

Meghan Riley (Indiana University Northwest)

'...WE ARE SIMPLY INOFFENSIVE FOOLS WHO WANT TO FEED PEOPLE THEY DON'T THINK ARE WORTH FEEDING' QUAKER FOOD RELIEF IN THE INTERNMENT CAMPS OF SOUTHERN FRANCE, 1940-42

In 1939, a handful of French internment camps emerged as a haphazard collection of detention sites for the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the denouement of the Spanish Civil War; by late 1942, they had metastasized into a sprawling concentration camp system in which all rejects from the collaborationist Vichy society would be interned and from which 72,500 Jews would be transported to their deaths in the Nazi death camps. Observing, and occasionally participating in, this harrowing transformation were American humanitarian organizations who provided vital nutritional, medical, legal, and psychosocial aid to those interned within the camps and who then witnessed, in horror, the deportations of their charges to Auschwitz.

In this paper, I will explore how four American aid organizations—the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee; the American Friends Service Committee; the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee; and the YMCA—operated within the French camp system. I will focus on how these aid workers understood and classified the internees in their charge: Did they utilize Vichyite, Nazi, or other categories? Did their means of classification reinforce or legitimize Vichyite categories? Was this accommodation with Vichyite categories the result of necessity, convenience, or at times sympathy? I will conclude with a discussion of how these issues relate to the larger problem at the core of humanitarian work in the French internment camp system: the question of if and how these aid organizations legitimized the spaces of violence, terror, and extrajudicial detention in which they served. To engage with this complex and fraught topic, my research draws on archival materials from the United States, France, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.

Meghan Riley is an advanced doctoral candidate at Indiana University Bloomington and a Future Faculty Teaching Fellow at Indiana University Northwest. Her dissertation concerns the work of American humanitarian organizations in French internment camps from 1940 to 1942. She has been a Fulbright Fellow and Saul Kagan Fellowship in Advanced Shoah Studies Fellow, and her doctoral research has been supported by the American Academy of Jewish Research as well as by numerous institutions at Indiana University.