



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Galmarini, M.C. (2024) Ambassadors of social progress: a history of international blind activism in the cold war

Trigt, P.W. van

Citation

Trigt, P. W. van. (2025). Review of Galmarini, M.C. (2024) Ambassadors of social progress: a history of international blind activism in the cold war. *H-Diplo Roundtable Review*, 40, 14-17. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260183>

Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4260183>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

The official response of Soviet officials when the USSR was asked to join the Paralympics in the late 1970s was that “there are no invalids in the USSR” (12). According to Maria Cristina Galmarini, this represented “an (awkward) effort to preserve an image of social progress in the perception of foreign audiences” (12-13). I first encountered this quotation in the Dutch context when the Netherlands, my home country, organized the Paralympics in 1980 after the Soviet Union refused. The word “awkward” captured indeed what I thought about the statement. Awkwardness, however, can be a fruitful starting point for writing good histories: in *Ambassadors of Social Progress*, which discusses blind internationalists from the USSR and East Germany, Galmarini explains why the Soviet officials presented themselves as such. By doing this, she opens up so-called “second world” or socialist perspectives on disability and disabled people, a legacy that has been almost forgotten since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Galmarini is not the first scholar to focus on this legacy. Historians such as Ned Richardson-Little have started to rewrite the history of second-world countries from their own perspective and in a global context.¹ As part of this tendency, historians such as Claire Shaw have increasingly studied disability in the second world.² Galmarini’s book is unique in that it focuses on internationalism and on actors from two countries. Mainly based on research in the archives of the All-Russian Society of the Blind and the East German Union of the Blind and Low-Sighted, she has written a precise and nuanced history of international blind and socialist activism during the Cold War era. This history, Galmarini argues, is relevant for disability historians

not only because it brings attention for the first time to developments occurring in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, but also because it adds a new model—the socialist one—to the interpretative models through which they have so far analyzed disability (4).

In addition, she argues that her work on this overlooked group, which “reveals disability as a locus of internationalism where they can test larger narratives about East-West accommodations during the Cold War” (4), will be of interest to historians of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

That it speaks to different audiences is one of the book’s strengths. Since my expertise is mainly limited to disability internationalism, this review focuses on what Galmarini’s monograph contributes to the historiographical field of disability history. As Gildas Brégain recently pointed out, “transnational disability history has been developing since the early 2000s and has become stronger in recent years.”³ Although most disability histories are still national or local histories, he observes a tendency among disability historians to study transnational and international exchange, to situate national and local histories in a more global

¹ Ned Richardson-Little, *The Human Rights Dictatorship: Socialism, Global Solidarity and Revolution in East Germany* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

² Claire Shaw, *Deaf in the USSR: Marginality, Community, and Soviet Identity, 1917–1991* (Cornell University Press, 2017).

³ Gildas Brégain, “Transnational History of Disability: Reflections,” in Marcia H. Rioux, et al., eds., *Handbook of Disability: Critical Thought and Social Change in a Globalizing World* (Springer, 2024): 137–157, here 139.

context, and to write a less Western-centric historiography. Most studies that are discussed by Brégain do not study disability internationalism, a term that was used, for the first time, it seems, by Monika Baár in an exploratory chapter in the edited volume *Internationalists in European History*.⁴

Ambassadors of Social Progress is one of the first books that presents a well-documented history of disabled internationalists who, moreover, came from an understudied part of the world. Galmarini not only opens up this relatively unknown world, but also shows how her protagonists situate themselves in the broader world. Her book shows how blind activists such as Vladimir Alexandrovich Viktorov, who was one of the leading figures of the All-Russian Society of the Blind during the interwar period, developed and spread a “specifically Marxist understanding of blindness” and “a specific version of blind people’s history in Russia” (29) that was critical of capitalism and colonialism. At the same time, these activists were very much in favor of the transnational and international exchange of knowledge and people because “the blind need help from all parties” (43). Galmarini’s analysis contributes to the literature when she discusses the anti-imperialistic stance of the socialist activists and their relations with those in the so-called “third world.” Her discussion of East German solidarity with the global south in chapter 5 is a welcome contribution to the increasing literature about disability in the (post)colonial context.⁵

Another substantial contribution of *Ambassadors of Social Progress* is that it makes a strong case for rethinking the very concept of (disability) activism. Galmarini broadens the definition of activism by using it for internationalists who “were bureaucrats rather than fighters for disability rights” because “their stories reveal that contestation and subversiveness are not the only prisms through which scholars can look at social movements, especially those in authoritarian political systems” (10-11). By criticizing the assumption that activism could only be carried out by active and entirely free people, her book has a broader relevance. Within disability studies, several scholars have already pointed out how this assumption is problematic from a disability perspective that wants to do justice to different ways of being (an activist) in the world.⁶ This critical understanding of activism has consequences for the way in which historians construct their narratives about disability activism.

Most of the literature, including my own work on disability internationalism,⁷ tends to situate the beginning of these histories in the 1960s and 1970s, when people with different disabilities started to

⁴ Monika Baár, “Vegetables of the World Unite! Grassroots Internationalism of Disabled Citizens in the Postwar Period,” in Jessica Reinisch and David Brydan, eds., *Internationalists in European History: Rethinking the Twentieth Century* (Bloomsbury, 2021): 182-197.

⁵ Esmee Cleall, *Global Histories of Disability, 1700–2015: Power, Place and People* (New Routledge, 2023).

⁶ Eline Pollaert and Paul van Trigt, “Archiving Dutch Disability Activism: What Can Digital Culture Do?,” in Daniele Salerno and Ann Rigney, eds., *Archiving Activism in the Digital Age* (Institute of Network Cultures, 2024): 116-133.

⁷ Katharina Heyer, *Rights Enabled: The Disability Revolution from the US to Germany and Japan, to the United Nations* (University of Michigan Press, 2015); Sharon Barnartt, “The Globalization of Disability Protests, 1970–2005: Pushing the Limits of Cross-Cultural Research?,” *Comparative Sociology* 9:2 (2010): 222-240; Paul van Trigt, “Equal Reproduction Rights? The Right to Found a Family in United Nation’s Disability Policy since the 1970s,” *The History of the Family* 25:2 (August 2019): 202-213.

collaborate. However, Deaf and blind activism goes back much further, also on the international level. One of the most interesting suggestions of this book is that early disabled internationalists did not only come from the West. During the interwar period, disabled self-advocates from the USSR seem to have had a much higher level of self-organization than their peers from Western countries and in particular those from the US, who often had “a welcoming attitude toward sighted philanthropists’ guidance” (34). By articulating this attitude, Galmarini shows that activists from the US operated not only as emancipatory innovators. This differs from the suggestions in most of the literature, although recent research shows that also in later decades several disabled internationalists from the US were in favor of philanthropy.⁸

Since Galmarini’s narrative tends to stay close to the blind activists and their organizations it describes, it remains maybe a bit too modest, in two important ways, in elaborating on the book’s historiographical consequences. First, while the focus of the book is mainly on the two organizations from the USSR and East Germany and less on international organizations, since the archives of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind are untraceable, the argument does not always avoid Cold War dichotomies. This is clear when Galmarini summarizes the perspectives of her internationalists under the umbrella term “socialist model of disability” (11-14). She presents this model as an alternative to the supposedly dominant Western models of disability, which involve the medical model, which approaches disability as an individual deficit, and the social model, which approaches disability as a social construction. The socialist model is based on “medical and defectological ideas of normalcy” (11) but does not share the Western medical model’s “emphasis on charity and the view that disabled people need to be pitied” (11).

Galmarini writes that the socialist model “could not possibly see disability as a form of social oppression within its own society [like the social model] because this would have meant openly criticizing socialism” (12). I am not sure if the articulation of a third model is helpful. It hides from view that countries from the so-called first and second world to a large extent shared the ideal of a productive citizen. Furthermore, it neglects the fact that the medical and social model are far from self-evident realities in the West.⁹ If we historicize these models, we can see them playing a role in several countries after the models were invented in the 1980s, but more often we see that reality is much more complicated than these models suggest. Although certain discussions between the actors at the international level about political preference or special education suggest differences between East and West, in practice there were a lot of similarities. The Eastern preference for “special technologies to compensate for the deficiencies of ‘defective’ individuals” for instance was, as Galmarini rightly observes, in opposition to the approach of the Dutch educator Piet Oost, but Oost was not in fact representative of the Dutch approach (165).

Secondly, the book could have specified a bit more what exactly disability uncovers as a locus of internationalism. In the book we learn a lot about the East-West accommodations during the Cold War in terms of people working together, but what do these accommodations teach us about the international or global history of ideas such as human rights? It is for instance very interesting to read how Ian Fraser, a

⁸ Van Trigt, “Belated Integration: Disability in International Human Rights Law,” in Jan Eckel and Daniel Stahl, eds., *Embattled Visions: Human Rights since 1990* (Wallstein Verlag, 2022): 101-120; cf. Galmarini, *Ambassadors*, 159.

⁹ As suggested by Galmarini, *Ambassadors*, 148.

British participant in an international conference in 1931, “strongly discouraged fellow activists from advancing demands based on notions of rights” (36). This seems to have been clearly directed to the alleged Communist threat, but it is not entirely clear if the blind activists in the SU and East Germany had their own understanding of human rights, as is suggested in the historiography on human rights.¹⁰ The same question arises when Galmarini discusses how blind internationalists (dis)agreed on social policies in the European context in the 1970s and 1980s. She complicates Katharina Heyer’s observation that German activists in the 1990s critically engaged the “prioritization of civil and political rights over economic ones” by the American liberal legality model (186).¹¹

Galmarini argues that European activists were already debating this issue before the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act became influential, and she argues that “Western activists’ emphasis on the public provision of educational and rehabilitative services was significantly shaped by their collaborations with socialist colleagues” (187). In her analysis of the role of the East Germans in the social policy debates within the European Regional Committee of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind, Galmarini indeed shows how activists from Scandinavian countries and East Germany closely worked together, but it is unclear whether Western blind activists in fact “looked with longing at the wealth of social rights that blind people enjoyed (at least on paper) in Eastern Europe” as Galmarini suggests or that they longed for the (Scandinavian) welfare state before neoliberal budget cuts (188). The answer is most probably both, but it would have been interesting to hear more about the socialist understanding of human rights and to situate cross-Iron Curtain collaborations such as within the European Regional Committee of the World Council for the Welfare of the Blind in the broader human rights historiography.

In conclusion, with *Ambassadors of Social Progress* Galmarini has created an essential contribution to the international history of disabled activism. She has opened up the almost unknown world of blind internationalism from the USSR and Eastern Europe. My remarks do not concern her excellent historical analysis of the socialist blind internationalists, but intend to ask whether the book should not be more critical about the dominant narratives about disability activism in the West. A statement such as “There are no invalids in the USSR” may sound awkward, but is this sentiment really different from Western states, such as the Netherlands, which consider themselves to be champions of disability policies?

¹⁰ Cf. Richardson-Little, *Human Rights Dictatorship*.

¹¹ Heyer, *Rights Enabled*.