Rocking the boat: maritime rescue and the professionalization of relief, 1978–82

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ABSTRACT
The 1970s were, for many humanitarians, a period of consolidation in which a professional aid industry gradually developed out of the radical idealism of the late 1960s. For the large number of relief workers who had recently joined the sector, this decade marked a turning point, as a number of small-scale and previously amateur agencies began to garner international recognition as reliable and specialized partners. Whilst most humanitarians welcomed this professionalization, the period also saw the emergence of a new and antagonistic form of relief that explicitly rejected it: the rescue of refugees at sea. This article focuses on two maritime rescue initiatives – the French and German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects – which were begun in 1978 and 1979 respectively to assist Vietnamese refugees in the South China Sea. It examines the ways in which these initiatives challenged the growing agenda of humanitarian professionalization. Many larger aid agencies viewed the ‘Boats for Vietnam’ as ‘amateur’ exercises but for their proponents this was precisely the attraction, allowing them to offer a purer and more authentic brand of humanitarianism within a bureaucratizing industry that they believed was losing its heart. By charting the controversies that emerged over the boat projects, the article demonstrates how the presentation of refugee rescue as an antidote to regulation ended up spreading discord, generating dramatic confrontations between relief workers. It argues that the ‘Boats for Vietnam’ touched a nerve in this rapidly expanding humanitarian system – not only by bucking the trends of professionalization and expansion, but also by explicitly criticizing them. Interestingly, contemporary rescue projects conducted in the Mediterranean today generate similar divisions, with recent non-governmental organizations’ (NGOs’) more activist brand of relief unsettling traditionalists.

Introduction
On 5 May 1979 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), a medical humanitarian organization, held its seventh General Assembly at the Intercontinental Hotel in Paris. The Assembly was meant to review the organization’s projects and celebrate its achievements, but it was soon interrupted by Bernard Kouchner – one of MSF’s co-founders – who gave an impassioned speech marking his disillusionment with the organization before renouncing his membership. After listening to the president’s annual report, Kouchner stood up...
and walked angrily out of the hotel. He left behind, as MSF’s meeting minutes later put it, ‘the bitter image of friends, brothers and sisters losing sight of what united them and focusing instead on what divided them.’

What had divided MSF, in part, was Kouchner’s involvement in a small, informal search-and-rescue venture named the ‘Boat for Vietnam’, established in 1978 to assist Vietnamese refugees in the South China Sea. The ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project, run by a French humanitarian committee of the same name, intended to provide direct relief to Vietnamese refugees stranded at sea, chartering a search-and-rescue vessel named the Île de Lumières (Island of Light). Yet the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ was seen by many aid workers as a risky and unprofessional venture. Wrangling over the project’s status and value, the humanitarian community soon found itself at loggerheads, sparking several highly public arguments and even leading to the splintering of organizations like MSF. The boat project became – as Kouchner recalled – the ‘battleground’ on which many of the underlying tensions simmering beneath the surface at MSF were finally laid bare, creating conflict between members and resulting in Kouchner’s infamous breakaway from the organization.

The idea of providing relief at sea proved to be particularly divisive beyond MSF as well. Inspired by the work of the French ‘Boat for Vietnam’ committee, a German journalist named Rupert Neudeck launched his own search-and-rescue project in 1979 which similarly generated dramatic confrontations between relief workers. The work of Neudeck’s German Emergency Doctors Committee and its rescue ship, the Cap Anamur, severely aggravated members of the German Red Cross, kickstarting a fierce inter-organizational battle that worked its way up into governmental discussions surrounding West German aid.

Both Kouchner and Neudeck’s rescue projects were, contrary to the predictions of many commentators, a huge success. According to their statistics, German Emergency Doctors rescued 9507 Vietnamese refugees and medically treated a further 35,000 in the course of the Cap Anamur’s first mission at sea between 1979 and 1982. A recent history of the Île de Lumières’s first voyage of nine months (beginning in April 1979) puts the ship’s total rescue figure at 30,000 refugees. Despite these achievements, however, both rescue projects met with thinly veiled scepticism and often outright criticism. As both Neudeck and Kouchner discovered, maritime rescue became the straw that broke many of the fragile connections and alliances holding humanitarians together at this time.

This paper focuses on the French and German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects to examine how maritime rescue emerged onto the humanitarian scene in the late 1970s, challenging the growing agenda of professionalization. It is based on nine months of historical research conducted between 2020 and 2021, drawing on archival material from MSF, Médecins du Monde and German Emergency Doctors, as well as newspaper reports and the memoirs of aid workers who worked in the South China Sea in the 1970s and 1980s. It specifically charts the inter and intra-organizational battles that emerged over the ‘Boats for Vietnam’, showing how maritime rescue was viewed by the wider humanitarian community as an ‘amateur’ and antagonistic exercise. This, for its proponents, was precisely the attraction, as it represented a more authentic and powerfully disruptive form of assistance that challenged the era’s tendency towards bureaucratization.
In particular, I argue that these two ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects – as openly informal and spontaneous ventures – pushed against the processes of regulation and professionalization that had been transforming the world of aid at the time. This is significant because the 1970s, particularly the years following the Nigerian-Biafran war, have commonly been seen as the birth of modern humanitarianism and the moment when an internationalized, professionalized aid industry developed out of a cocoon of radicalism and idealism. In humanitarian historiography, this decade marks a turning point for relief, which gradually ceased to be understood as a small-scale, ad hoc and essentially amateur arrangement and instead began to garner international recognition as a reliable and professional endeavour. The problem with the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects, at least for the common view of this history, was that they bucked this trend. In fact, they explicitly criticized it. The ‘Boats for Vietnam’ were small, experimental ventures that represented a different ethos of assistance. They explicitly rejected bureaucratization, instead favouring informality and spontaneity, and they claimed to offer a purer and more authentic brand of humanitarianism within an industry that had lost its heart. These initiatives – kick-started by civil activists and retaining a strong sense of idealism – in fact presented themselves as an antidote to the fashionable process of regulating relief, a stance which inevitably spread discord.

The article proceeds in six parts, describing each of the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ ventures in turn and examining the controversies that they generated before reflecting on their continued relevance today. The first section focuses on MSF’s discussions over its potential involvement in the French ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project, which exacerbated internal conflicts over the structuring of aid. The second section examines the disagreements that the French ship generated amongst the wider humanitarian community once it arrived in the South China Sea. Shifting the focus onto the German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ initiative, the third section describes how maritime rescue became the focal point of a fierce skirmish between German Emergency Doctors and the German Red Cross. The fourth section focuses on the ways in which this German rescue project also clashed uncomfortably with the West German state’s response to the Indochinese refugee crisis. Turning to the legacies of the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects, the fifth section argues that the topic of rescue at sea continues to divide humanitarians today, with similar disputes and fractures opening up amongst relief workers in the Mediterranean. The article concludes by arguing that the controversies and divisions created by maritime rescue projects can often be traced back to their tendency to contest structured relief and instead champion informal humanitarianism. The ‘Boats for Vietnam’, like many contemporary rescue ventures, were seen to stretch the limits of relief and touch several foundational nerves of the humanitarian system, dangerously ‘rocking the boat’ at an important moment for the aid industry. Their perceived incompatibility with the ‘proper’ way of providing relief created significant ruptures, many of them permanent.

‘Un Bateau pour le Vietnam’: tensions within MSF

Following the communist takeover of Saigon in 1975, many Vietnamese citizens began to flee, seeking safety and opportunity elsewhere. Whilst the number of escapees dropped after an initial exodus in 1975, refugee numbers began to rise again considerably from late 1978, due to the state’s banning of private businesses, increasing
persecution of those of Chinese ethnicity and growing use of notorious ‘re-education camps’. Many refugees in this second wave left by sea, often travelling on board overcrowded and unsafe boats. In November 1978, footage of one of these boats – the Hai Hong, which was carrying 2564 Vietnamese refugees – was broadcast across Europe. Denied entry into Malaysian ports, the refugee vessel had been left to drift at sea for three weeks, leaving those on board without food, water or medical supplies. The Hai Hong’s story sparked impassioned declarations that a humanitarian crisis was unfolding in the ASEAN region and it prompted the creation of the French ‘Bateau pour le Vietnam’ committee. This committee launched a spontaneous rescue initiative, chartering a boat that could bring on board stranded refugees, provide them with medical assistance and transport them to safety. The project was viewed by its founders (including Bernard Kouchner) as a tangible example of the old humanitarian adage that ‘small acts can make a difference’. The rescue committee hoped that their simple idea of rescuing individuals at sea could push relief efforts in the ASEAN region forwards quickly, without hitting the bureaucratic speedbumps of the humanitarian machine. However, the project’s ideals of spontaneity and informality soon ran into opposition within MSF, a humanitarian organization that had begun to embark upon an opposing process of bureaucratization and professionalization.

Confident that MSF would support the work of his ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project, Kouchner offered its medical services to the rescue committee at once. He believed the initiative to be so important that the commitment of MSF on board would not need to be discussed, assuming that MSF volunteers ‘would even scramble to be involved’. Most MSF members, however, did not feel this way. Many were wary of tying their organization to such an impulsively established project, particularly one that focused on the unconventional provision of assistance at sea. At a Collegial Management meeting held in November 1978, MSF members voiced concerns that Kouchner had dragged MSF into a relief programme that it had neither formally debated nor committed to. After a brief but fraught discussion, MSF agreed to provide medical assistance on the planned rescue boat but demanded that it be made clear to the public that MSF was not itself a ‘Boat for Vietnam’ member. The agreement initially pacified both sides, yet as publicity surrounding the maritime rescue project mushroomed, so did MSF’s sense of discomfort regarding its involvement.

As the next months passed, MSF began to regard maritime rescue as a risky and rather radical form of humanitarian assistance, one which overstepped traditional humanitarian boundaries. Rather than representing a well-organized, institutionally backed project adhering to humanitarian guidelines, MSF viewed the rescue ship as an impulsive personal venture – the reckless dreamchild of Kouchner. Members disliked the way in which such an individual project had been publicly labelled as MSF’s. Confusion between the personal and the professional, they argued, weakened the reputation of their organization and erroneously gave the impression that humanitarian relief could be provided by individuals ‘going it alone’. As Claude Malhuret, MSF’s outgoing president at the time, later reflected, what angered members was the fact that Kouchner ‘created the impression that MSF and [the boat project] were one and the same thing. This story was bad for our autonomy, our unique identity.’ MSF felt that humanitarian assistance should involve the collective negotiation of plans according to professional standards and they therefore, as Malhuret put it, ‘didn’t think that one man should seek all the glory’.
MSF members also felt that running a search-and-rescue mission would be a foolish waste of their organization’s specific and developing expertise. Doctors, they argued, drew on specific training that could not be put to any kind of efficient use in the cramped quarters of a boat: MSF, after all, stood for ‘Doctors without Borders’ not ‘Sailors without Borders’. Rony Brauman – an MSF doctor who had just returned from Thai refugee camps and who had spent time as a ship’s doctor on a vessel laying underwater cables along the West African coast – sent enquiries to several marine officers he had met on these missions, asking them about the feasibility of providing medical care in the South China Sea and of locating wounded or sick refugees in such a vast space. He met with pessimistic replies, eventually concluding that it would be technically impossible to meaningfully help the boat people. Doctors were simply not able, he argued, to decipher the complex maritime radio and radar signals that told of refugee boats’ whereabouts, and their capacity to treat individuals would be limited even if they did manage to locate ships. Kouchner’s rescue boat was viewed by Brauman and others as a technically ineffective venture which, given that it was projected to cost two million centimes each day, also appeared a waste of valuable resources.

For all these factors, the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project appeared to MSF as an ‘amateur’ aid venture. In particular, it sat badly with a key group of MSF members who were lobbying to move the organization away from volunteerism and ad hoc programmes. Claude Malhuret and his supporters had begun the previous year to push for a process of expansion and professionalization, structuring MSF to make it more efficient in the field. Malhuret believed that if MSF continued to operate through improvised projects like Kouchner’s then the organization would perish. As he had put it to his colleagues during a Secretariat meeting in 1977, ‘I’m not interested in going on a mission with three drug samples in my pocket. So, either we get organized and grow, or we don’t and we disappear.’ This represented a common view at the time, when aid agencies were developing standards and systems. The rescue project, many felt, pulled MSF back into a state of disorder and inefficiency, steering the organization away from its bright future as a professional humanitarian player. This of course only angered Kouchner, for whom the venture represented a last bastion of volunteer idealism resisting the fierce tide of Malhuret’s bureaucratization.

Exacerbating these ever-deepening fault lines, MSF’s incoming president Xavier Emmanuelli launched a particularly vitriolic attack against the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ in December 1978. In a provocative article published in Le Quotidien du Médecin, Emmanuelli accused the ship’s committee of simply staging a flashy rescue mission. He argued that ‘Boat for Vietnam’ members, including Kouchner, were using the media spotlight for their own gain instead of meaningfully assisting boat people, titling his piece ‘A Boat for Saint German des Prés’ in reference to the wealthy quarter in the sixth arrondissement of Paris where most of the rescue committee lived and worked. Emmanuelli accused the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ of ignoring the plight of other refugees around the world whose suffering was less spectacular, less politicized and therefore less amenable to self-interested publicization. Why, he asked, should so much money be spent on highly complex maritime projects to assist Vietnamese refugees at sea when millions of other refugees continued to suffer, albeit less visibly, on land: ‘What about the Angolan refugees in Zaire? And the Zairean refugees in Angola? Who is speaking up for the Eritrean and Somali refugees? […] Where are your boats, oh, great men of
conscience?\textsuperscript{15} The project, Emmanuelli concluded, had been kickstarted only by media-hungry humanitarians who wished to dramatically sail upon ‘the oceans of our guilty consciences’ and who seemed more interested in filling boats under the watchful eyes of television cameras than in emptying them.\textsuperscript{16}

Unsurprisingly, such mockery served only to stoke up the flames of disagreement within MSF, creating a deep rupture between those members who supported Bernard Kouchner’s boat venture and those who wished to see the back of such informal schemes. Unable to tolerate what he saw as the abandonment of humanitarian idealism in favour of paper-pushing bureaucracy, and reacting angrily to personal attacks on his motives, Kouchner stormed out of the organization’s General Assembly and decided to continue the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project alone. MSF’s ideological commitment to alleviating suffering and its support for the victims of global injustice, he raged, had been ‘brought down in full flight by the charity’s bureaucrats and the technocrats of aid’\textsuperscript{17} MSF, he cried, was ‘making another charity [when] we wanted to propose a brotherhood’.\textsuperscript{18}

Éric Cheysson, a junior surgeon in training at the time of the rupture, recalls following Kouchner and his supporters out of the MSF’s meeting room and onto the streets of Paris: ‘We found ourselves in a miserable bistro, sitting around Kouchner who declared solemnly and determinedly, smacking the palm of his hand on the table, “We are going to make it work, this boat!”’\textsuperscript{19} Recalling his enrolment into the new rescue organization – which would eventually become the NGO Médecins du Monde – Cheysson recounted a particularly illuminating conversation with Kouchner: ‘Suddenly, looking me straight in the eyes, [Kouchner] asked me, “What is it that you do?” Intimidated, I stuttered: “Well, I’m a surgeon … .” In actual fact, I had never operated in my life. “Voila,” exclaimed Kouchner, “We have a surgeon!”\textsuperscript{20} This was a good illustration of the project’s overall approach, orientated around ‘pull[ing] together a solidarity [of] the amateurs of Human Rights’.\textsuperscript{21}

Effectively, the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ venture ignited many pre-existing and heated internal discussions within MSF regarding its future and the forms of relief it wished to provide. The simmering pressures unearthed by the project – largely centred around the efficacy of ‘amateur’ aid – had previously hidden beneath the surface of the organization but had now been dragged dramatically into the open. MSF’s potential involvement in the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project served to compound the highly explosive divide between Malhuret’s vision of professionalization and its counter-current of volunteerism, upheld by Kouchner.

**Upsetting humanitarians in the South China Sea**

Beyond its instigation of internal humanitarian quarrels, the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project sparked wider disagreements about the role played by ‘amateur’ aid organizations on the global stage. As it sailed out to the South China Sea for fitting in February 1979, the French ‘Boat for Vietnam’ was accused of damaging the professional reputation of relief by connecting humanitarian projects to political debates surrounding the ethics of rescuing the escapees of communist regimes. Many aid workers felt that the direct rescue of Vietnamese refugees – and the subsequent transportation of many of these individuals to the West – would wrongly intervene in the ideological struggles of the Cold War, marking a blunt departure from a more traditional humanitarianism
defined by the principle of neutrality. Whilst other NGOs and international organizations working in the ASEAN region were attempting to skirt around the obvious political symbolism of Vietnamese displacement – avoiding instigating projects or professing opinions that could involve them in public controversies – the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ (sometimes inadvertently but often intentionally) strained the highly sensitive nerves of the humanitarian system through its direct model of humanitarian engagement.

The French committee’s plan to rescue victims of communism and transport them to safety in Europe recalled uncomfortable memories on the part of those who had fought in favour of the communist ‘liberation’ of Vietnam a few years earlier. Upsetting the delicate balance of European leftist politics, the boat project inevitably provoked angry reactions. It had prompted, for instance, the French communist trade union centre (the Confédération Générale du Travail) – who managed the majority of vessels at port in France – to block all of the rescue committee’s efforts to arrange a charter of a French-flagged vessel, arguing that in no circumstances could French union ships be used to rescue the escapees of a communist regime.22 The committee also received complaints that by abruptly sailing out into the South China Sea without calculating a specific rescue approach, the Île de Lumière would end up providing humanitarian assistance to individuals who did not need it, potentially bringing rich and corrupt bureaucrats to Europe rather than supporting the bona fide victims of persecution. The project’s prioritization of speed over strategy was viewed not only as inefficient but also as an erroneous negation of humanitarian principles. These complaints were soon given public voice: in a particularly thorny television interview, the rescue committee’s Vo Van Ai was asked how a humanitarian project could assist ‘pimps’ and ‘profiteers’ who had ‘supported a corrupt military regime’ and who accordingly ‘deserve[d] what they got’.23 Reckless enthusiasm for immediate action, some aid workers cuttingly argued, would only result in the inappropriate rescue of ‘awful bourgeois Sino-Vietnamese who each had sixty-four golden teeth per jaw and their savings sewn onto their testicles’.24

The Île de Lumière initiative had now become a highly polarizing gesture, and the wider humanitarian community worried that it would undermine the maintenance of a respected model of relief. The Vietnamese displacement crisis had given significant impetus to the duty to assist boat migrants, but humanitarians mainly hoped to achieve this through specific, organized schemes and legal mechanisms, not through nonconformist rescue projects.25 The most concerted effort made by the international community to assist refugees was the development of the Orderly Departure Program, facilitating the resettlement of Vietnamese abroad. However, this scheme was specifically designed to reduce the number of people fleeing by sea and hence the need for maritime rescue. When the practice of sea rescue was pushed forwards – most notably with the institutionalization of the duty to rescue at sea through the drafting of the Search and Rescue (SAR) Convention in 1979 – the focus very much remained on the organized coordination of rescue between states. Those rescue schemes receiving sanction were ones initiated by state Navies – US Navy ships conducted rescue operations while operating in the area, for instance, whilst Italian and later French Navy vessels were specifically dispatched to assist refugees. Support for the humanitarian assistance of boat people did not, however, extend as easily to the efforts of small rescue organizations. Whilst
maritime assistance was fast becoming a legitimate and morally praiseworthy activity, it was seen as one which should be restricted to certain responsible actors and kept away from ‘amateurs’.

Arriving in the South China Sea, therefore, the Île de Lumière met with disparagement from organizations such as UNHCR who felt that the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ disrupted the humanitarian community’s calculated response to displacement. Explaining his dislike of maritime rescue, the United Nation’s High Commissioner for Refugees, Poul Hartling, argued that the Île de Lumière would only constitute a complicating presence in the region, scooping drowning individuals out of the waves like a ‘relay baton’, without considering where they could safely be disembarked or which organization would have the responsibility of caring for them afterwards. As Hartling explained, UNHCR had only managed to steer clear of political disputes with ASEAN states and maintain its access to refugee camps by adopting a very specific (and rather dubious) interpretation of displacement, arguing that individuals at sea – even those obviously fleeing persecution in Vietnam – could not legally be classified as refugees. The office’s responsibility for displaced persons accordingly began only on the shoreline, where UNHCR had negotiated access with specific governments. Hartling informed Kouchner in no uncertain terms that, for UNHCR, ‘[t]hose Vietnamese who flee their country and who have not found a host country have no juridical existence.’ An unregulated maritime rescue venture, UNHCR felt, would upset the delicate positioning of aid efforts in the region by asking difficult questions about the rights held by individuals still on the move at sea.

For its first stay in the area, therefore, the Île de Lumière was forced to relinquish rescue from its mandate. It remained anchored off the small Malaysian Island of Bidong, where it was supposed to function as a hospital ship for refugees and make occasional journeys to neighbouring Islands to deliver supplies. Yet the team on board aggravated local authorities, as well as humanitarian agencies, by continuing to conduct rescues and to assist boat arrivals whenever possible (often surreptitiously). In one instance, Éric Cheysson and Patrick Laburthe, another volunteer doctor, jumped on board a refugee boat stranded in Bidong’s coastal waters and directed it under Malaysian gunfire to the shore. After such an open defiance of instructions, both men were arrested and detained in custody for a night where they were reprimanded for their flagrant disregard for state authority. Such actions, for actors like UNHCR, confirmed the interpretation of the French rescuers as confrontational and irresponsible, their individual forays differing markedly from synchronized schemes like the Orderly Departure Program and the drafting of a coordinated legal rescue framework.

The rescue boat’s tendency to cause upset, combined with its struggle to navigate the murky political waters of the Indochinese refugee crisis, eventually led to the termination of the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project. The rescue committee members felt that they were ‘wading through a drama that they were unable to control’, bombarded as they were with criticism from other humanitarians and worried enquiries from the French state, which had begun to realize that the ship’s efforts were proving unpopular. The committee decided to move the hospital equipment on board the Île de Lumière to a refugee camp in Thailand and to end the ship’s mission. After a three-month stay at Bidong, and a subsequent five months searching for stranded refugees around the small Islands of the Anambas, the ship was sent back to its home port in Noumea, where it reverted to its old role as a cargo carrier. The ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project had in many respects been an
operational success, but it had also become a highly divisive venture amongst aid workers, sparking ‘a certain mistrust of [...] mavericks who [did] not belong to conventional humanitarian structures’. It had created a clear division between the staff of rapidly professionalizing organizations, and those idealizing more amateur and voluntaristic forms of assistance.

These tensions were not limited to the French boat’s project. In Germany too, the provision of maritime rescue in the South China Sea would come to be regarded with scepticism by humanitarians who wished to focus on expansion and professionalization. As we will see in the next section, the work of the Cap Anamur, a search-and-rescue vessel run by the German Emergency Doctors Committee, was criticized by the German Red Cross for being hazardous and inexpert, marring in the process the reputation of German humanitarianism. The Red Cross’ scepticism of this ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project, combined with the increasing pressure that the boat placed on the West German government to receive refugees, led to fraught confrontations between aid workers within the humanitarian community, and between this community and the state.

‘Ein Schiff für Vietnam’: tensions with the German Red Cross

In February 1979, Rupert Neudeck – a correspondent for the German broadcaster Deutschlandfunk – travelled to Paris where he met with André Glucksman, a prominent member of the French ‘Boat for Vietnam’ committee. Glucksman told Neudeck of the Île de Lumière’s work, leaving him struck by the simplicity of the rescue boat venture which he felt was a ‘more practical, more spontaneous and less complicated’ way of assisting Vietnamese refugees than arranging resettlement from camps. In Neudeck’s eyes, maritime rescue had the potential to offer a release from the powerful sense of inertia which he felt was beginning to plague the humanitarian community in Germany. Although Germans were aware of the Vietnamese boat people’s plight, watching amongst other footage the scenes broadcast from the Hai Hong, Neudeck felt that their compassion largely amounted to a feeling of ‘television misery’. Humanitarians, he argued, ‘could wallow in pity in the television armchair but still sip [their] beer and enjoy [their] pretzel sticks’.

Realizing that maritime rescue seemed to be off the agendas of established German NGOs, Neudeck felt that direct, spontaneous action (initiated from the periphery of the aid world rather than from its overly bureaucratized centre) had to be taken to find and assist stranded refugees. He set up a search-and-rescue project, named ‘Ein Schiff für Vietnam’ after the French venture. The newly formed organization that supported this project, German Emergency Doctors (GED), got in touch with Hans Voss, a German ship owner who had a large vessel named the Cap Anamur at anchor in Kobe, Japan. Voss offered the vessel to the GED for a charter of 235,000 DM a month, which they speedily accepted. The Cap Anamur set sail for the South China Sea on 9 August 1979.

Despite enjoying considerable support from the public – in just three days in July 1979 the project received donations totalling 1.2 million DM – Neudeck and his team found themselves increasingly drawn into a fierce conflict with the German Red Cross (DRK) over the value of their project. The DRK was also providing aid to Vietnamese refugees, but its members argued that the GED’s rescue venture was compromising their work by marring the professional reputation of German relief in the eyes of the West German
government. The DRK had held close ties to the national government for decades and had worked with them on several projects in the ASEAN region in the 1960s and early 1970s, jointly sending a hospital ship named the Helgoland to Saigon and Da Nang to treat casualties of the Vietnam War. Building on this collaboration, the DRK had recently chartered a vessel named the Flora to carry medical and welfare supplies between Southeast Asian islands. However, the organization had decided not to rescue Vietnamese boat people after holding discussions with representatives from the West German government. Learning of the problems facing the Île de Lumièere and the French government in their attempts to rescue boat people, West German ministers had asked that the Flora did nothing that would antagonize local authorities in the South China Sea. This ultimately meant that search-and-rescue was never integrated into the DRK’s objectives, since authorities would only grant the Flora access to their territorial waters if it agreed not to conduct rescues. The DRK viewed Neudeck’s initiative as headstrong and impetuous, serving only to raise the hackles of local states who might have been able to assist with relief efforts and with whose backing the delivery of aid could be made more efficient.

Jürgen Schilling, the head of the DRK at the time of the Vietnamese displacement crisis, was so outraged at the impulsive implementation of rescue projects like Neudeck’s that he presented a damning report on the activities of ‘private organizations’ to the German parliamentary subcommittee on humanitarian aid on 13 February 1980. In his report, Schilling outlined what he saw as a fundamental disjuncture between the DRK (a longstanding, reputable organization that employed professional staff, had established strong networks with other Red Cross branches in the ASEAN region and which enjoyed the formal legal protection of the Geneva Conventions) and those spontaneously founded organizations like Neudeck’s that had come to work in the South China Sea. Ad hoc assemblages of aid, he warned, posed key challenges to the smooth delivery of relief: they worked within inadequate structures, hired personnel lacking appropriate knowledge and skills and ultimately endangered international aid through careless action. A newspaper report summarized Schilling’s invective neatly:

In a litany of complaint, the Red Cross professionals accused the watchful amateurs of inadequate expertise and capability [...] [Schilling] was of the view that it was crucial to ‘prevent unregulated growth’ in the private sector [since] the drive of private-lifesavers could become politically damaging.

For Neudeck, however, Schilling’s arguments were ‘merely symptomatic of bureaucratic thinking and the sluggishness of an ingrained apparatus’. Neudeck’s team felt that the DRK was becoming an extension of the state domination of humanitarian affairs, abandoning the rescue ship model of relief – which would have provided a ‘last lifebuoy’ of hope for boat people – and weakly bowing to the interest of governments. Neudeck felt that the DRK had turned into a ‘voracious’ institution which only ‘blocked, hijacked or destroyed’ the more idealistic rescue efforts being planned for Vietnamese refugees. These critiques were similar to the ones that Kouchner had levelled at the rapidly professionalizing MSF.

The dispute over maritime rescue in Germany soon turned public and personal. Before the next meeting of the parliamentary subcommittee, Walter Bargatsky, the president of the DRK, sent a telegram to the committee’s chairman, Jürgen
Möllemann, informing him that Schilling was not willing to present his next report in the presence of Neudeck given that the journalist’s recently published book on maritime rescue had criticized the work of the DRK.⁴⁰ Later on, in June 1981, Schilling appeared on the radio for Deutschlandfunk, arguing that Neudeck’s committee was wasting millions of deutschmarks on a project that wrongly drew Vietnamese boat people away from their country, transplanting them in a completely alien environment in the West, whilst the Red Cross was trying to (in its view more effectively) solve the problem of displacement in situ. In response, Neudeck sent a public letter to Bargatsky, calling Schilling a ‘shabby squealer’ and demanding that Bargatsky publicly defend the work of the Cap Anamur against such accusations.⁴¹

The German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project had driven a particularly powerful wedge between these two organizations, one of whom wished to expand and professionalize with the support of the West German state and one of whom favoured a brand of ‘radical humanism’ that was orientated around independence, solidarity and spontaneous action.⁴² Neudeck wrote of his frustrated efforts to defend the idea of maritime rescue to other aid workers, complaining: ‘[E]verywhere, I bump into walls, opposition. I sense keenly how disparagingly these [search-and-rescue] initiatives are received: Who are we? Are we known? Is there even a file about this [project], what’s it called again?’⁴³ He especially disliked the fact that rescue was seen as a ‘passing craze’ which unnecessarily strayed from the humanitarian norm.⁴⁴ Intended to provide swift and unproblematic relief to stranded refugees, the Cap Anamur project had soon found itself caught up in highly public arguments as to whether sea rescue was a worthwhile, reputable or even truly ‘humanitarian’ form of activity.

**Struggles with the state**

Beyond sparking intra-organizational struggles over the best way of providing relief to Vietnamese refugees, the German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ initiative also created divisions between aid workers and the West German state. Given that the Cap Anamur’s direct rescue of stranded boat people bypassed the standard procedures of conventional camp-based resettlement programmes, the government felt that the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project was twisting its arm, exerting too much pressure on the state to take in refugees. In this sense, as well as creating opposition internal to the humanitarian community – confronting questions surrounding the strategy, focus and principles of relief – the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ also became embroiled in questions of statecraft and the governmental response to displacement. This once again set the German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ project in opposition to the DRK and other rapidly professionalizing NGOs, who were beginning to develop closer relationships with the state and who were cautious of antagonizing these influential donors.⁴⁵

The Cap Anamur project worried the West German state because it proposed a very direct means of addressing the needs of Vietnamese escapees: transporting them directly out of danger towards Germany. In doing so, it bypassed the traditional model of selective resettlement from camps, which was favoured by European governments because it was easier to control. This subversive straying from the conventional humanitarian path was intentional. Neudeck saw the direct rescue of stranded boat people as a ‘lever in the hand’ of non-governmental organizations, which could be used to
overcome the ‘bureaucratic tension’ caused by states’ lethargy in the face of increasing refugee flows. This demonstrated the oppositional radicalism of his amateur humanitarian movement, which contrasted starkly with professional aid agencies.

Unlike the Ile de Lumière, which had been more confined at anchor at Bidong, the Cap Anamur began almost immediately to conduct fully fledged rescues in the open sea. Officials in Bonn had agreed before the Cap Anamur’s voyage to accept all refugees rescued by the vessel, but they had done so unaware of the numbers that this might involve and so they soon felt penned in by an instant and direct obligation of welcome. Although West Germany was, on the whole, very receptive to the plight of Vietnamese refugees – taking in 40,000 between 1975 and 1990 – the Cap Anamur’s circumvention of the processing mechanisms traditionally used for such resettlement schemes sparked resentment amongst officials. Many began to feel that the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ was undermining international humanitarian protocol by unscrupulously handing out queue-jumping ‘fast-passes’ to Europe. The state effectively developed, as Neudeck put it, a ‘bureaucratic fear of the activities of the committee: fear of too much effectiveness in helping and saving’. Intentionally creating facts on the ground by transporting refugees, the German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ initiative moved quickly towards a collision with the state.

In talks held at the West German Foreign Office, Neudeck clashed with ministers over this issue of direct rescue. Describing one particularly heated meeting, he remembered reminding officials that the state had a responsibility to accept all refugees rescued from the waves by the Cap Anamur, regardless of numbers. He argued that the Cap Anamur was ‘there to save people from distress. That could mean that in three weeks we would arrive in the port of Singapore with 200 Vietnamese on board.’ Worried by these predictions, officials raised concerns over the lack of control which the state would have over resettlement policy in this situation, eventually hitting Neudeck with the ‘memorable, un retractable words: “[T]hen don’t take so many [refugees] out of the water.” As the Cap Anamur’s work compounded the pressure exerted on West Germany to accept refugees, the government began to reconsider what the ideal humanitarian response to Indochinese displacement should be. In particular, it began to ask just how much sway private relief efforts, particularly those of newly formed organizations, should be allowed to have over state policy. The tide of opinion soon began to turn against the ‘Boat for Vietnam’, as ministers argued that non-governmental organizations should fit their work into the state’s chosen parameters of relief, not vice versa. Neudeck’s initiative came to be viewed as overly antagonistic and pressurizing, rather than as a project which represented a reputable and cooperative model of relief.

This shift soon prompted the emergence of critical campaigns in the press, many of which hoped to turn the tide of favour against maritime rescue by presenting it as a form of assistance which undermined global resettlement efforts. In particular, Neudeck’s committee was hit with a forceful stream of criticism through the publication, in January 1981, of an International Herald Tribune article entitled ‘On Genuine Migrants, Economic Refugees’. The article called the Cap Anamur’s rescue project ‘one of the worst examples of meddling in the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees’, which was only making it ‘harder for the West German government to follow a measured policy in resettlement’. By wrongly offering the ‘lion’s share’ of refugee quota places to boat escapees at the expense of others waiting patiently, sometimes for years, in refugee
camps, the *Cap Anamur*’s approach to displacement was described as ‘deeply unfair’.\textsuperscript{52} Most interestingly, the article raised a criticism which has come in recent years to plague more contemporary search-and-rescue workers: the idea that rescue ships were a ‘pull factor’ that unnecessarily encouraged refugees to make dangerous journeys.\textsuperscript{53} The piece argued that while many early Vietnamese refugees had been ‘pushed not pulled’ from the country, driven out by persecution, many of those fleeing from 1980 onwards were merely tempted by the prospect of resettlement in wealthier countries and the ‘magnet’ of the *Cap Anamur*.\textsuperscript{54} The GED’s rescue project was therefore seen to produce boat migrants rather than assist them. Although the NGO fought back viciously against the pull factor argument, calling it an ‘invention of various impure motives’ aimed at grounding rescue ships, the West German Foreign Office, with the backing of the Interior Ministry, soon proposed a review of resettlement quotas and of the *Cap Anamur* project, threatening to withdraw official sanction for the vessel.\textsuperscript{55}

On 15 June 1981 ministers of the various German Länder effectively voted against rescue efforts, with all but four choosing not to allocate a single quota space for Vietnamese refugees. This left the *Cap Anamur* without a straightforward means of disembarking rescued boat people. Speaking on Deutschlandfunk on the day of the decision, Peter Scholl-Latour (a television correspondent and *Cap Anamur* supporter) described the situation as ‘scandalous’:

> Come on. I understand the concerns of the German states about becoming a – how should I put it – a reception centre for refugees of all kinds from all over the world, but in the case of the *Cap Anamur* this accusation [...] is undoubtedly wrong. [The boat] is a final rescue plank for the refugees who are trying to escape the unworthy conditions under which they have to live.\textsuperscript{56}

The *Cap Anamur* managed to continue operations for several more months by making one-off agreements with individual federal states. Lower Saxony was particularly co-operative, offering an extra 350 places for rescued refugees. Yet in the eyes of the central government, these agreements represented only a private understanding between federal state and rescue committee and did not amount to official state endorsement of rescue. The GED’s work could only continue for so long in such a climate. On 11 June 1982 an outraged Neudeck told the federal government that he was terminating his project and sailed the *Cap Anamur* back to Hamburg with a final 285 refugees on board.

The German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ initiative had been presented by Neudeck as an antidote to the process, typified by the German Red Cross, of professionalizing relief by deepening aid agencies’ relationship with the state, working more closely with state agendas as a means of guaranteeing reach and impact. Explicitly rejecting the ‘bureaucratic restrictions’ of this approach, Rupert Neudeck and the *Cap Anamur* volunteers favoured an independent model of direct rescue that imposed upon the state rather than working with it.\textsuperscript{57} However, the committee’s activities were cast as an unprofessional skipping of the traditional humanitarian queue for resettlement and its work was seen to overly pressurize the West German state, setting rescue humanitarians apart from the more professional agencies of the time who had spent this period developing much closer relationships with Western states as major donors and humanitarian partners.
Legacies of the ‘Boats for Vietnam’: rescue in the Mediterranean

The stories of the ‘Boats for Vietnam’ constitute particularly interesting case studies given that the emergence of new maritime rescue NGOs in the Mediterranean has led to similar controversies amongst humanitarians. In recent years, Europe has witnessed a proliferation of maritime rescue projects, sparked by declarations of an escalating ‘migration crisis’. Outraged by the lack of state rescue efforts, 10 different non-governmental organizations began conducting maritime rescue operations in the Mediterranean between 2014 and 2017, rescuing over 100,000 migrants and becoming the largest provider of maritime assistance in this space.

Leveraging the legal principle of innocent passage to freely operate, these NGOs advocated for the ‘duty to assist’ all individuals in distress at sea. Thirty years after the maritime response to Vietnamese displacement, the sea once more became a thriving and highly publicized humanitarian arena. However, this arena was again a controversial one in which some aid workers proclaimed to capture the spirit of sans-frontiérisme through immediate action whilst others criticized the impudence of spontaneity.

Amidst the contemporary crowd of search-and-rescue NGOs were several familiar faces. MSF, making a different decision to the one it had made in the 1970s, decided to launch rescue operations in the Mediterranean in 2015. The NGO ran joint rescue missions with a new NGO named SOS Méditerranée – whose founder Sophie Beau had previously worked for Bernard Kouchner’s Médecins du Monde. These organizations’ work built upon earlier rescue efforts from the early 2000s, including a venture carried out in 2004 by Cap Anamur, the descendent of Rupert Neudeck’s German Emergency Doctors. The major humanitarian players reacting to the Vietnamese displacement crisis had returned to the world of maritime relief. However, their rescue ventures once again became the subject of splits and divisions both amongst aid workers and between aid workers and states.

Just as Bernard Kouchner and Claude Malhuret had parted ways in 1978 over maritime rescue’s perceived transgression of professional humanitarian boundaries, disagreements arose between MSF and SOS Méditerranée as to whether working at sea would jeopardize the reputation of humanitarian efforts to assist refugees. After Covid-19 regulations ground their jointly operated rescue ship in February 2020, both organizations met in Marseilles to discuss how best to operate in such a restrictive context. MSF wanted to immediately return to sea regardless of the political and legal obstructions in its way (including the closures of ports and borders as well as Italian and Maltese decrees forbidding the disembarkation of individuals rescued at sea). SOS Méditerranée, on the other hand, was worried that venturing out to sea in this climate would be reckless, leaving the ship waiting with rescued people on board in unsafe conditions. They felt that an unsanctioned return to sea would be counterproductive and unprofessional, losing more than could be achieved. Accordingly, they proposed a short-term suspension of rescue operations. After a ‘very heated debate’ (which ultimately was not resolved) the NGOs decided to terminate their partnership. The historical positions taken by Bernard Kouchner and Claude Malhuret had been reversed – with MSF now pushing for the subversion of regulation and control – but the disagreements were surprisingly similar.

Cap Anamur’s 2004 rescue project also saw the re-emergence of antipathies between maritime humanitarians and states. After conducting a rescue operation in the Strait of Sicily, Cap Anamur’s shipmaster and first officer as well as the director of the NGO were
investigated by an Italian court for aiding and abetting illegal immigration. All three individuals were eventually acquitted, but this trial led to the closing of the organization. Just as Rupert Neudeck had found in his struggles with West German officials, European states had disliked the pressure that the ship’s work placed on them to accept migrants onto their shores. Now, however, these states had taken legal action to shut such relief work down, kickstarting a powerful drive towards the criminalization of humanitarian assistance that continues to define the world of search-and-rescue.

Contemporary rescue operations in the Mediterranean, therefore, continue to divide and unsettle. Rescue has been carried out by a remarkable range of organizations which disagree considerably as to the purpose and meaning of humanitarianism at sea. The central clashes between ‘professional’ and ‘amateur’ aid, and between state collaboration and resistive independence in particular foment disagreement and debate. Larger INGOs (international non-governmental organizations) like Save the Children and more traditional rescue NGOs like the Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) have for instance grounded their rescue work in a strict interpretation of the principle of neutrality, adopting a strictly apolitical and non-confrontational attitude in order to operate in particular rescue areas without antagonizing state authorities. This attitude has, however, been contested by a number of more outspoken rescue groups which, in the mould of Kouchner and Neudeck, combine activism with assistance and which organize their work around direct action and informality. These groups – most of them new and specifically maritime NGOs such as Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet – push against the mainstream and have championed the benefits of alternative approaches to care. They frequently combine activism with assistance by criticizing state border-control policies, and they very much see themselves as, in the words of one rescue volunteer, ‘fly-by-night humanitarians’ opposed to ‘professional but cumbersome’ models of aid.

These opposing conceptions of rescue work have sparked several notable disagreements. In July 2017, for instance, Italy drafted an EU-sponsored code of conduct aimed at regulating NGO rescue operations, making (amongst other regulations) the disembarkation of migrants in Italian ports conditional on a high level of collaboration with state authorities. Whilst NGOs like MOAS and Save the Children immediately signed the document to facilitate access to suffering migrants at sea, organizations like MSF, Sea-Watch and Jugend Rettet refused to sign as a means of directly challenging the state co-option of relief. More politicized NGOs have argued that the staff of larger or more traditional rescue agencies ‘generally don’t act as citizens’, losing the rebellious spirit of relief work through their wish to get states on side. In turn, these NGOs are criticized by many for being inexpert and overly antagonistic, refusing to co-operate even for pragmatic reasons with other actors and losing impact in the process. Referencing this sense of rebellion and outsider status, one media outlet has referred to the rescue vessels of NGOs like Jugund Rettet as ‘Berliner squat[s] out in the middle of the sea.’

Contemporary providers of humanitarian assistance at sea have therefore come face to face with the struggles confronted by Bernard Kouchner and Rupert Neudeck’s rescue teams over the value of spontaneous aid. The maritime context provides humanitarians with a relatively unique freedom to act independently outside of state boundaries and it encourages them to consider broader political questions surrounding the right to free movement, yet it also provokes disputes about whether these activities fit within a movement traditionally centred on the technical, structured and apolitical provision of care.
Conclusion

In Empire of Humanity, Michael Barnett writes that ‘[f]or most of its history humanitarians acted as if showing up was enough […] Those who ran [humanitarian] organizations enjoyed their seat-of-the-pants, jerry-built lifestyle because it reflected their idea of what a voluntary organization looks like.’\textsuperscript{73} Barnett, and other historians of relief, however, argue that ‘those days are [now] history\textsuperscript{74} and they trace a shifting of modern humanitarianism away from informality and volunteerism towards greater professionalism, which accelerated from the late 1970s into the 1980s.\textsuperscript{75} From this point onwards, the standard narrative arc suggests, individual acts of charity morphed into organized projects coordinated by a formal aid industry – defined by specialist knowledge, bureaucratic procedures and standardized guidelines.

At the moment in which both the French and German ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects came into being, the world of relief certainly seemed set on a clear trajectory that departed from an outdated paradigm of ad hoc relief, and which instead veered towards an ideal of regulation and expansion. The powerful currents of organization and professionalization swept aid workers along and, crucially, were inextricably linked to the promise of humanitarianism ascendency. The authoritative recognition of relief as a legitimate and valuable global force, many aid agencies felt, was seen to derive from the establishment of structures, codes and standards and from the tightening of connections to influential donors, including states. There was a belief that if aid became more ‘business-like’ then the problems associated with it – practical problems of planning and coordination as well as ethical problems related to the unintentional side effects of relief efforts – would soon disappear.

However, the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects – orientated as they were around spontaneity, direct action and antagonistic independence from states-led relief – pushed strongly against these currents and in fact argued that humanitarianism would be best preserved by paring back the management of relief, which served only to stifle its spirit and capacity for improvisation. At a time when many aid agencies seemed intent on ‘reinventing the firm’, the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects seemed equally as intent on dismantling the idea that humanitarianism should be scaled-up or professionalized.\textsuperscript{76} Whilst Claude Malhuret and his supporters were restructuring MSF to make it a ‘perfect machine’\textsuperscript{77} that could efficiently provide relief across the world – and whilst the Red Cross in Germany boasted of their organizational proficiency in order to acquire the institutional backing of the state – Bernard Kouchner and Rupert Neudeck focused their efforts on the rapid implementation of a new type of aid that seemed to fly in the face of technocracy and NGO-state cooperation: maritime rescue. Prioritizing the immediate but relatively small-scale act of salvage as a means of both bypassing ‘red tape’ relief and preserving the vibrant camaraderie that (for them) gave the provision of aid its true meaning, these humanitarian committees publicly criticized what they saw as other humanitarians’ obsession with protocol over principled action.

Bernard Kouchner and Rupert Neudeck’s rescue organizations accordingly garnered a reputation for disruptiveness and antagonism, as they questioned fundamental assumptions about the ‘right’ way to go about providing assistance to Vietnamese refugees. The disputes over the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ projects were particularly fierce, focused as they were on questions of what relief should represent and what future it had on the
international stage. Agencies like MSF and the DRK were convinced that informal, ‘lone ranger’ relief ventures polluted the reputation of aid. This clashed fundamentally with the beliefs of the two ‘Boat of Vietnam’ projects: that stripped back, idealistic projects were the only means of ensuring that relief work remained ‘pure and innate’.

Witnessing the revival of these debates today in the Mediterranean, we might ask about the continuing tendency of maritime rescue to divide relief workers. How much does the legacy of the ‘Boat for Vietnam’ humanitarian missions live on for today’s search-and-rescue NGOs? I would argue that rescue at sea continues to be a divisive and provocative form of relief, one which key raises fundamental dilemmas for aid workers. These dilemmas include the relative merits of spontaneous or professionalized assistance as well as the appropriate level of collaboration with states. Rescue projects tend to create a fraught clash over the question of what holds the greatest value: the earnest ad hoc efforts that volunteers make to assist others, or the work of larger institutions that spend time co-ordinating and regulating relief? Such questions force aid workers, both historical and contemporary, as well as scholars to evaluate and reassess fundamental beliefs about aid, asking what humanitarianism really is at its heart. Is the commitment to the alleviation of suffering best served by large and state-sanctioned bureaucracies with a global reach and professional staff and systems? Or is it best served by smaller groups that claim to retain and incubate the truly radical heart of the humanitarian spirit? Recent events in the Mediterranean have kept these issues alive, but they go back to the first debates over maritime rescue in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when resistance to professionalization first came to relief.

Notes

1. Binet and Saulnier, Médecins Sans Frontières, 33.
2. Kouchner, L’île de Lumière, 58.
3. Bösch, “Refugees Welcome?” 15.
4. Martin, Médecins Du Monde, 49. Other rescue ventures were later instigated throughout the 1980s by Bernard Kouchner and Rupert Neudeck on vessels including the Akouna, the Balny, the Geolo and the Rose Schifflano. On these later projects see Suteau, “La Coopération Marine-Médecins Du Monde”; Damousi et al., “Forced Migration, Oceanic Humanitarianism.”
5. The phrase ‘A Boat for Vietnam’ is most often associated with the French rescue venture, but it actually cuts across both the French and German projects, especially since the latter explicitly took its name from Kouchner’s initiative.
6. On this moment of professionalization and globalization see O’Sullivan, The NGO Moment; Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 107–61.
7. Vallaey, Médecins sans frontières, 285.
8. “Réunion Du CDC Du Ler Mars 1979,” Boat People 1978–79, MSF Archives, Paris.
9. Binet and Saulnier, Médecins Sans Frontières, 31.
10. Vallaey, Médecins sans frontières, 137.
11. Video interview with Rony Brauman, September 2, 2020.
12. Binet and Saulnier, Médecins Sans Frontières, 30. This equated at the time to roughly 600,000 francs per month.
13. Binet and Saulnier, Médecins Sans Frontières, 29.
14. Even older NGOs like Oxfam and CARE were rapidly professionalizing in this period. See Wieters, “Reinventing the Firm”; and Hilton, “Oxfam and the Problem of NGO Aid Appraisal,” 3.
15. Xavier Emmanuelli, “Un Bateau Pour St Germain Des Prés”; and Le Quotidien Du Médecin, December 4, 1978.
16. Ibid.
17. Binet and Saulnier, Médecins Sans Frontières, 33.
18. Kouchner, L’île de Lumiére, 233 (emphasis added).
19. Cheysson and Fauré, Au Coeur de l’Espoir, v.
20. Ibid., v.
21. Kouchner, L’île de Lumière, 403.
22. The committee, deciding to search for a vessel without the French flag, found the Île de Lumière which was registered in New Caledonia.
23. Ai, “Isle of Light,” 44.
24. Vallaey, Médecins sans frontières, 285.
25. For an excellent discussion of the legal underpinnings of rescue, and the organization of a response to Vietnamese displacement see Mann, Humanity at Sea, 56–101.
26. Kouchner, L’île de Lumière, 72.
27. Ibid., 62.
28. “Journal de Bord d’un Médecin de l’Ile de Lumière,” Libération, July 10, 1979.
29. “Sous La Pression de Phnom-Penh L’équipage de L’île de Lumière Renonce à Sa Mission Médicale,” Le Monde, November 6, 1979.
30. Ibid.
31. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 23.
32. Ibid., 37.
33. Ibid., 37.
34. Vössing, “Competition over Aid?” 347.
35. Ibid., 355.
36. “Flüchtlingshilfe: Das Deutsche Rote Kreuz Wehrt Sich Gegen Private Hilfsorganisationen, Die in Kambodscha Tätig Sind,” Der Spiegel, March 9, 1980.
37. Ibid.
38. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 108.
39. “Flüchtlingshilfe”; Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 16.
40. Vössing, “Competition over Aid?,” 356–7.
41. Ibid., 362.
42. Merziger, “The ‘Radical Humanism’ of ‘Cap Anamur’," 171–92.
43. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur 1, 48.
44. Ibid., 48.
45. On the ever-tightening relationship between NGOs and states in this period, see Krause, The Good Project; Wallace, Bornstein, and Chapman, The Aid Chain; Hulme and Edwards, NGOS, States and Donors.
46. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 146.
47. Marcel Berlinghoff has recently looked into the factors shaping West Germany’s response to Vietnamese boat people. See Berlinghoff, ‘Germany: “Refugie-Surprise” ’; also Bösch, “Refugee Welcome?”
48. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 154.
49. Ibid., 49.
50. Ibid., 49.
51. “On Genuine Migrants, Economic Refugees.” International Herald Tribune, January 17, 1981.
52. Ibid.
53. Today’s scholarship on non-governmental sea rescue has questioned this claim, showing that no correlation exists between the presence or absence of NGO ships in the Mediterranean and the number of migrants departing from Libya. See for instance Cusumano and Villa, “Sea Rescue NGOs”; Heller and Pezzani, “Blaming the Rescuers.”
54. “On Genuine Migrants, Economic Refugees.” Xavier Emmanuelli’s critique of the Île de Lumière raised similar points, arguing that ‘if a refugee in Vietnam were to hear about [the boat], he might try his chance in the hope of being rescued’.
55. Neudeck, Die Letzte Fahrt Der Cap Anamur, 82.
56. Ibid., 109.
57. Ibid., 146.
58. Scholars have since discussed the reasons behind this proliferation of non-governmental search-and-rescue work. See Cusumano, “Humanitarians at Sea”; Cusumano, “The Sea as Humanitarian Space.”
59. Cusumano, “Humanitarians at Sea,” 239.
60. This ‘duty to assist’ has evolved into a customary legal duty through codification in various international treaties including the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the 1974 International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention and the 1979 International Convention on Maritime Search and Rescue (SAR Convention). However, it also reflects an ancient and unwritten maritime tradition. For further discussion of this history see Attard, The Duty of the Shipmaster to Render Assistance; Aarstad, “The Duty to Assist,” 414.
61. For a fascinating discussion of the debates which opened up within MSF when making this decision see del Valle, “Search and Rescue in the Mediterranean Sea,” 22–40.
62. Video interview with SOS Méditerranée member, January 8, 2021.
63. Basaran, “The Saved and the Drowned”; Cuttitta, “Repoliticization Through Search and Rescue?”
64. Cusumano and Villa, “From ‘Angels’ to ‘Vice Smugglers’”; Ghezelbash et al., “Securitization of Search and Rescue at Sea”; Carrera, Alsopp, and Vosyliütė, “Policing the Mobility Society.”
65. The existence of these different ‘role conceptions’ and their effect on NGO–NGO relations is described in Cusumano, “United to Rescue?”; Cusumano, “Humanitarians at Sea.” The different identities and approaches of NGOs providing maritime rescue are also outlined by Cuttitta, “Repoliticization Through Search and Rescue?”; Stierl, “A Fleet of Mediterranean Border Humanitarians.”
66. Neumann, “Rights-Bearing Migrants.”
67. Ibid., 107.
68. Telephone interview with Sea Watch volunteer, October 9, 2020.
69. Cusumano, “Straightjacketing Migrant Rescuers?”
70. Fiori, “Rescue and Resistance in the Med.”
71. “Eight Things We Have Learnt from the Papers on the Iuventa,” Open Migration, 2017, https://openmigration.org/en/analyses/eight-things-we-have-learnt-from-the-papers-on-the-iuventa/ (accessed December 15, 2021)
72. The freedom of the high seas provides that any ship is permitted to use the high seas as long as they conform with international law. No state can acquire sovereignty over the high seas meaning that, when they operate in these spaces, humanitarians can work ‘without borders,’ operating at the outer limits of asserted statehood by undertaking independent lifesaving action outside of state territorial boundaries.
73. Barnett, Empire of Humanity, 234.
74. Ibid., 234.
75. Martin, “Forced Migration and Professionalism”; Lindenberg and Bryant, Going Global; Shanks, ‘Why Humanitarian Aid Became Professional’; O’Sullivan, The NGO Moment.
76. Wieters, “Reinventing the Firm.”
77. Vallaey’s, Médecins sans frontières, 248.
78. Merziger, “The ‘Radical Humanism’ of ‘Cap Anamur,’’ 171.
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