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In the Shadow of 'Just Wars'

Violence, Politics and Humanitarian Action

edited by Fabrice Weissman



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Medecins Sans Frontieres, Fabrice Weissman, Doctors Without Borders : In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised In the Shadow of "Just Wars": Violence, Politics, and Humanitarian Action:

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful. Analysis of current aid motivations and applications By Patrick

Connor This collection of essays brought together by Medecins Sans Frontieres intends to help readers explore the current state of international "humanitarian" aid in the wake of the "just wars" that were fought on humanitarian pretexts in the Balkans last decade. Contrary to what government officials prefer to brag, most humanitarian aid is not humanitarian at all, but is an extension of politics. This work expounds on that theme, implying that the "just wars" of the last decade were the demise of truly independent and humanitarian work. In keeping with this theme, the essays in this book, with the exception of one or two, delve into the politics of a complex emergency and explore how the international community has failed to live up to the humanitarian ideal -- either by abstaining from involvement or manipulating aid. There is particular focus on Africa, since the cases were chosen by ranking complex emergencies according to their cost in human lives, and focusing on the most serious. This annoyed me to an extent because the essays on the African conflicts tend to give tremendous amounts of information in only small amounts of space. By the time the reader covers three or four of the African conflicts, he cannot help but jumble and confuse the names of the main players and the acronyms of the liberation armies. Also, several different authors all seem to use the same words and have the same style of writing. At first I suspected some sort of conspiracy on the part of MSF, but then I realized that most of the essays were probably written in foreign languages then later translated by Fabrice Weissman into English. The result is that I began to tire of the book's style and diction halfway through. One word in particular -- I forget which -- must have been used twenty or thirty times, despite not being a commonly used word. The soporific effect of this phenomenon cannot be overlooked in evaluating the book's merit. By the end, however, every reader should at least be more informed about the civil wars taking place in Africa. And he should also be able to more critically assess news reports describing humanitarian emergencies and humanitarian assistance. Thus the book does deliver some reward, although each of these messages is better articulated by David Rieff in his book "A Bed for the Night." I would recommend this collection only for those with a deep interest in humanitarian aid.

During the planning stages of military intervention in Iraq, humanitarian organizations were offered U.S. government funds to join the Coalition and operate under the umbrella of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Nongovernmental organizations had previously been asked to join in "just wars" in Kosovo, East Timor, Sierra Leone, and Afghanistan, wars initiated by Western powers against oppressive regimes or armed groups. Many aid organizations cooperated eagerly. Few Afghans regret the eclipse of the Taliban, or Sierra Leoneans the stabilization of their country after British military intervention in 2000. However, the incidental victims of these triumphs, those on the "wrong" side, are soon forgotten. Humanitarian organizations are duty-bound to save these people, although in so doing they must remain independent of the warring parties and not support the "struggle against evil" or any other political agenda. Then there are places where the pretense of providing assistance allows donor governments to disguise their support for local political powers. Millions in North Korea, Angola, and Sudan have starved to death because of the diversion and unequal distribution of huge quantities of food aid. There are also those whose sacrifice is politically irrelevant in the wider picture of international relations: the victims of brutal wars in Algeria, Chechnya, and Liberia, for instance, where what little international aid is available is subsumed by the adversaries' desire to wage total war, to exterminate entire populations. In this book, international experts and members of Medecins Sans Frontieres analyze the way these issues have crystallized over the five years spanning the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. They make the case for a renewed commitment to an old ideal: a humanitarianism that defies a politics of expendable lives.

From Publishers Weekly The role of humanitarian organizations in the world's troubled and violent regions has never been so vital, or so debated. Over the course of this collection's 17 essays (written by scholars, journalists and humanitarian relief workers), 11 of the world's greatest humanitarian crises of the past five years are scrutinized for their successes and failures. From the moderately successful U.N. intervention in East Timor, to the U.N.'s absence in the war-torn Democratic Republic of Congo, humanitarian action has often failed to live up to its exalted ideals, suggests this volume. With a clear, and often critical eye, the essays in this collection not only expose the shortcomings of the various humanitarian organizations, particularly the U.N., but also succeed in illuminating the complex moral and political debate that surrounds even the most basic relief operations. Saving lives is the ultimate purpose of any humanitarian action, and yet, according to the authors, that seemingly simple purpose is inevitably shrouded in a host of complicating, and often conflicting, values. The humanitarian ideal "is peaceful by nature but not pacifist," and therefore must inevitably contend with the specter of violence that comes with every relief operation. By focusing on the particular details of each intervention, the essays in this book succeed in going beyond the conventional stereotypes and myths of rebel atrocities and hapless governments. As such, they are an excellent resource for scholars and professionals in the field. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "The role of humanitarian organizations in the world's troubled and violent regions has never been so vital, or so debated. Over the course of this collection's 17 essays (written by scholars, journalists and humanitarian relief workers), 11 of the world's greatest humanitarian crises of the past five years are scrutinized for their successes and failures. . . . With a clear, and often critical eye, the essays in this collection not only expose the

shortcomings of the various humanitarian organizations, particularly the U.N., but also succeed in illuminating the complex moral and political debate that surrounds even the most basic relief operations. By focusing on the particular details of each intervention, the essays in this book succeed in going beyond the conventional stereotypes and myths of rebel atrocities and hapless governments. As such, they are an excellent resource for scholars and professionals in the field."Publishers Weekly, April 2004"

The new collection of essays brought out by *Mdecins sans Frontieres* is very welcome. By reasserting the distinction between the humanitarian idea proper and the humanitarian motives or pretensions of political leaders, the MSF writers are able to move the arguments back to where they ought to be taking place. In essence, they are saying that there are two quite different sets of arguments. One is about foreign policy, and this should take place in the knowledge that even worthy foreign policy is not in the first place humanitarian."The Guardian, April 2, 2004"

To what extent has the proliferation of so-called 'just' wars and the recent enthusiasm for ethical and humanitarian values benefited populations exposed to mass violence? There is no quick answer to that question, but a survey of recent conflicts, including Afghanistan, East Timor, Colombia, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Algeria, suggests mixed results. The contributors to *Just Wars* (Cornell University Press) propose that in a number of these cases, humanitarian actors, mindful of donor money, access to target populations, or politics, forget their duties to those on the 'wrong' side in such conflicts."The Village Voice, April 20, 2004"

With insightful case studies of conflicts ranging from East Timor and Afghanistan to Sudan and Colombia, and thoughtful considerations of issues such as the responsibility of humanitarian aid workers in war crimes trials and the growing tension between Islamic, Christian and secular humanitarian NGO's, *In the Shadow of 'Just Wars'* is a significant and sobering work that should be engaged by humanitarians, politicians, and responsible global citizens alike."Patrick LaRochelle, *Virginia Quarterly*, vol. 81, no. 1, Winter 2005

About the Author *Mdecins Sans Frontieres/Doctors Without Borders (MSF)* delivers emergency medical care to people in crisis in nearly 80 countries worldwide. An independent, international humanitarian organization, MSF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999. Fabrice Weissman, research director at the MSF Foundation, is the author of works on humanitarian aid and the political economy of conflict.