in Volga famine relief also had a strong religious dimension. From the summer of 1922, second generation Irish American Jesuit Edmund Walsh directed a Papal Relief Mission in aid of the Volga famine, which followed earlier Papal support for the SCF’s campaign. The mission set up seven feeding stations in Soviet Russia and fed around 158,000 people a day by 1923.¹¹³ Irish donors to the Papal Relief Mission included women’s religious groups like the Sisters of Mercy in Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh.¹¹⁴ The ISCF’s famine relief campaign was part of a much larger web of intergovernmental and religious responses.

For the ISCF, the scale of the international response to the Volga famine helped to generate public awareness, but it also increased competition with other funds, with multiple organisations appealing to the public’s purse strings.¹¹⁵ Alongside the ISCF and aforementioned Papal Relief Mission, the pro-Soviet Workers’ International Famine Relief Committee, the Imperial War Relief Fund and the Society of Friends or Quakers were among the organisations fundraising for Volga famine relief in Ireland.¹¹⁶ Cuthbert Wigham, who came from a Dublin Quaker family, worked on the ground in Soviet Russia in 1921 and 1922 as part of the Friends’ Famine Relief Committee.¹¹⁷ Rival relief organisations used press advertising to argue that they had the necessary experience and credentials to ensure money donated in Ireland was spent ‘to the best purpose.’¹¹⁸ As part of this striving for credibility, humanitarian organisations sought to forge their own mythologies of success, including through recording

¹⁰⁹*Freeman’s Journal*, 3 Aug. 1921, 4; 22 Aug. 1921, 3; *Irish Press* (Philadelphia), 11 Mar. 1922, 3.

¹¹⁰Anna Lively, ‘“Playing at International Politics?”: Irish Nationalist Responses to the Russian Revolution, 1917–21’, in *The Irish Revolution: A Global History*, ed. Patrick Mannion and Fearghal McGarry (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 93–115.

¹¹¹*Freeman’s Journal*, 3 Aug. 1921, 4. Also see *Irish Press*, 22 Apr. 1922, 5.

¹¹²*Freeman’s Journal*, 1 Sept. 1923, 9, 24 Oct. 1922, 6; *New York Tribune*, 12 Aug. 1923, 1 Oct. 1922, 4; *Irish Independent*, 11 Apr. 1928, 6.

¹¹³Patrick McNamara, ‘Russia, Rome, and Recognition: American Catholics and Anticommunism in the 1920s’, *U.S. Catholic Historian* 24, no. 2 (2006): 71–88; Marisa Patulli Trythall, ‘“Russia’s Misfortune Offers Humanitarians a Splendid Opportunity”: Jesuits, Communism, and the Russian Famine’, *Journal of Jesuit Studies* 5, no. 1 (2018): 71–96; Edmund Walsh, *The Fall of the Russian Empire: The Story of the Last of the Romanovs and the Coming of the Bolsheviks* (London: William and Norgate, 1929); *Studies*, March 1924, 44–63.

¹¹⁴*Irish Independent*, 5 Apr. 1923, 6.

¹¹⁵These included the Papal Relief Fund, the Friends’ Relief Committee and the Imperial War Relief. For example see *Irish Independent*, 7 Oct. 1921; *Freeman’s Journal*, 11 Aug. 1921, 5; 20 Sept. 1921, 4. On fundraising on the radical left, see e.g. *The Workers’ Republic*, 26 Nov. 1921.

¹¹⁶*The Workers’ Republic*, 24 Dec. 1921, 3; *Irish Times*, 23 Sept. 1921, 6.

¹¹⁷*Irish Times*, 10 Dec. 1921, 8; *Skibbereen Eagle*, 22 Apr. 1922, 2. Wigham’s father, John Richardson Wigham of Dublin, had been involved in fundraising for the Russian famine of 1891–2, illustrating continuities in philanthropic work: *Irish Times*, 11 Feb. 1892, 6.

¹¹⁸*Irish Times*, 19 Dec. 1921, 4.

and publishing letters of thanks from recipients.¹¹⁹ Private correspondence by relief workers and eye-witness accounts sometimes gave a more complicated picture, indicating friction between the SCF, Soviet authorities and different relief organisations.¹²⁰

Within the patchwork of humanitarian operations within and beyond the Volga region, famine relief was not spread evenly. The geographical scale of the regions affected meant areas were missed out, and one international medical observer described how there were 250,000 children in the Samara region ‘for whom no help is available’ from the SCF (which concentrated on Saratov), the American Relief Administration, the Quakers or the Soviet authorities.¹²¹ Severely affected southern Ukrainian provinces received international aid much later than in the Volga region and were compelled by the Soviet authorities to continue supplying the Volga region with grain, intensifying levels of domestic need.¹²² As also seen during the Great Irish Famine, international attention was difficult to sustain and domestic and international relief efforts tapered off during 1923, despite ongoing need in areas including southern Ukraine.¹²³ While millions were fed through international relief operations, this relief was selective and conditional.¹²⁴ As Luke Kelly emphasises, the extent of international support did not always correspond with the level of ongoing need. Humanitarian organisations and the international press often tried to frame crises like the Volga famine as discrete events with clear geographical boundaries and beginning and end points, even if the reality was rarely so simple.¹²⁵

Relief in Ireland

The ISCF’s Volga famine relief campaign had met with mixed success in the early 1920s. It succeeded in raising the organisation’s profile, but not all the publicity had been positive and there were calls for a greater domestic focus.¹²⁶ Between 1921 and 1923, Soviet Russia received the most ISCF funding by a substantial margin: £1,795 1s. 6d. in comparison to £139 4s. 1d. sent to Austria and £620 spent in Ireland.¹²⁷ In the mid-1920s, the ISCF pivoted to domestic relief and to responding to hunger in the west of Ireland.¹²⁸ In 1923 and 1924, heavy rains led to poor harvests and turf shortages in Connemara, prompting a resolution by Clifden Rural District Council in February 1924 calling for more government assistance as ‘surely it is the function of a Government to look after its people’.¹²⁹ As Úna Newell argues, the population of Co. Galway was particularly vulnerable to these kind of shocks because of land congestion and ‘pockets of extreme poverty’. This social reality sat sometimes jarringly alongside a romanticised view of the supposed ‘simple life’ of the west and the Gaeltacht within cultural nationalist and language revival movements of the early twentieth century.¹³⁰ Poverty

¹¹⁹*The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 1 Apr. 1922, 215.

¹²⁰See Eglantyne Jebb to Tye Jebb, 17 Dec. 1919, Jebb Papers, 7EJB/B/01/03/23; ‘The Famine in Russia – Mr. Webster, Moscow’, 1921, LNA, File R657/12/17,345/14,182.

¹²¹‘Report of Dr. Farrar, Medical Advisor to Dr. Nansen, on the journey of inspection made in the Volga Region with the High Commissioner from November 27th to December 8th 1921’, LNA, File C1382/278/R.304/2/A, 1–3.

¹²²See Wasyl Veryha, ‘Famine in Ukraine in 1921–1923 and the Soviet Government’s Countermeasures’, *Nationalities Papers* 12, no. 2 (1984): 265–85; Serbyn, ‘Famine of 1921–23’, 147–78; Roger Pethybridge, *One Step Backwards Two Steps Forward: Soviet Society and Politics in the New Economic Policy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 94, 109. There was some acknowledgement of famine in Ukraine in the Irish press (e.g., *Skibbereen Eagle*, 22 Apr. 1922, 2) and by the SCF by 1922 (e.g. *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 1 Apr. 1922, 224), but the Volga region was the main area of focus.

¹²³Francesco Zavatti, ‘Agents of Altruism: The Great Irish Famine and Italian Civil Society (1847)’, *European Review of History* 28, no. 1 (2021), 140; Serbyn, ‘Famine of 1921–2’, 167.

¹²⁴Kelly, *British Humanitarian Activity*, 161; Williams, ‘The 1921 Russian Famine’, 300; Breen, ‘Saving Enemy Children’, 231.

¹²⁵Kelly, *British Humanitarian Activity*, 167.

¹²⁶*Ulster Herald*, 28 Oct. 1922, 6.

¹²⁷*Irish Times*, 17 Nov. 1923, 8.

¹²⁸Buxton and Fuller, *The White Flame*, 75.

¹²⁹Úna Newell, *The West Must Wait: County Galway and the Irish Free State, 1922–32* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 76.

¹³⁰*Ibid.*, xi–xviii, 76.

in Connemara had received considerable attention in 1913, when Irish nationalist and humanitarian Roger Casement led a relief campaign and argued that suffering in the west demonstrated the failings of British rule in Ireland.¹³¹

This context meant that relief in the west of Ireland was politically sensitive, touching on major questions about Irish identity. Relief became intertwined with post-Civil War politics, as the victors in the Civil War (represented by the Cumann na nGaedheal party) sought to prevent reputational damage to their government by playing down the severity of the situation.¹³² Despite remaining relatively neglected in the historiography outside of county-based studies, the severity of hunger sparked contemporary warnings of ‘famine’ and claims that it was the worst hunger experienced since ‘black ’47’.¹³³ Memories of the Great Irish Famine, combined with the timing in the early years of the Irish Free State, made these reports particularly contentious. In late 1924, the Cumann na nGaedheal politician and minister for agriculture, Patrick Hogan, declared that ‘All this talk about famine is nonsense. There is no real famine in any sense of the word’. Reflecting his socially conservative politics and ‘laissez-faire liberal’ approach, Hogan dismissed the scale of need.¹³⁴ Critics of Cumann na nGaedheal, particularly on the radical left, argued that the near-famine conditions showed the lack of social change since the Civil War.¹³⁵ Like with responses to the Volga famine, political and press debates raged over the credibility of news information and whether the scale of suffering had been exaggerated. The Free State government was keen to shut down alarmist reporting in the Irish American press, with president of the executive council William Cosgrave reiterating by telegram that ‘No famine in ordinary sense exists’.¹³⁶ Picking up on official Free State statements, the Irish American nationalist newspaper the *Gaelic American* praised the Free State for dealing effectively with the social inheritances of British rule.¹³⁷ There were also allegations in the Irish and Irish American press of cynical and hypocritical English press reporting, encapsulated in the headline ‘England boosting the “Irish Famine”’.¹³⁸ Political and press debates about humanitarian relief were multi-layered and multidirectional. Relief organisations like the SCF could not separate themselves from the politicisation of relief given their reliance on cooperation from the press and Free State government.

As the SCF began to scale up its relief in the west of Ireland in 1925, class, nationality, religion and gender shaped encounters between relief workers and local communities. In a telegram to London, one SCF representative reported on his visits to schools and houses on Turbot Island in Co. Galway, where he met a mother with five children and only ‘dry bread’ left to eat. Descriptions of the ‘pale and undersized’ bodies of the children reflected the SCF’s preoccupation with health and the body.¹³⁹ This extended to before-and-after style advertising in SCF publications, which included photographs showing the difference between children who had and had not received relief in different countries.¹⁴⁰ Personal letters suggest the disconnections between relief workers and recipients. In February 1925, Eglantyne Jebb travelled to Dublin with an Australian woman called Miss John to hold meetings with the ISCF, government representatives and other relief organisations. Miss John was presumably the

¹³¹ Angus Mitchell, “An Irish Putumayo”: Roger Casement’s Humanitarian Relief Campaign among the Connemara Islanders 1913–4, *Irish Economic and Social History* 31, no. 1 (2004): 41–60.

¹³² *Connacht Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1925, 8.

¹³³ *Cork Examiner*, 31 Jan. 1925, 10; *Sligo Champion*, 14 Feb. 1925, 8. See Timothy O’Neill, ‘Minor Famines and Relief in Galway 1815–1925’, in *Galway History and Society: Interdisciplinary Essays on the History of an Irish County*, ed. Gerard Moran and Raymond Gillespie (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1996), 445–77; Peter Cunningham, ‘The Forgotten Famine and How It Put the Fledgling Irish Free State on the Brink’, *Irish Times*, 9 Apr. 2020, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-forgotten-famine-and-how-it-put-the-fledgling-irish-free-state-on-the-brink-1.4218048>.

¹³⁴ Dáil Éireann debate, 5 Dec. 1924; William Murphy, ‘Hogan, Patrick J. (‘Paddy’); *DIB* (2009).

¹³⁵ *Irish Independent*, 20 Apr. 1925, 8; Grant, ‘Workers to the Rescue’, 40–1.

¹³⁶ Newell, *The West Must Wait*, 80–81.

¹³⁷ *Gaelic American*, 7 Mar. 1925, 1, 3, 4 Apr. 1925, 1.

¹³⁸ *Gaelic American*, 7 Mar. 1925, 1; *Connacht Tribune*, 7 Feb. 1925, 8.

¹³⁹ *Kerry News*, 23 Feb. 1925, 2.

¹⁴⁰ *The Record of the Save the Children Fund*, 15 Mar. 1922, 203.

founder of the Australian Save the Children Fund, Cecilia John, who lived in London from 1921 and became head of the overseas department of the London SCF office.¹⁴¹ In a letter to her Irish mother, Jebb described her and John's experience:

When last I wrote, I had just started on my Irish business. The Government suggested – I think I told you – that we should take Clifden on the Connemara coast, not far from Roundstone as our centre. Miss John went straight off to see it, + sent from there telegrams, which have caused some stir. Of course the normal condition of the peasantry in the congested areas would be such as to startle an Australian, + the site of a hen picking about in the straw of the bed in one cottage rather upset her! – I am in quiet hopes, however, that the problem of chronic poverty in these districts will really be dealt with by the Free State Government after a bit, + meanwhile if we can do some effective relief work, we shall be preparing the way for such a development.¹⁴²

Jebb's comments reflect the unfamiliarity of SCF members with the social environment in which they were working, as well as uncertainties over the direction of Irish relief work. The SCF's work in the west of Ireland operated largely on a crisis model, with 'money, food and clothing' sent in to 'distressed' districts.¹⁴³ Rather than emergency provision, the ambition was for relief of a 'more constructive kind'. This included the 'encouragement of local industries and workrooms', echoing the ethos of Tye Jebb's Home Arts and Industries Association.¹⁴⁴ There was an implication that food donations, which might be necessary and suitable in famine-stricken Russia, were potentially ill-fitting for a context much closer to home.¹⁴⁵ The Irish diaspora in Britain helped fundraise for the SCF's work in the west of Ireland, including through a special fund set up by 'Manchester Irish men and women' who believed they had a 'great duty to perform'.¹⁴⁶ Within the Irish Free State, the Catholic Church facilitated relief work and local priests supervised meals for school children across the west.¹⁴⁷ Following a shipping disaster off the west coast of Ireland in November 1927, local priests provided the ISCF with numbers of children deemed to be in need, alongside their ages, who were then sent 'the most suitable garments'.¹⁴⁸ This gave local priests considerable power in determining who received relief. While sustaining Protestant involvement, the ISCF adapted to the role of Catholicism in the Free State. Prominent Catholic members like Mary Kettle evoked ideas about religion and citizenship, praising the Declaration of the Rights of the Child as 'practical Christianity'.¹⁴⁹ Far from being a secular organisation, the ISCF shows the multiple ways in which religion shaped the practices and language of inter-war humanitarianism.

Hunger in the west of Ireland also gained international attention, notably within Soviet Russia. Competing narratives about humanitarian relief emerged across the political spectrum and in transnational contexts. In the spring and summer of 1925, *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* reported on disease, the devastation of livestock and poor harvests in the west of Ireland. Drawing on narratives promoted by Irish radicals, they accused the Irish Free State of remaining silent about the 'famine' and

¹⁴¹ Patricia Gowland, 'John, Cecilia Annie (1877–1955)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (2006), <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/john-cecilia-annie-6849/text11861>. On John see also Joy Damousi, *The Humanitarians: Child War Refugees and Australian Humanitarianism in a Transnational World, 1919–75* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), chapter 1.

¹⁴² Eglantyne Jebb to Tye Jebb, 6 Feb. 1925, Jebb Papers, 7EJB/B/01/03/31. Quotation reproduced with the kind permission of the Jebb family.

¹⁴³ *Irish Times*, 23 May 1926, 5.

¹⁴⁴ News Bulletin from the Press Department of Save the Children, 18 June 1925, 'International Labour Office Refugees Service – Relations with the Save the Children Fund – Geneva and London', LNA, C1410/306/R.404/3/01/1.

¹⁴⁵ *Irish Independent*, 20 Apr. 1925, 8.

¹⁴⁶ *Irish Times*, 5 Feb. 1925, 7.

¹⁴⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 8 Feb. 1925, 7.

¹⁴⁸ *The Save the Children Fund News Bulletin*, July 1928, lvi.

¹⁴⁹ *Irish Times*, 23 May 1926, 5.

leaving people with only grass and leaves to eat.¹⁵⁰ In April 1925, *Pravda* featured a front-page article by the Irish trade unionist and socialist Jim Larkin on ‘Famine in Ireland’. In a reformulation of the Irish press comparisons made during the Volga famine, Larkin declared that ‘readers of *Pravda*, who survived the horrors of the famine of 1920 and 1921, will understand the state of affairs in western Ireland’.¹⁵¹ A cartoon illustrating Larkin’s article criticised the Catholic Church’s response to the hunger and was reminiscent of Vladimir Lenin’s writing on the 1913 Dublin Lockout, which suggested the indifference of the Catholic Church to the suffering of the Irish working classes.¹⁵² Alongside press discussions, there was also some direct relief sent from Soviet Russia to Ireland in 1925 through the Workers’ International Relief, a Soviet-backed organisation founded in 1921 to co-ordinate workers’ relief for the Volga famine.¹⁵³ One donation of £500 ‘from the peasants of Russia to the starving peasants of Ireland’ reached Ireland via British Labour MP and Soviet sympathiser George Lansbury.¹⁵⁴ This donation prompted angry claims in the *Belfast Newsletter* that it was really the ‘peasants of Russia, under the rule of the Soviet’ rather than the Irish who needed relief.¹⁵⁵ International relief could prompt anxieties over national pride and international standing, which were often intensified through press speculation.

The ISCF’s response to the situation in the west of Ireland in 1925 set the tone for its work over the following decade, which had the ‘welfare of the Irish child’ as its ‘dearest object’ alongside support for ‘Irish mothers’.¹⁵⁶ This reflected a shift away from the internationalist rhetoric of the Volga famine campaign and was in keeping with the tone of other charitable organisations in the Irish Free State.¹⁵⁷ The ISCF’s model differed from the imperial-orientated British SCF, which conducted extensive work in Africa in the 1930s and spent a much smaller proportion of its funds within Britain.¹⁵⁸ The ISCF remained reliant on the cooperation of local communities, continuing to use the ‘local Doctor, Nurse, Priest or School-teacher’ to distribute food and clothing in the 1930s.¹⁵⁹ The ‘transnationalisation’ of humanitarian relief after the First World War was not an even or unidirectional process.¹⁶⁰ Smaller organisations like the ISCF vacillated between more outward- and inward-looking relief projects, retaining some flexibility in their operations despite being part of large, multinational organisations.

In a history of Irish inter-war foreign policy, Gerard Keown argues that the Irish Free State sought to create ‘credibility through participation’ in international conferences and negotiations.¹⁶¹ The role of humanitarianism in attempts to establish ‘credibility’ has been far less recognised in relation to the Irish Free State compared to other countries, perhaps partly because international campaigns like the ISCF Volga famine appeal were relatively sporadic and small-scale. However, the work of the ISCF illustrates how the significance of humanitarian fundraising campaigns cannot be calculated solely in monetary terms. The Volga famine was a major test case for Irish humanitarianism for domestic and international reasons. Although the timing and context of the unfolding Irish Civil War could have prevented engagement, the opposite turned out to be the case. The Dáil’s public donation asserted a confident role for the Irish Free State on the international stage, even if this was only a drop in the ocean of international relief.¹⁶² As also seen with Soviet donations to Ireland in 1925, comparatively

¹⁵⁰ *Izvestiia*, 4 Mar. 1925, 2; *Pravda*, 1 Apr. 1925, 2.

¹⁵¹ *Pravda*, 14 Apr. 1925, 1.

¹⁵² *Pravda*, 14 Apr. 1925 1; *Proletarskaia Pravda*, 11 Jan. 1914, 1; *Severnaia Pravda*, 29 Aug. 1913, 2.

¹⁵³ Kasper Braskén, *The International Workers’ Relief, Communism, and Transnational Solidarity: Willi Münzenberg in Weimar Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 11, 31–3.

¹⁵⁴ *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 July 1925, 12; O’Connor, *Reds and the Green*, 7, 105–8.

¹⁵⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 28 July 1925, 12.

¹⁵⁶ *The Save the Children Fund News Bulletin*, Dec. 1927, xxix–xxx; *Irish Times*, 29 Nov. 1929, 6.

¹⁵⁷ Brazil and Oppenheimer, ‘Saving “Ireland’s Children”’, 2.

¹⁵⁸ *The World’s Children*, Nov. 1930, 29, June 1931, 167; SCF Annual Reports, 1922/23–1934/35, SCFA, SCF/P/1/1/4–16.

¹⁵⁹ McCullagh to Ussher, 7 Feb. 1932.

¹⁶⁰ Cabanes, *The Great War*, 5.

¹⁶¹ Keown, *First of the Small Nations*, 151.

¹⁶² Griffith to Law, 10 Apr. 1922, DIFP.

small donations could gain widespread traction through the press and develop a political and cultural significance disproportionate to the size of the donation. The noise and debate surrounding relief was often detached from the needs and experiences of the people in the affected areas; in 1925, disputes over the terminology of ‘famine’ consumed most of the press attention. This disjuncture between the practical impact of relief and its symbolic importance poses methodological challenges. Within the silences, gaps and distortions of relief appeals and accounts, there is a wider story about the selectivity and conditionality of humanitarian relief. By the inter-war period, humanitarian relief campaigns relied on narrative-building through the press. The ‘gentle, fair-haired’ Russian child and the starving family on Turbot Island were crucial elements of this storytelling, but they were often framed by humanitarian organisations as symbols of wider suffering, rather than individuals with their own agency.¹⁶³

As this article shows, case studies based on smaller relief organisations can offer very different perspectives on humanitarianism compared to macro-institutional and international histories. Incremental processes of adaptation and negotiation come into sharper relief, as well as more complex relationships with imperial and religious structures.¹⁶⁴ Correspondence, publicity material and press coverage of the ISCF reveal how British–Irish relations cast a shadow over Irish humanitarianism, driving rhetorical and practical efforts to separate Irish from British relief. Alongside this, the legacies of partition and the Irish Civil War affected the operations of the ISCF and Cumann na nGaedheal’s response to ‘famine’ reports in 1925. Irish inter-war humanitarianism reflected the particularities of Irish religious and philanthropic traditions. Despite the influence of the Catholic Church in the Irish Free State, there were strong continuities with nineteenth-century Protestant women’s philanthropy, as exemplified by the Jebb family. The Irish diaspora also influenced humanitarian fundraising and press reporting, as seen in relation to the United States during the Volga famine and Irish communities in Britain in response to hunger in the west of Ireland. Incorporating so-called ‘small nations’ like Ireland into the history of inter-war humanitarianism involves tracing local community responses, cross-border communications, individual transnational lives and international press networks. As with global responses to the Great Irish Famine, the Volga famine was re-interpreted abroad to suit domestic social and political concerns.¹⁶⁵ Coming quickly in the wake of the First World War and the Russian civil wars, international responses to the Volga famine were about much more than attitudes to communism. State sovereignty, domestic credibility and international influence were all up for grabs in humanitarian relief efforts.

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¹⁶³*Belfast Newsletter*, 9 Aug. 1921, 4; *Kerry News*, 23 Feb. 1925, 2.

¹⁶⁴See also Matthew Hilton et al., ‘History and Humanitarianism: A Conversation,’ *Past and Present* 241, no. 1 (2018): 16.

¹⁶⁵Shrout, *Aiding Ireland*, 10; Keown, *First of the Small Nations*.

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