

Eva Plach

Relief on the Hoof. The Seagoing Cowboys, the Heifer Project, and UNRRA in Poland

Ithaca/London: Northern Illinois University Press, 2025

ISBN 978-1-5017-8464-4 (HB) \$145.00 (PB \$39.95, e-book \$27.99). 310pp.

Eva Plach's book reconstructs one of the more unusual forms of postwar humanitarian assistance: the transatlantic shipment of livestock to war-devastated Europe. At the centre of the narrative stand two institutional actors – UNRRA and the Heifer Project – whose entangled histories Plach traces through extensive archival research conducted in American and Polish archives. The result is a study of how animals functioned simultaneously as material resources for agricultural reconstruction and as symbols within the humanitarian imaginaries of the mid-twentieth century.

The book comprises nine chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion, followed by a list of abbreviations (p. 205–206), endnotes (pp. 207–276), a bibliography (pp. 277–300) and an index (pp. 301–end). The Introduction ('Global Agents of Humanitarian Aid', p. 1) situates the book within the historiography of humanitarianism, food aid and postwar relief, establishing UNRRA and the Heifer Project as the twin institutional protagonists.

The nine chapters fall broadly into three thematic clusters. Chapters 1–2 (pp. 12–51) address the institutional and organisational dimensions of UNRRA's animal aid programme and its partnership with the Brethren Service Committee. Chapter 3 (pp. 52–75) shift to the human actors – the so-called 'seagoing cowboys' – examining their recruitment, the logistics of transatlantic livestock transport and the cultural and ideological meanings attached to this unusual form of relief work. Chapters 4–5 (pp. 76–134) examine cattle as the 'star species' of the Heifer Project, the symbolic centrality of milk in mid-century humanitarianism and the logistics of animal transport on the American side. Chapter 6 follows the cowboys' and animals' overland journeys and their experiences as among the first civilians to reach post-war Poland. Chapters 7–9 (pp. 135–194) concentrate on Poland as the primary recipient country, analysing the geography of animal distribution, the specific role of the Heifer Project and the role of livestock as both material resource and ideological symbol.

Particularly noteworthy is Plach's confident command of both Polish and English-language sources. She conducted research in the United Nations archives – the essential repository for UNRRA scholars – as well as in the Polish Archive of Modern Records, which holds central documentation produced by Polish state bodies, and in regional State Archives: in Warsaw and Szczecin. This raises the question of whether the archival base might have been broadened to include further regional State Archives. The potential documentary base is considerable, but it is possible that the author made a deliberate decision to limit the scope of her archival inquiry. The book also makes a valuable

contribution in bringing yet another religious humanitarian organisation into scholarly view – one whose role in postwar relief efforts has hitherto received insufficient attention in the literature (Rosner-Leszczzyński, K. 2026).

Noteworthy, too, is Plach's reading of the conversation between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Jan Karski, the Polish courier whose reports documented conditions under German occupation, including the Holocaust. During that meeting, Roosevelt reportedly posed two questions of some significance: first, whether Poland had in fact been a primarily agricultural nation before the war (yes), and second, whether the Germans had confiscated Poland's horses as part of their invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 (yes) (p. 30). Plach rightly observes that Roosevelt's words attracted criticism in certain quarters, as they gave the impression that the American president 'was more concerned about animals and wheat than the genocide of the Jews' (p. 30). By situating Roosevelt's remarks within the context of the relief effort already being planned at that time, Plach demonstrates how much can be gained by embedding environmental history within broader geopolitical contexts. It is here that the book is at its most compelling.

Environmental history has a considerably shorter tradition in Poland than in the United States, where the field emerged in the previous century, and there remains much ground to recover (see further: Wiślicz, T. 2021). Plach's book is an important contribution to this still-emerging field – restores agency to the animals that participated in the reconstruction of Poland after 1945 and gives voice to actors whose role has hitherto received insufficient attention in Polish historiography. It is to be hoped that the author will consider a Polish translation, which would bring the book to a wider readership beyond the academic community.

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References

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