


# Intellectual Relief in Europe following the First World War

*by Tomás Irish*

*Swansea University*

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## Abstract

This project examines the phenomenon of intellectual relief in Europe following the end of the First World War. Intellectual relief is defined as aid that was specifically aimed at intellectuals and cultural institutions and constituted not only food and medicine, but also specialist reading material and equipment. My project aims to establish why intellectuals were targeted for bespoke relief and what philanthropic and humanitarian bodies, such as the Rockefeller Foundation, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, and Commonwealth Fund, sought to achieve by it. It also poses the question of who the “intellectuals” were and how they were identified. In a wider sense, my research will provide a new means of understanding how Europe transitioned from war to peace and how contemporaries sought to build stable democratic states.

# Intellectual Relief in Europe following the First World War

My research project focuses on how the intellectual world was rebuilt following the cataclysm of the First World War. The Great War damaged European intellectual life in many ways; nine million combatants were killed, including many prominent young minds serving in the armed forces of their respective nations. Modern warfare also saw the destruction of sites of learning and cultural importance, such as the library of the University of Louvain in Belgium, Rheims Cathedral in France, and many sites of cultural, religious, and educational importance across Europe. The war also created divisions between scholars and institutions on opposing sides; the flow of information and books, which had typified the nineteenth century intellectual world, ceased during the 1914-1918 conflict, with gaps appearing in libraries where once publications from belligerent countries had been received. The humanitarian crisis that followed the war compounded intellectual and cultural problems. Huge numbers of refugees had to leave Russia following the Bolshevik Revolution and the ensuing civil war. In addition to the problem of displaced people, starvation, and disease were rife in central and Eastern Europe where, in many cases, new democratic states were being formed following the demise of defeated empires in the war.

Europe's crisis saw an unprecedented intervention by American humanitarian agencies. What is not well known is that a great deal of money was spent on providing targeted aid to intellectuals and scholarly institutions in Europe which saw them as particularly in need of bespoke aid, separate from the wider populations in which they existed. My project seeks to explore this phenomenon. It asks why intellectuals, writers, artists, scientists, etc. were identified as a category that necessitated special aid amidst a wider humanitarian crisis and explores different justification for this aid. It investigates how "intellectuals" were identified and categorized in this period and examines the types of aid that was provided to ensure the intellectual reconstruction of Europe.

In 1919, the French poet Paul Valéry famously stated his fears that “we civilizations now know that we are mortal.” He was not alone in articulating a belief in the decline of civilization.<sup>1</sup> The belief in a “crisis of civilization” was also famously articulated by the German writer Oswald Spengler; both he and Valéry spoke of an intangible crisis of faith in progress and ideas that resulted from the war. Feelings of civilizational mortality and cultural pessimism became commonplace in the interwar period.<sup>2</sup> While discussions of civilizational decline were often rooted in intangible ideas, the post-war humanitarian crisis that impacted European intellectuals provided a material manifestation of fears about the collapse of learning and scholarship, and humanitarian interventions frequently utilized the language of civilizational decline. Advocating for support of Russian scholars in 1924, Herbert Hoover wrote that “it is to the interest of civilization” that they should survive.<sup>3</sup>

During my time at the Rockefeller Archive Center, I examined the involvement of a number of different philanthropies in providing intellectual aid to Europe after the First World War. These were the Rockefeller Foundation (RF), the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial Foundation (LSRM), the Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (OMR), the International Education Board (IEB), as well as the Commonwealth Fund (CF).

One of the key research questions of my project is to ascertain why aid was targeted at intellectuals and intellectual institutions. On a basic level, intellectual relief can be defined as the provision of food, clothes, and medical assistance to intellectuals to keep them alive and in good health. In this way, intellectual relief can be seen as the extension of normal humanitarian relief to a particular category of people, in this case “intellectuals.” The question of how intellectuals were defined in the aftermath of the First World War was an open one; the term “intellectual” was frequently used as a shorthand for this kind of aid, but one that was often not very helpful for aid workers in places like Austria, Poland or Russia in identifying specific people who faced starvation or disease.

There was a second component to intellectual relief which differentiated it from other forms of aid. Beyond food and medicine, intellectual relief frequently

involved the provision of up-to-date literature, laboratory equipment, or other scholarly materials for those deemed in “need” of them. This was especially important in countries such as Germany and Austria where, in many cases, newly published work had not been received from Western Europe since the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. While it may seem hyperbolic, this type of assistance was frequently justified using the same language that was used to describe the victims of famine. In 1926, Edgar MacNaughten, a representative of the YMCA working on an intellectual feeding programme in Ukraine, stated that local scholars frequently told him that “although we hunger for food, our craving for books is even more acute.”<sup>4</sup> Both humanitarian actors as well as those seeking assistance frequently used the metaphor of intellectual hunger in Europe in the early 1920s. Another, related form of intellectual relief was the provision of specialist literature to institutions whose collections had been destroyed during the war or after, such as the reconstruction of the library at the University of Louvain or at Tokyo Imperial University following the earthquake of September 1923.

In general, post-war intellectual relief can be seen as part of wider efforts to stabilize Europe following the war. The vast majority of states (with the exception of Russia) in receipt of assistance to intellectuals were new democracies, formed out of the embers of the Habsburg Empire. At the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, US President Woodrow Wilson put his faith in self-determined democracies as an integral part of ensuring peace in Europe.<sup>5</sup> This task was made all the more urgent by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the fear of Bolshevism that quickly emerged elsewhere in Europe and undoubtedly motivated American philanthropic activities.<sup>6</sup> The archival holdings of the Rockefeller Archive Center demonstrate the myriad interests informing American philanthropy in Europe in the post-First World War period. They also illustrate the varied ways in which different parties framed intellectual relief; Rockefeller money was channeled through a wide range of funds and organs to aid the cultural reconstruction of Europe, and this was justified in a variety of ways.

On a personal level, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., provided financial support for a number of educational initiatives to aid scholars in need. One of the most prominent of these was his support given to assist Russian scholars and their

children in exile as a result of the Russian Civil War.<sup>7</sup> One of these initiatives was led by Thomas Whittemore, an American archaeologist who decided to support the education of gifted Russian youths through the Committee for the Rescue and Education of the Russian Youth in Exile. In October 1922, Whittemore appealed to John D. Rockefeller Jr. for funding, having first approached the Rockefeller Foundation and learned that his request was outside the scope of that body.<sup>8</sup> Frederic B. Pratt met with Whittemore on a number of occasions in 1922, in Constantinople and in the US. He wrote to John D. Rockefeller Jr. in October 1922 to recommend that he support it, stating that “the importance of his work I think cannot be questioned nor the efficiency and devotedness which he is showing.”<sup>9</sup> Pratt encouraged Rockefeller to contribute \$10,000 to the work, stating that he would also donate.<sup>10</sup> Whittemore’s efforts were unreservedly elitist in nature; it sought to help only those children and teenagers of exceptional intellectual ability in the hope that they would return to Russia following the end of Bolshevik rule and constitute its new leadership. Rockefeller continued to fund Whittemore’s committee until the end of the decade.

A similar initiative reached Rockefeller in February 1921, when Princess Cantacuzène’s Committee for the Relief of Russian Refugees appealed for funds, amounting to \$4,000 per month for a year, to assist in the upkeep of 30,000 Russian refugees in Poland. Cantacuzène and her supporters were explicit about the purpose of their committee; it aimed to keep an educated elite alive and active while waiting for the expected fall of the Bolshevik regime. In a letter to the committee in November 1921, the former US Secretary of State Elihu Root, who was one of the vice-presidents of the committee, articulated this idea in unambiguous language:

It becomes constantly more evident that the hope of Russia for a long period to come and the benefit of the whole world of having Russia restored to an effective share in the community of civilized nations, depend upon keeping these refugees alive and fit for the reconstruction of the political and social life of their country when the Bolshevik tyranny has fallen.<sup>11</sup>

The Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller was also involved in funding the construction or reconstruction of cultural sites that had been damaged during the

war or in its immediate aftermath. In 1925, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., gave \$100,000 towards the reconstruction of the library of the University of Louvain, infamously destroyed by the German Army in August 1914.<sup>12</sup> In September 1923, an earthquake destroyed the library of Tokyo Imperial University and its 700,000 volumes. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. gave a grant of four million yen towards the reconstruction of the library building, stating that he wished to “hasten the day when your University, which stands among the foremost institutions of learning in the world, will again be provided with adequate library facilities.”<sup>13</sup> Rockefeller’s commitment to the construction of working libraries continued in 1927 when he gave \$2 million towards the construction of a library for the League of Nations in Geneva. Raymond Fosdick wrote to Rockefeller that “I do not think that any similar sum that you have ever spent is going to have a wider influence.”<sup>14</sup> Beyond direct funding to cultural institutions such as libraries, Rockefeller also gave money to assist the reconstruction of sites of cultural importance that had been damaged in the war, such as Rheims Cathedral in France.<sup>15</sup>

Rockefeller’s personal benevolence is only a part of the wider picture of intellectual relief; it was often the case that parties turned to him when other Rockefeller philanthropies could not support initiatives as they deemed them beyond their immediate scope. The Rockefeller Foundation, which had a strong emphasis on the support of medical science, decided to give \$10,000 to the relief of medical scientists in Vienna in 1920 in response to appeals that Simon Flexner and William Welch received from Austrian scholars, and in turn communicated to the RF.<sup>16</sup> In its official minutes, it was noted that there was in Vienna “eminent danger of actual starvation by even the most important and distinguished professors and their families. The future of medical science as well as the dictates of humanity would seem to call for special action to meet this emergency.”<sup>17</sup> This money was used to buy American Relief Administration (ARA) food parcels which were then made available to physicians in Vienna. Intellectual relief was, for the Rockefeller Foundation, a relatively cheap investment and one that was in line with their overall mission to cultivate medical research. For example, later in 1920, the RF appropriated \$1 million to the ARA for its programme of child feeding in Europe, a figure that dwarfed its outlay on intellectual relief.<sup>18</sup>

The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, founded in 1918, also supported a wide range of initiatives to support intellectuals in need, although these typically related to the social sciences. Following the famine in Russia, the LSRM similarly appropriated \$230,000 and \$700,000 towards the feeding of Russian intellectuals in 1922 and 1923.<sup>19</sup> The money was given on condition that the donor's name not be revealed and the aid was administered by the American Relief Administration in Russia. The files in the LSRM archives demonstrate that it was moved to act following receipt of a number of reports from Russia that depicted harrowing material conditions for intellectuals. At their most moving, reports emanating from stricken areas talked of death. Pitrim Sorokin's report ended with a striking declaration: "we are dying – disappearing." He named a number of colleagues who had either died from starvation or malnutrition or killed themselves.

We die so quickly that we are unable to learn in time about each death. It is only at university faculty meetings that one finds himself "well-informed". It is not a meeting of the faculty but some kind of an undertaker's bureau. Each meeting begins with the announcement of the deaths of five or six among us and with tribute to their memory. In truth, death works well.<sup>20</sup>

The records also show that many Russian intellectuals wrote letters of thanks to the anonymous donor, which were forwarded to Rockefeller by district organisers. Funding from the LSRM for Russian intellectuals continued – on a much smaller scale – continued until the end of the decade and was largely the consequence of individual humanitarian actors in specific areas writing to Beardsley Ruml, the director of the LSRM, with specific requests. This money was used to buy food, medicine, as well as specific academic literature.<sup>21</sup>

The Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial also invested money in aiding intellectual institutions in Germany, where many libraries had not received books from Western Europe or North America since the outbreak of the war. In 1923, the LSRM was contacted by the Notgemeinschaft der deutschen Wissenschaft which outlined the perilous situation facing German libraries. Guy Stanton Ford of the University of Minnesota was sent to investigate the situation at German universities and libraries in 1924, from where he wrote that "intellectually as well



as physically they have lived for ten years on their own flesh.”<sup>22</sup> Initially, LSRM’s grant to German institutions was an emergency measure, designed to plug important scholarly gaps that had appeared in the collections owing to the war and the difficulty of buying literature with the post-war hyperinflation. This relationship continued into the 1930s, but became less defined by emergency aid and more about the LSRM sponsoring large scale research projects at different German institutions. This relationship was taken over by the Rockefeller Foundation after the LSRM merged with it in 1929 and, following the rise to power of the Nazis and the associated threats to academic freedom, posed a major challenge to the relationship (which is beyond the scope of the present study).

The granting of aid for European intellectuals was not specific to Rockefeller philanthropies, nor did it originate with them. The actions of the Rockefeller Foundation, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., himself, were typical of a wider concern with the rise of Bolshevism in Central and Eastern Europe and a belief that intellectuals and scholarly institutions could be stabilising forces in democratic states. The Commonwealth Fund was founded in 1918 and, in the 1920s, it was approached by the American Relief Administration which requested that it provide relief to ameliorate “the distressing plight to which many individuals of the intellectual classes in Central and Eastern Europe were reduced through the difficulty of obtaining food.”<sup>23</sup> The CF agreed to an appropriation of \$500,000 to be used for “food drafts for the intellectual class in Central Europe”; this money was split into two parts of \$250,000 each, with a slightly larger share being sent to Austria on account of need. Austria received \$100,000, Poland \$90,000, Hungary \$40,000, and Czechoslovakia \$20,000.<sup>24</sup> Alonzo Taylor, a director of the ARA, argued that “among the brains of this intellectual class depends the future of these countries.”<sup>25</sup>

In his report on the Commonwealth Fund’s decision to approve the appropriation, Director Max Farrand observed that “it is interesting to note that numbers of this intellectual class are as much concerned over the shortage of material and facilities for their work as they are over the scarcity of food.” He also noted that a similar appeal had been presented via the ARA to the Rockefeller Foundation but rejected on account of it being relief work and thus outside the formal remit of the

RF.<sup>26</sup> While the CF initially informally promised \$250,000 for this purpose, at a meeting of directors of the Commonwealth Fund on 26 June 1920, the amount was doubled.<sup>27</sup> One account of how this aid was practically distributed described the recipients as being “scientists, artists, and other intellectual workers who have no proper market for their products,” “disabled persons unable to early a living, including pensionists, widows, orphans, etc.” and “all other intellectual workers whose income is not in proportion to the number of family members they have to support.”<sup>28</sup> The categorization of intellectuals and intellectual workers was an essential part of the process of allocating relief.

The records of the various American philanthropies who sent aid to Europe in the aftermath of the First World War tell a story not only about why money was given, but also provide an insight into conditions being experienced by people facing deprivation, how they articulated their suffering in seeking assistance, and how that was, in turn, understood by foundations. These records are full of often graphic accounts of starvation, disease, and death, and the solace provided by intellectual material in times of extreme need.

These records also provide a key insight into why it was that American philanthropic bodies sought to provide financial support for these communities, although this was not always articulated in an explicit manner. It is undoubtedly the case that relief of this nature was seen as part of a wider anti-Bolshevik measure. The Rockefeller-funded International Education Board, established in 1923 to support European intellectual life following the war, explicitly cited the promotion of democracy as one of its aims.<sup>29</sup> In certain cases, it is evident that individual figures who had visited the affected areas or had historic connections to them were key in securing money, while in others (such as the dealings of the *Notgemeinschaft* with LSRM), representative national bodies were instrumental. The story of post-First World War intellectual relief also sheds new light on the much-better known story of the exodus of scholars and intellectuals from Nazi Germany after 1933. The Rockefeller Foundation provided support in ensuring that exiled scholars could find employment in American universities.<sup>30</sup> While that story is beyond the scope of the present research project, it is significant that

intellectuals had been the subject of a wide range of philanthropic and humanitarian activity since the First World War.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Valéry, “The Spiritual Crisis,” *The Athenaeum*, 11 April 1919, p. 182.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Overy, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Hoover to Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, 9 October 1924, RAC, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial records (FA061), Series 3: Appropriations, Subseries 3\_03, Emergency Relief, Box 10, Folder 112.

<sup>4</sup> MacNaughten to Ruml, 30 September 1926, RAC, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial records (FA061), Subseries 3\_03, Appropriations - Emergency Relief, Box 10, Folder 113.

<sup>5</sup> Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>6</sup> John Horne and Robert Gerwarth, “Bolshevism as Fantasy: Fear of Revolution and Counter-Revolutionary Violence, 1917-1923,” in Horne and Gerwarth, eds., *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 40-51.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth White, “Relief, Reconstruction and the Rights of the Child: The Case of Russian Displaced Children in Constantinople, 1920-22” in Nick Baron, ed., *Displaced Children in Russia and Eastern Europe, 1915-1953* (Leiden: Brill, 2017) pp. 70-96.

<sup>8</sup> Frederic B. Pratt to Rockefeller, 13 October 1922, RAC, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, World Affairs, Series Q (FA326), Area of Interest: War Relief, Box 42, Folder 369.

<sup>9</sup> Frederic B. Pratt to Rockefeller, 13 October 1922, RAC, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, World Affairs, Series Q (FA326), Area of Interest: War Relief, Box 42, Folder 369.

<sup>10</sup> “Mr Thomas Whittemore,” in Pratt to Rockefeller, 13 October 1922, RAC, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller, World Affairs, Series Q (FA326), Area of Interest: War Relief, Box 42, Folder 369.

<sup>11</sup> “Letter received by Princess Cantacuzène from Mr. Elihu Root and read at the Annual Meeting of the American Central Committee for Russian Relief, Inc.,” 7 November 1921, RAC, Office of the Messrs Rockefeller, World Affairs, Series Q (FA326), Area of Interest: War Relief, Box 42, Folder 368.

<sup>12</sup> Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Rockefeller Family, Educational area: Foreign Colleges, University of Louvain, Box 131, Folder 1008.

<sup>13</sup> Masaharu Anesaki and Tamaki Yamada, “First Report on the Reconstruction of the Tokyo Imperial University Library,” *First Report on the Reconstruction of the Tokyo Imperial University Library* (Tokyo: Tokyo Imperial University Library, 1926), RAC, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller records, Educational Interests, Series G (FA316), Rockefeller Family, Educational area: Foreign Colleges, Tokyo Imperial University and Library, Box 130, Folder 994, pp. 2-3.

<sup>14</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick to John D. Rockefeller. Jr., 29 March 1933, Office of the Messrs Rockefeller records, Cultural Interests, Series E (FA314), Cultural Area: Libraries, Box 3, Folder 20.

<sup>15</sup> James Allen Smith, “An Internationalism of Beauty: The Rockefeller Restorations in France after the Great War,” *The Tocqueville Review/La Revue Tocqueville*, Vol XXXVIII, 2 (2017), pp. 241-251.

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- <sup>16</sup> William H. Welch to Charles S. Bacon, 12 April 1920, RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Records, SG. 1.1, (FA386a), Series 100, Box 77, Folder 728.
- <sup>17</sup> Minute of 24 March 1920, RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Records, SG. 1.1 (FA386a), Series 100, International, Subseries 100.N: International, War Relief, Box 56, Folder 557.
- <sup>18</sup> Minute of 1 December 1920, RAC, Rockefeller Foundation Records, SG. 1.1 (FA386a), Series 100, International, Subseries 100.N: International, War Relief, Box 56, Folder 557.
- <sup>19</sup> “Memorandum – Russian Relief,” February 1923, RAC, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (FA061), Series 3: Appropriations Subseries, 3\_03, Emergency Relief, Box 9, Folder 105.
- <sup>20</sup> Sorokin, “Academic Life in Soviet Russia,” Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial (FA061), Subseries 3\_03, Emergency Relief, Box 9, Folder 105, p. 4.
- <sup>21</sup> Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial records (FA061), Subseries 3\_03, Emergency Relief, Box 10, Folder 112-116.
- <sup>22</sup> Guy Stanton Ford to Beardsley Ruml, 12 March 1924, Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial records (FA061), Subseries 3\_06, Appropriations – Social Studies, Box 52, Folder 558.
- <sup>23</sup> Report by Max Farrand, *The Commonwealth Fund: Second Annual Report of the General Director for the Year 1919-1920* (New York, 1921), p. 8.
- <sup>24</sup> “Extension of Assistance to the Intellectual Classes,” *ARA Bulletin*, 2.12 (1921), p. 29.
- <sup>25</sup> A Director of the American Relief Administration, “The Situation of the Intellectual Class in Central Europe,” *ARA Bulletin*, 2/3 (1920), 36.
- <sup>26</sup> Max Farrand, No 364. American Relief Administration – Food Drafts for the Intellectual Class in Central Europe, 10 June 1920, RAC, Commonwealth Fund: Grants, SG 1, Series 18 (FA290), Subseries 1, Box 12, Folder 119.
- <sup>27</sup> Farrand to Rickard, 28 June 1920, Max Farrand, No 364. American Relief Administration – Food Drafts for the Intellectual Class in Central Europe, 10 June 1920, RAC, Commonwealth Fund: Grants, SG 1, Series 18 (FA290), Subseries 1, Box 12, Folder 119.
- <sup>28</sup> Eva Lutyens, “Intelligentsia Progress Report #1,” 4 April 1922, RAC, Commonwealth Fund: Grants, SG 1, Series 18 (FA290), Subseries 1, Box 12, Folder 121.
- <sup>29</sup> George W. Gray, *Education on an International Scale: A History of the International Education Board* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941), pp. 8-9.
- <sup>30</sup> Stephen Duggan and Betty Drury, *The Rescue of Science and Learning: The Story of the Emergency Committee in Aid of Displaced Foreign Scholars* (New York: Macmillan, 1948).