

despite massive food deliveries, to save thousands of children from starvation in Ajiep in southern Sudan.

Repeatedly, the authors in this volume raise serious questions about the viability of notions of impartiality and neutrality, particularly when humanitarian aid abets the very conflict and human rights violations that have disastrous consequences for civilian populations. While the analysis is compelling, they offer few alternatives to these revered standards. They generally tend to be sceptical that military intervention is the answer to humanitarian emergencies, and question the motives of governments when humanitarian action appears to be a substitute for political action; but they offer no alternatives to humanitarian intervention when, in Roberts' words, 'the underlying issue which gives this concept its salience remains, namely how to respond to immediate and urgent humanitarian disaster and mass refugee flows'. While it is somewhat dispiriting that a group as thoughtful as these authors have so few alternatives to offer, the questions raised are certainly the first step towards a fundamental re-examination of the role of humanitarian action during conflict and in repressive regimes.

My major quibble with the volume is the lack of an empirical base for the analysis. With the exception of the MSF contribution, these essays generally stick to the realm of theory. They rely heavily on existing evaluations of humanitarian operations, but it is not clear if the authors have engaged in fieldwork or practice that would test their assumptions. By contrast, the MSF chapter pulls the reader into the reality of the hard choices that the other authors examine in more theoretical terms. As described in the chapter, Operation Lifeline Sudan established a set of humanitarian principles that were clearly violated in Ajiep, as elsewhere in the Sudan. Working through local authorities too often meant diversion of humanitarian assistance, particularly away from the thousands of internally displaced persons who were of little interest to local political or military leaders. While again offering criticism but few alternatives, this chapter captures most effectively the dilemmas faced in carrying out humanitarian action in real-life settings.

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A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis. By David Rieff. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002. 367 pp. \$26.00. ISBN 0 684 80977 X.

David Rieff's book is a beautifully written stab at the idea of humanitarianism. It is certain to provoke debate, particularly amongst the different elements of what Rieff calls 'the humanitarian international', those agencies and non-governmental organizations that have distributed humanitarian relief in the midst of armed conflicts over several decades.

Rieff sets up humanitarianism as a 'master idea', which he argues has been 'the reigning utopia for well-intentioned people in the West during the last two decades of the twentieth century', comparable to communism or the concept of globalization. He hedges against this obvious overstatement by noting the relative modesty of 'the humanitarian project'. He remembers as well disillusion associated with communism and also asserts the emptiness of the globalization concept.

Rieff develops his argument by comparing humanitarianism with an earlier idea of charity, and he finds a historical antecedent in colonialism, upon which he elaborates at length. Quoting Kipling on the 'White Man's Burden', he discusses the genesis of humanitarian action in terms sure to disturb many politically liberal aid workers. He quotes with admiration an official with the Geneva-based International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who had worked in Bosnia and who explained that his job was

'to bring a measure of humanity, always insufficient, into situations that should not exist'. Rieff was drawn to ICRC, despite what he regards as its 'shameful conduct in Nazi-occupied Europe' during the Second World War. Leaders of the ICRC decided not to go public then with their knowledge of Nazi concentration camps on the grounds that the agency must remain neutral, and therefore silent.

Apart from the ICRC, Rieff cites as purveyors of humanitarianism relief organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), as well as UN agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the World Health Organization, and UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund). In essence, he is talking about the provision of essentials such as food, water, and shelter in the midst of war by agencies that try to remain more or less independent, neutral and impartial in relation to the conflict. It is this last element, the many varieties of independence, neutrality and impartiality exhibited in the work of these different agencies, which provides the locus for Rieff's 'crisis' in humanitarianism.

This book was born in 1995 during the war in Bosnia, where David Rieff allows that he became an 'activist' on behalf of the Bosnian Muslim cause. In the Balkan wars of the early-to-mid 1990s, the humanitarian 'fig leaf', which is relief deployed in lieu of direct political and military action, became excruciatingly obvious. International humanitarian organizations, with UNHCR in the lead, sought to protect and assist people *in situ* in the middle of a vicious armed conflict. This was a containment strategy designed to forestall the flight of refugees to Europe, and to avoid the need by Western political leaders to explain away body bags filled with dead soldiers to an indifferent and bewildered public. The result was a cynical usurping of the humanitarian principle by leaders desperately seeking a substitute for a more risky course of political action.

As Rieff recognizes, this kind of political expropriation is hardly new—in 1938, for example, Hitler worried publicly about the mistreatment of ethnic Germans in the Sudetenland before plunging Europe into the devastation of the Second World War. Nor is Bosnia the only recent example of using an exclusively humanitarian response to deal with a political crisis—Africa has been the setting for many such responses. The Rwandan genocide in 1994 and its aftermath is only the most notorious recent incident. The same dynamic can be seen today in Sudan and several West African countries. But it was the international policy lie relating to Bosnia that wounded David Rieff sufficiently to produce this passionate denunciation of humanitarianism.

While there are numerous groups involved in humanitarian activities, Rieff focuses on the doctrinal debates that swirled around the establishment of MSF by a cadre of French doctors who had become disillusioned in the course of their work with ICRC during the Biafran war. They asserted they were bearing witness to genocide, as the Nigerian government battled a secessionist bid by the Igbo. MSF, which eschews ICRC's vow of confidentiality, can act explicitly as a witness with a mandate to denounce serious and widespread human rights violations (although in practice the agency shows some measure of restraint in order to retain access to populations in need). Bernard Kushner, one of the founders of MSF, is a proponent of the use of military force for humanitarian purposes, or 'humanitarian intervention', an endeavour which Rieff analyses as political in character in the tradition of just wars, and never humanitarian. Later, after a series of ideological and programme disputes, Kushner broke away from MSF to found Médecins du Monde, and in 1999 he became the first UN administrator in Kosovo.

David Rieff's vision of the world is bleak. In this world, war is the norm and evil-doers act with an astoundingly coherent malevolence to produce genocide in places like

Bosnia and Rwanda. Arrayed against this force is a putative but non-existent 'international community', populated by a cadre of legalistic human rights activists like Human Rights Watch who are largely irrelevant. UN organizations are staffed by false optimists who are embarked mainly on career advancement. Governments have stolen the humanitarian imperative as a justification either for political non-action, or to disguise military adventures motivated at bottom by national interest.

Relief workers, even when well intentioned, are fools in Rieff's world when they try to do more than apply band-aids. Observing the fine points of impartiality and independence consigns them to silence in the face of monstrous injustices and grave crimes, with the exception presumably of genocide, in which case Rieff would advocate revelation. According to Rieff, humanitarian assistance has become a kind of 'flag of convenience' for different groups with policy pretensions and political agendas, a dynamic he calls the 'instrumentalization of humanitarianism'.

A Bed for the Night is a sophisticated rant which exhibits both marvellous craftsmanship and a debilitating pessimism. Rieff's suggestion that humanitarian groups go back to basics and insist upon an autonomous humanitarian space rings a bit hollow given the interplay today of the values, politics, bureaucratic momentum and financial interests that he describes so adroitly. What exactly does autonomous mean in these circumstances if not an invitation for a form of resignation and selective indifference to the causes and consequences of humanitarian catastrophes?

In warning against the 'horror of the cost of a good deed', Rieff eschews 'nihilism', rather unpersuasively in my view, but offers no policy prescriptions or vision of a better way. David Rieff has done a service by posing important questions which humanitarians must address. He does not presume to answer them.

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The Kosovo Tragedy: The Human Rights Dimensions. Edited by Ken Booth.

London and Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 2001. ix + 386 pp. £45/\$59.50, ISBN 0 7146 5085 4 hb; £17.50/\$24.50, ISBN 0 7146 8126 1 pb.

Conflicts come and go and lessons learned far too often stay with the actors and are not carried forward to those involved in new situations. For this and many other reasons, *The Kosovo Tragedy* should be compulsory reading for those deciding war, carrying out war and rebuilding societies in the post-war period; it is also important reading for scholars and others interested in the field of conflict prevention and resolution.

The book contains 13 comprehensive articles, five shorter contributions, a number of key documents and a comprehensive introduction. The main articles are organized into four parts in a chronological framework. The first part opens up unavoidable discussions related to the Kosovo crisis and other conflicts: genocide, ethnic cleansing and rape. The second part narrows the focus to Kosovo and examines the human rights violations and international interventions in the period leading up to the start of the NATO bombings in March 1999. Part three addresses the war and in particular the legality and legitimacy of the NATO intervention. Intimately linked to the war is the issue of protection of refugees and the respect for international humanitarian law. The last part opens up the discussion on the international interventions in the aftermath of the conflict. How should a multi-ethnic democratic society be built on the ruins of an ethnic conflict? Is this wishful thinking or a real option? Following the main body of the book there is an interesting discussion about whether 'humanitarian war' is a