

Witnesses to Genocide: The Tragedy of Sudan

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*Where's humanity? Who's humanity? You? Me?*¹

One of the world's poorest and least developed countries, Sudan is Africa's largest nation, its 966,757 square miles accounting for one tenth of the continent. Vast plains and plateaus comprise most of the land in which nineteen major ethnic groups reside.² Darfur, Sudan's westernmost region, is home to a particularly intricate and interwoven collection of tribes. Landlocked and isolated by the Sahara Desert and the Kordofan Providence, Darfur is largely barren from years of drought and over-grazing.³ It is here in this unremarkable land that 400,000⁴ people have been systematically murdered in the first genocide of the twenty-first century.

In 1944, a lawyer and linguist named Raphael Lemkin coined the term "genocide" in *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, primarily a compilation of laws imposed by the Axis powers in Nazi-occupied territories.⁵ The book was also an undeniable indictment of the Nazis' ruthless and cruel policies, outlined in documents written by Hitler and his advisors. It is in this indictment that Lemkin invented the word that would encompass a specific type of atrocities against humanity. "Genocide" was "a coordinated plan of *different* actions aiming at the destruction of essential foundations of the life of national groups, with the aim of annihilating the groups themselves." He added:

Genocide has two phases: one, destruction of the national pattern of the oppressed group;

¹ Philip Gouevitch, *We Wish to Inform You that Tomorrow We Will be Killed with Our Families* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998) 170.

² "The Sudan," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2005 ed.

³ Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2005) 2.

⁴ <<http://www.darfurgenocide.org>> 20 Mar. 2006.

⁵ Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002) 57.

the other, the imposition of the national pattern of the oppressor. This imposition, in turn, may be made upon the oppressed population which is allowed to remain, or upon the territory alone, after removal of the population and colonization of the area by the oppressor's own nationals. ⁶

While pleased with the term's acceptance among lexicographers and public officials, providing a name for a specific type of crime was only the beginning. Banning the act under international law, Lemkin's ultimate goal, would take another four years.

The 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide defined genocide as

any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial, or religious group, as such:

- A. Killing members of the group;
- B. Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
- C. Deliberately inflicting on the group the conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
- D. Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
- E. Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.⁷

Under the new law, a guilty party had to commit any one of these acts, intending to annihilate all or part of a specific group. By defining genocide and the law against it in a specific, yet wide-encompassing manner, Lemkin, who lobbied the convention tirelessly, sought in part to prevent Hitler's Final Solution from becoming the standard for requiring the international community to act. He feared that future generations would fail to stop instances of genocide that did not

⁶ Power 43.

⁷ Power 57.

resemble Hitler's crimes in terms of execution, regardless of the same intent or result. Lemkin could not have known that this prescient fear, as well as, perversely, a disputable detail from the 1948 Convention itself, would play a heavy role in the world's propensity to stand by as entire populations were decimated, and continue to be decimated in Sudan.

The most appalling aspect of the world's ambivalence toward Darfur is that the lack of intervention is not an anomaly. There have been six widely documented cases of genocide since the liberation of Auschwitz, two of which—in Rwanda and Yugoslavia—occurred after the 1993 opening of Washington D.C.'s Holocaust Museum, a site which has drawn over 23 million visitors.⁸ In each of these instances, the world has followed the same pattern of denial, obfuscation, and outright refusal to act in the face of mass slaughter. To examine the Sudanese genocide is therefore to confront both our silent role in the killings and our duty to prevent the destruction of an entire segment of humanity.

In February of 2001, the Popular Patriotic Congress, a political party, united with the Sudan People's Liberation Army to overthrow the Arab government of Khartoum, Sudan's capital.⁹ The next two years were fraught with violence between the alliance, rooted in Darfur, and government soldiers as negotiations failed. The government, believing a peaceful solution to be impossible, decided the rebels must be crushed militarily. Under the guise of quelling a rebellion, the government also set its sights on the civilians of Darfur with the goal of "removing African tribes to achieve what Hitler called Lebensraum: "living space" for nomadic Arabs and their camels."¹⁰ In the spring of 2003, Khartoum began to formalize its relationship with *Janjaweed* militias.

⁸ <<http://www.ushmm.org/research/library/index.php?content=faq/>> 10 Apr. 2006.

⁹ Prunier 85.

¹⁰ Nicholas D. Kristof, "Africa's Brutal Lebensraum," The New York Times 14 March 2006: A27.

Sociologically the *Janjaweed* seem to have been of six main origins: former bandits and highwaymen, demobilized soldiers, young members of Arab tribes, common criminals, and young unemployed Arab men...The militias later operated in full cooperation with the regular army. [In July of 2003] the government unleashed the *Janjaweed* on a grand scale.¹¹

Aligned with the militias Khartoum would later blame exclusively for the killing, the Sudanese military began aerial bombing of civilian villages. Combat helicopters and fighter-bombers fired machine guns and rockets at any structures that had remained standing after previous raids.

These assaults were not ends in themselves, but preparatory measures for the *Janjaweed*.

In the “hard” pattern they would loot personal belongings, rape the girls and women, steal the cattle and kill the donkeys. Then they would burn the houses and shoot all those who could not run away. Small children, being light, were often tossed back in the burning houses. In the “soft” pattern the militiamen would beat up people, loot, shoot a few recalcitrant men, rape the females, often scarring them or branding them with a hot iron so that they would become recognized as “spoilt” women in the future...Some groups of boys and men were taken away and executed. Girls and women were...used as sexual toys for a few days and then either let go or murdered.¹²

Global media reports of the killings did not begin to surface until eight months later when the United Nations Humanitarian Coordinator, Mukesh Kapila, condemned them: “The only difference between Rwanda and Darfur is the numbers of dead, tortured, and raped...This is ethnic cleansing, this is the world’s greatest humanitarian crisis, and I don’t know why the world

¹¹ Prunier 99.

¹² Prunier 100.

is not doing more about it.”¹³ Despite the eruption of Kapila, who had spent a year in Darfur, the international community refused to recognize the scale of mass murder, or that the Sudanese government was orchestrating it. In June of 2004, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan stated: “I cannot at this stage call it genocide or ethnic cleansing yet.” The acting UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Bertrand Ramcharan, added, “I condemn the government of Sudan, but I do not think it is responsible.”¹⁴ Politicians and agency officials attempted a purely humanitarian approach to the crisis of 600,000 refugees fleeing Darfur, failing to acknowledge its cause or the need for militaristic intervention. To say nothing of stopping genocide, the plan proved largely ineffective in providing basic provisions to refugees. The UN requested \$722 million for Darfur, yet only \$288 million was pledged, mostly by the European Union.¹⁵ Ironically, not only does an entirely humanitarian response fail to halt genocide, it previously has not cost less than intervention would have. In Rwanda, “the money spent on humanitarian aid to refugee camps quickly rivaled the likely cost of intervention to prevent genocide in the first place.”¹⁶

By September, U.S. officials began to use the term “genocide” to describe the crisis in Darfur. Then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, President George W. Bush, and Senator John Kerry all stated that genocide was taking place. However, none pushed for any type of specific response to halt the killing, instead deferring to the United Nations. In January of 2005, the long-awaited UN Commission of Inquiry on the Darfur Violence reported:

There are 1.65 million internally displaced persons in Darfur, and more than 200,000 refugees in neighbouring Chad. There has been large-scale destruction of villages throughout Darfur...the Government of Sudan and the Janjaweed are responsible for

¹³ Samantha Power, “Dying in Darfur,” *The New Yorker* 30 Aug. 2004, 10 Apr. 2006
<http://www.newyorker.com/fact/content/?040830fa_fact1>.

¹⁴ Prunier 135.

¹⁵ Prunier 140.

¹⁶ Peter Ronayne, *Never Again?* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001) 206.

serious violations of international human rights and humanitarian law amounting to crimes under international law. Government forces and militias conducted indiscriminate attacks, including killing of civilians, torture, enforced disappearances, destruction of villages, rape and other forms of sexual violence, pillaging and forced displacement. These acts were conducted on a *widespread and systematic* basis, and therefore may amount to crimes against humanity. The extensive destruction and displacement have resulted in a loss of livelihood and means of survival for countless women, men and children. The vast majority of the victims of all of these violations have been from the Fur, Zaghawa, Massalit, Jebel, Aranga and other so-called ‘African’ tribes.¹⁷

According to the 1948 Genocide Convention, the contents of the report entail that genocide had been committed; measures A-C clearly had been orchestrated by the Sudanese government against specific ethnic groups. Stunningly, however, the Commission concluded that

the Government of the Sudan has not pursued a policy of genocide...the crucial element of genocidal intent appears to be missing, *at least as far as the central Government authorities are concerned*. Generally speaking the policy of attacking, killing and forcibly displacing members of some tribes does not evince a specific intent to annihilate, in whole or in part, a group distinguished on racial, ethnic, national or religious grounds. Rather, it would seem that those who planned and organized attacks on villages pursued the intent to drive the victims from their homes, primarily for purposes of counter-insurgency warfare.

Apparently, because the government authorities in Sudan did not openly divulge their intent, as the Nazis had, the UN could actually justify not calling their actions “genocide,” effectively

¹⁷ “Report of the International Commission of Inquiry on Darfur to the United Nations Secretary-General” 25 Jan. 2005, 11 Apr. 2006 <http://www.un.org/News/dh/sudan/com_inq_darfur.pdf>.

absolving the UN and the world of any legal obligation to intervene. Raphael Lemkin's fear had again been realized.

Since the Commission's findings, 60,000 more people have been slaughtered, raising the death toll to 400,000.¹⁸ If the world is not legally bound to stop genocide, is it morally bound to do so? In the United States especially, the term "sanctity of life" has become a fixture in moral and political discussions over issues such as abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and euthanasia. It is often both a rallying cry in defense of the essential value of even a single life, and a declaration of indignation at its possible violation. What about the violation of millions of lives? More disturbing than failing to name an act of genocide because of a disingenuous perceived technicality is the lack of widespread outrage over the wanton killing of hundreds of thousands. Why do so many indignantly condemn genocide yet fail to demand intervention, and even argue against it?

One strategy, implicit or explicit, of those who deny culpability and oppose militaristic intervention is to hide behind distance. UN Security Council President Ambassador John Danforth expresses this explicit defense perfectly: "I don't think that it is right to say that suddenly the blame should be shifted from the people doing these terrible things to people living half way around the world."¹⁹ A second defense of inaction entails asking why one's particular nation is obligated to act when there are a wide number of other countries who could intervene. Yet, as philosopher Peter Singer has argued, neither one's distance from the epicenter of evil or the existence of potential intervening sources absolves society from a moral obligation to act.

Singer, writing in regard to famine and disaster relief, began with the assumption that

¹⁸ <<http://www.darfurgenocide.org>> 20 Mar. 2006

¹⁹ Prunier 147.

“suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad.”²⁰ One can alter this premise to an equally true assumption: suffering and death from genocide are bad. His next premise is that if we have the power to prevent something bad from occurring “without sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance,” we are morally obligated to do so. Therefore, according to this principle, if one comes across a child drowning in a shallow pond, he is morally obligated to wade in and rescue her. Crucially, one’s distance from a given problem has no bearing upon his obligation to solve the problem if possible. The moral imperative to save a nearby drowning child is equivalent to preventing a child in Sudan from butchery. Equally important, the principle undercuts the argument that because others are also in a position to act, one can justify not doing so. It is absurd to believe that the presence of a dozen equally capable individuals near the pond abrogates one’s own moral obligation to save the child’s life.*

An objection to applying Singer’s principle to genocide intervention involves the possibility of stopping the killing, given that it would be much more difficult than saving a drowning child. An additional doubt lies in the inferred exception of the second premise: not having to act if doing so requires “sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance.” Both objections directly relate to another argument against militaristic intervention: unacceptable risks and costs. Intervention is often likened to entrenchment in a hopeless quagmire in which Americans are killed for a cause irrelevant to our political and economic interests. In truth, each of these objections is without merit, as it is entirely possible to prevent genocide in Darfur without sacrificing thousands of lives.

²⁰ Peter Singer, “Famine Affluence, and Morality,” *Writings on an Ethical Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001) 107.

*Here I follow Singer’s example and analysis on 107-108.

When the Sudanese government conducted aerial raids on villages, it primarily used Antonov An-12s, which are four-engine transports rather than bombers.** The “bombs” consisted of used oil drums filled with explosives and metallic debris.²¹ The United States Air Force, in stark contrast, is the largest modern air force in the world, with over 9,000 aircraft in service and approximately 352,000 people on duty.²² The mere presence of exponentially superior U.S. air forces would prevent aerial terror in Darfur. Even without putting our planes in the air, we could enforce a no-fly zone from an air base in Abéché, Chad—a measure the president of Chad has welcomed.²³ However, because the vast majority of the killings are perpetrated by the *Janjaweed*, ground troops are ultimately necessary. Experts estimate that twenty-five thousand armed troops, stationed solely to protect civilians, would greatly improve the situation.²⁴ Given that the *Janjaweed* attack while mounted on horses and camels, it is unreasonable to doubt that armed professional soldiers—U.S. or multinational—could combat the terror. These troops would not need a mandate requiring them to hunt down the militias, thereby incurring a far greater risk of injury. As with air forces, their presence alone would discourage attacks by militaristically primitive and inferior forces. While the risk of loss of life in such a mission is inevitable, the sacrificing of soldiers’ lives—which would mean almost certain death—is far from a given, especially when considering the immense disparity between the forces.

Despite the militaristic means that would stop the Sudanese genocide, the killings will continue unabated unless the public pressures elected officials to act. According to

²¹ Prunier 99.

²² 12 Apr. 2006 < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._Air_Force>

²² Nicholas D. Kristof, “The Silence of Bystanders,” *The New York Times* 19 March 2006: A27.

²³ Power, “Dying in Darfur.”

**Although combat helicopters and fighter-bombers were also used, the government has since sought to hide its explicit role in the genocide by ceasing assaults with them

Samantha Power,

It is in the realm of domestic politics that the battle to stop genocide is lost. American political leaders interpret society-wide silence as an indicator of public indifference. Potential sources of influence—lawmakers on Capital Hill, editorial boards, non-governmental groups, and ordinary constituents—do not generate political pressure sufficient to change the calculus of America’s leaders.²⁵

Pressuring leaders requires neither a fundamental shift in our concept of the value of life—few, if any, would refute the premise that genocide is wrong—or even, polls show, our views on intervention:

In a 1994 poll conducted by the Program on International Policy Attitudes, 63 percent of respondents said that the U.S. and the UN should “always” or “in most cases” intervene “with whatever force is necessary to stop acts of genocide.” Only six percent said “never.” Even when asked to consider a hypothetical humanitarian intervention with several thousand American casualties, 60 percent believed that the U.S. would have done the right thing by stopping the greater genocidal carnage.²⁶

Defeating evil requires placing genocide into public consciousness and altering our belief in the ability of individuals to collectively determine genocide policy. Public lectures, editorials, awareness campaigns, and film are only some of the venues through which one could raise genocide awareness. Organizing letter-writing campaigns to politicians, lobbying state and national lawmakers, and staging marches and demonstrations would pressure policy-makers to finally live up to the vow, “Never again.”

²⁵ Power, Problem XVIII.

²⁶ Ronayne 201.

It is nearly impossible to comprehend the savagery of people who shoot infants²⁷ and throw children into burning houses. The apparent differences in our concepts of humanity and human dignity, however, should not prevent us from confronting genocide in Sudan. The imperative for intervention lies not in who they are, but in who we are. We must therefore combat genocide in accordance with our belief in justice, humanity, and the inherent value of life, not accepting the world as it is, but fighting to create what it can be. Ultimately, “we—even we here—hold the power, and bear the responsibility.”²⁸

²⁷ Nicholas D. Kristof, “Where Killers Roam, the Poison Spreads” *The New York Times* 7 March 2006: A27.

²⁸ Abraham Lincoln. Quote taken from Power’s introduction to *A Problem from Hell*.

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