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DAVID RIEFF

A BED FOR THE NIGHT

HUMANITARIANISM IN CRISIS

SIMON & SCHUSTER

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

HV
639
.R543
2002

SIMON & SCHUSTER
Rockefeller Center
1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

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Designed by Lisa Chovnick
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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Rieff, David.
A bed for the night : humanitarianism in crisis / David Rieff.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. War relief. 2. International relief. 3. International agencies.
4. Humanitarianism. I. Title.
HV639.R543 2002
361.2'6—dc21 2002029432
ISBN 0-684-80977-X

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"A Bed for the Night" in
Bertolt Brecht, Werke. Große kommentierte Berliner und Frankfurter Ausgabe.
30 Bände, Hg. Werner Hecht, Jan Knopf u.a.

Bosnia

THE BOSNIAN WAR WOULD EVENTUALLY become so essential to our collective understanding of the post–Cold War world that it is now hard to remember the euphoria that reigned in Western Europe and North America in the immediate aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall. In 1989 and 1990, another war in Europe seemed an impossibility. There was a building consensus that, after so many wars and calamities, Europeans at last might be freed not just from war (there had been no war on the continent since 1945), but even from the threat of war. And it no longer seemed utopian to extrapolate from a Europe at peace and undivided to a peaceful order for the world as a whole. This was the era of UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's "An Agenda for Peace," and George Bush senior's New World Order. Liberal internationalism, with its commitments to human rights, humanitarianism, democratic—or, as the billionaire investor and philanthropist George Soros preferred to call them, "open"—societies, and the rule of law, seemed to have swept all before it. Communism was dead. We were all liberal capitalists now, and the new political opening that the end of the Cold War had provided, combined with the prosperity that the technological revolu-

tion promised, was finally going to make the world safe for democracy, as Woodrow Wilson had said in 1918.

Beware of nature, "cynical in her sunrises," Nietzsche once wrote. He might as well have been warning about history, above all about what would prove to be the historical false dawn of 1989. The triumphalist talk, with its conceit that history had somehow come to an end, did not last long; history, the old-fashioned, pitiless, sanguinary kind, was soon back with a vengeance. In fact, the euphoria over the collapse of the Soviet Union had barely worn off when the genocidal wars of "ethnic cleansing" that would sweep through the Balkans between 1991 and 1999 began in Croatia.

The old saying "Save me from what I wish for most" could not have been more appropriate than it was to the breakup of Yugoslavia. The Western powers had wanted an end to the Cold War division of Europe. Well, now they had to deal with all the historical messes that had been festering, in some cases since the end of World War I, but had been frozen or suppressed during the half-century struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union. And the United Nations had wanted a wider role, believing, as senior officials of the world body had been insisting practically since its inception, that the potential of the UN would finally be unlocked were the superpower rivalry ever to end. Then, they said, the UN would show the world what a force for good, and above all for peace, it was, and had had the potential to be all along.

"In the course of the past few years," Boutros-Ghali wrote in 1992, "the immense ideological barrier that for decades gave rise to distrust and hostility—and the terrible tools of destruction that were their inseparable companions—has collapsed." And he insisted confidently that while "the adversarial decades of the cold war made the original promise of the Organization impossible to fulfill . . . a conviction has grown, among nations large and small, that an opportunity has been regained to achieve the great objectives of the [UN] Charter—a United Nations capable of maintaining international peace and security, of securing justice and human rights and of promoting, in the words of the Charter, 'social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom.'" The opportunity, he added, was one that must not be squandered.

Enter Bosnia, laughing. The reality was that almost no one had really expected the Soviet empire to collapse, and no government, let alone the UN Secretariat, was either prepared or really in a position to deal competently with the political aftershocks that accompanied its passing. It was not that no one foresaw the threat posed by the possible breakup of Yugoslavia. A CIA report predicted just such an eventuality in 1989. But the mechanisms that would have been set in motion during the Cold War to prevent the catastrophe from taking place—above all, pressure from both Washington and Moscow on a state that was in fact beholden to both—no longer existed in 1991 when war erupted in Slovenia and Croatia. The administration of George Bush senior offered the Western Europeans its assistance in resolving the conflict, although with what degree of sincerity is open to dispute. But the Europeans, believing themselves to be stronger and, above all, more unified than they were, told the Americans they would handle the crisis themselves. "Now is the hour of Europe," was the way Jacques Poos, the foreign minister of Luxembourg, put it as he delivered the European Union's response to Washington.

By the time the major powers realized that the Yugoslav catastrophe was something to which they would have to give priority, it was too late for conventional diplomacy. The options facing the West were simple. The first involved doing nothing and allowing Yugoslavia's leader, Slobodan Milosevic, to carve a "greater Serbia" out of the corpse of the former Yugoslavia. The second required that out-

siders use force to end the fighting. But even had a NATO army intervened, or, at least, threatened convincingly to do so, the question was, what would it have intervened for? Would it have been to secure terms favorable to Milosevic, to the Croatian nationalist regime of Franjo Tudjman, or to the legitimate Bosnian government of Alija Izetbegovic, or for some democratic order that would have to be maintained from the outside? The Americans seemed not to know what they wanted, while the great European states were divided. French President François Mitterrand's government was overwhelmingly pro-Serb. The Germans were preoccupied with helping the fledgling Croatian state secure its independence. As for the British, to the extent they had a view, it was that now that the damage had been done the best thing was to arrange a partition on ethnic lines.

These political divisions among the great powers were accompanied by military anxieties. The Yugoslavs could fight, or so it was presumed, and not only by those who wanted to forestall any military move. An intervention would be costly and difficult. It was this conviction, bred of military caution and the unwillingness of any major Western government to push hard for intervention, that made the third option—containing the crisis—so appealing. In practice, this meant trying to bottle up as completely as possible all this suffering and death, and, in their wake, to contain the mass movements of refugees as completely as possible within the borders of Croatia and, once the fighting broke out there in the spring of 1992, within those of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Only in that strange, euphoric moment that was the immediate post–Cold War period, or among people who believed the self-flattering lies that Western politicians, UN officials, and their intellectual brethren were telling about how at last we were going to live in a different and better world, could it have come as a surprise that

the great powers opted for containment. European leaders did not want a war and they did not want any more refugees. Given those priorities, the choice for them must have been obvious. And yet, most educated, liberal Westerners were surprised. We thought that the world—or did we only mean Europe?—was better than it was. We thought *we* were better. Bosnia would disabuse us of both conceits, affecting us as only something that takes place in a familiar locale or context can do. Think of the destruction of the World Trade Center, almost a decade later, and how it would finally make terrorism real to Americans.

For journalists and relief workers, in particular, the reality of having to cover, or attempt to alleviate, an emergency on what for most was their native soil (for the majority of the Americans, only imaginatively so, but the effect was much the same) was deeply absorbing and deeply unsettling. Above all, it was *different*. No longer would we go "out there" to places where the customs, the look of the people, and, above all else, the poverty kept one at a distance, no matter how hard one tried to connect. Intellectually, it was easy to insist that this starving African child, this Afghan woman, or this wounded Kurd fighter was simply a fellow human being, and as such no different from us. But for most of us, on an emotional level at least, it was not true. Our sisters did not, and never would, wear burkas; our mothers would never be refused medical care because the hospital in some Taliban-controlled town was for men only; our children did not go barefoot, except at the beach or in the back garden. But more to the point, we did not come from places where people made war on one another. That period of history—it was in fact all of European history until 1945 when you thought about, but we didn't think about it—had ended.

What lies we tell ourselves. And in Bosnia, those lies came true. The driver on a UNHCR convoy wanted to talk about the experi-

mental theater company he had seen in Paris before the war. The ruined village in the Bosanska Krajina had had central heating and was within an hour's drive of the magnetic resonance imaging machine in the regional hospital. The young girl with her arm blown off by a sniper's round as she played in the courtyard of her Sarajevo high-rise had dreamed of being a contestant in the Euro Song competition. And the journalist cadging cigarettes in an underground café had strong opinions about the relative merits of the front-page layout of the *International Herald Tribune* and that of Madrid's *El Pais*. In other words, Bosnia and its people were not significantly different from us culturally. That was the essential point. Throughout my time in Bosnia during the war, I heard this sense of affinity for the Bosnians being expressed as often by black American reporters and aid workers as by blond Swedish colleagues. For that matter, I heard it repeated over and over by the Bosnians themselves, many of whom felt entitled to the European "immunity" from war and want.

This deep sense of connectedness helps explain how Bosnia exerted the kind of fascination on, and engendered the kind of commitment from, aid workers and journalists that no crisis in the poor world had ever commanded. In particular, the fate of besieged Sarajevo became more than a crisis, it became a cause. This was not only understandable, it was justifiable, and not only because it is only human to care more about neighbors than strangers. Both morality and self-interest justified insisting that, almost half a century after the defeat of Nazism, the ethnic fascism Slobodan Milosevic incarnated must not be allowed its second life, and that Europe, having emerged from the Cold War, must not be permitted to regress into the kind of savagery that had marked it for most of its history. After 1945, Europe had to an admirable degree found a way out of its own barbarism, above all through a commitment to education and to an understanding between European peoples that was far more serious

than the pieties and self-congratulation surrounding it sometimes suggested. Europe had the right to prevent a slide back into barbarism, and the entire world had an interest in that effort.

This is not to minimize the grave moral problems revealed by the way humanitarians and journalists reacted to the new Balkan wars. I have come late to seeing them, and now feel that I failed to face up to them in *Slaughterhouse*, the book I wrote about the Bosnian war. One should not talk about neighborliness without conceding that this neighborliness is also a form of hegemony. The international media are dominated by Western reporters, photographers, editors, and producers, and thus a Bosnia is going to occupy the world stage, not simply that of Europe and North America. In a just world, there would be reporters and editors who cared about Angola as much as I cared about Bosnia, and those reporters would have access to the front pages and the leads on the evening news.

But to say that the world is as unjust in its response to humanitarian crises as it is in everything else is neither an excuse nor a sufficient reply to the outrage many in the poor world felt and continue to feel over the attention—journalistic, diplomatic, and humanitarian—that the wars of Yugoslav succession received. To staff their humanitarian operations in the Balkans, UN agencies and NGOs drew personnel away from programs in Africa. For journalists, Bosnia became *the* international story. Only the Rwandan genocide, in which eight hundred thousand people were killed in six weeks, managed to divert the press corps's attention from the fate of Sarajevo.

The moral challenge to the ethos of humanitarian aid was even starker. Relief workers are pledged to work on the basis of need, not of politics, and certainly not of cultural affinity. And yet the reality is that the Bosnian crisis engaged the humanitarian international, as the Kosovo crisis would engage it seven years later, to a degree that was clearly out of proportion to the purely humanitarian needs in-

volved. Whether in terms of the monies that donor governments were willing to commit to humanitarian programs in the Balkans, or the number of NGOs that were being funded by UN agencies, the European Union, and the U.S. government—there were 250 by the time the Dayton Agreement that ended the war was signed in 1995—Bosnia was and remains a special case in the annals of humanitarian action.

The deeper question is whether Bosnia was a major humanitarian crisis at all. Was the way the crisis unfolded more the product of events on the ground, the course of the war itself, or the decisions the major donors made early in the conflict about how to manage it? In most refugee crises, even in the post–Cold War world of conflicts where refugee flows are not a by-product of fighting but the strategic goal of the war itself, what happens is that people who have been "ethnically cleansed"—to use the term we all learned in Bosnia—at least those who can make it, flee across an international border. That was just what the major Western powers were determined to prevent. There were geopolitical reasons for their concern, the fear that a flood of refugees in all directions would help ignite further conflicts in neighboring Albania and in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, which had thus far been spared the conflict. But another, equally important reality was that Western European governments did not want to take the Bosnians in if they could possibly avoid it. For both reasons, policymakers swiftly concluded that a method needed to be devised to get them to stay where they were. That method was humanitarian action.

If the commitment to Bosnia on the part of humanitarians (and journalists) was as much an expression of self-love as it was of a more altruistic brand of solidarity, European and American politicians would prove to be far less sentimental. For them, the tragedy of Bosnia was at best a regrettable sideshow. In 1992, the American

political establishment was obsessed with the economy, while European politicians and civil servants were mostly concerned with issues revolving around the European Union, above all that of a common currency. It was not that politicians such as the British prime minister, John Major, or the French president, François Mitterrand, completely agreed with Prince Bismarck, who had said that wars in the Balkans were not worth the life of "a single healthy Pomeranian grenadier." On the contrary, the French and British governments were more than willing to sacrifice troops—the French lost more than a hundred soldiers in Bosnia between 1992 and 1995—but in order to contain the crisis, not to resolve it.

Deploying and being willing to sacrifice soldiers was never intended to be the principal form of the West's response. Humanitarianism was. The idea was simple, coarse, and brutal, and it would prove astonishingly effective. Instead of political action backed by the credible threat of military force, the Western powers would substitute a massive humanitarian effort to alleviate the worst consequences of a conflict they wanted to contain. "Containment through charity" was the way one UN official put it. Boutros-Ghali would get his chance to show how relevant the United Nations could be, though hardly in the way he had proposed in "An Agenda for Peace." If the response was to be humanitarian, the moral warrant of the UN would be essential.

The world body's deeply ingrained institutional culture made it the perfect "implementing partner"—to use the phrase that UN agencies like UNHCR often use for the relief NGOs they fund—for the great powers as they looked for an excuse not to intervene militarily. Secretary-General Annan later issued a report on the Srebrenica massacre, in which eight thousand men and boys (all the males in the enclave except for prepubescent boys and a few old men who had not succeeded in escaping) were murdered in cold blood by

Serb forces after they overran the Bosnian government–controlled enclave in eastern Bosnia in July 1995. The report spoke of "the pervasive ambivalence within the United Nations regarding the use of force in the pursuit of peace" and of "an institutional ideology of impartiality even when confronted with attempted genocide."

The question was how to put this humanitarian alibi for nonintervention into operation. A UN flag of convenience already existed in the form of the ill-named United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR), a peacekeeping deployment whose troops were barely authorized to defend themselves, let alone the Croatians or the Serbs in the areas of Croatia in which they were deployed. But peacekeepers cannot simply be turned into humanitarian aid workers, and there was no UN agency charged with looking after the welfare of people who might, if given the chance, become refugees. UNHCR had been an operational relief agency before, but never in an ongoing conflict and never on the scale on which it would operate in the Balkans. It had been active in northern Iraq after the Gulf War, where it actually took over from Operation Provide Comfort, the U.S. military's relief effort for Kurds. But before the Bosnian war, UNHCR's principal concern since its inception in 1951 had been refugees. Its mandate included standing up for their rights—what it called "protection"—resettlement, and running refugee camps both in countries into which refugees initially fled and in third countries. It had no particular competence in running aid convoys, let alone the relief airlift that would eventually play a central part in its Bosnian programs. And looking after people in war zones had traditionally been the responsibility of the ICRC.

And yet in Bosnia, the ICRC was absent. Although to many outsiders it looked as if by emphasizing the preeminent role of UNHCR the great powers were intent on marginalizing the ICRC, in fact, as one relief worker put it, "the ICRC marginalized the ICRC." At the

outbreak of the war, the Geneva Committee had only one delegate in place in Bosnia. Realizing its mistake, the ICRC sent a team of experienced officials into Sarajevo in May 1992. But the convoy was shelled, and one delegate, Frederic Maurice, was killed. The ICRC withdrew and did not really recommit to serious effort until the end of 1993. In the interim, the UNHCR began to fill the humanitarian role normally occupied by the ICRC, which was generally viewed by both UN officials and NGO workers as extremely jealous of its prerogative.

However ad hoc and almost accidental the decisions that led to UNHCR's new centrality, the agency underwent an unprecedented and astonishing transformation and, in a matter of months, became what Gil Loescher, the historian of UNHCR, has called "the world's largest relief agency." As one UNHCR official later recalled, "The preeminent role the UN and the UNHCR came to play in Bosnia was less the result of a grand plan than of the contradictory policies of different Europeans, the prevalent desire of the Europeans not to get involved, and a series of other fuck-ups. Then there was the ICRC's mistakes and ill-fortune."

A split soon developed within UNHCR between those who welcomed this new mandate and those who feared that the agency's traditional role would be swamped by its new duties and, above all, its new political centrality. According to Loescher, who cites senior UNHCR officials to back up his claim, the new high commissioner, Sadako Ogata, "perceived UNHCR engagement [in the former Yugoslavia] as an opportunity to make the agency relevant to the international community's most powerful actors." This was particularly necessary because UNHCR was in dire straits financially and on bad terms with many European governments due to its insistence on pressing them on the legal rights of asylum seekers. As Loescher puts it, here was a chance to "revitalize the organization and enable

it to enhance its influence and prestige with governments—particularly UN Security Council member states—[and] also restore the confidence of European governments."

The new structures were quickly put into place. The UN would finally play a major role in peace and security in the post–Cold War world. The UNHCR would be "rehabilitated." And the great powers would have their humanitarian fig leaf for nonintervention. It was an arrangement that suited all the major players in the tragedy—except, of course, the Bosnians.

It was also a defining moment for the private relief agencies. For in an important sense, it was in the interaction in Bosnia between donor governments, the UN relief and refugee agencies, and the NGOs that a new humanitarianism was born. It was better funded (and as a result more dependent on donors), more efficient, more political, and more admired by the public at large, who saw in relief workers almost the only people in the Bosnian catastrophe with whom they could wholeheartedly sympathize. From a public relations standpoint (I speak as one of the many writers covering the war who developed a deep admiration for UNHCR during this period), Mme. Ogata's decision had been a triumph. UNHCR was soon lionized, unlike other UN agencies, and certainly unlike its Department of Peacekeeping Operations (UNDPKO, or DPKO), whose efforts in the Balkans were reviled in the press, and which seemed to epitomize what Annan's own report on Srebrenica would later concede was the institution's "inability to recognize the scope of evil confronting us."

Ogata herself came to be viewed as the one entirely admirable senior figure in a landscape otherwise dotted with failed or superannuated politicians serving as international negotiators, such as Britain's Lord Owen or the former U.S. secretary of state Cyrus Vance, and with UN officials and assorted Western leaders who

seemed incapable of formulating a common policy. Indeed, her star rose so high that she was soon being whispered about as a possible successor to Boutros-Ghali as UN secretary-general, an outcome that some of her advisors played up privately and that she herself was said to wish for.

In narrow humanitarian terms, the praise UNHCR received was fully warranted. Bosnia was a place where any drunken lout with a Kalashnikov could stop an aid convoy indefinitely. A second UNPROFOR mission for Bosnia had been authorized by the Security Council in 1992. The peacekeepers' mandate was to assist, as the UN resolution put it, in "creating conditions for the effective delivery of humanitarian aid." But the UN Secretariat and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations applied this only in the most minimalist way. Above all, the peacekeepers were forbidden from using force to push the aid through. Thirty thousand UN troops were deployed by the time the mission ended, and yet they were not authorized to use their weapons in defense of anyone except themselves or any principle except that of the need to continue the mission. It was, as Jose María Mendiluce, the UNHCR's first special envoy to the Balkans, would put it, "a case study in the politics of impotence."

UNHCR officials, though unstintingly supported in their efforts by Ogata, were obviously unable to do for themselves what the UN soldiers could not do for them. And yet what was accomplished was extraordinary. While little or no aid reached the eastern Bosnian enclaves of Srebrenica, Gorazde, and Zepa, and much that did reach people in need in the northern area known as the Bosanska Krajina was stolen by the Serbs, an astonishing amount did reach those who needed it. Less than four months after the Bosnian war began, UNHCR had begun an airlift ferrying relief supplies to Sarajevo, which was by then almost completely encircled by the Serbs. That

airlift would run for almost three years. By 1993, UNHCR estimated that it was getting aid to more than 2.7 million people in Bosnia (out of a total prewar population of 4.5 million), as well as 1.4 million people in other parts of the former Yugoslavia. They were spending upwards of a million dollars a day to do so.

This last figure should illustrate that the situation was more complicated than the aid tonnages delivered and the gallantry of those who did the delivering—and UNHCR officials, particularly in the early part of the war, were nothing if not gallant—might otherwise suggest. Not only were the sums involved such that only the major Western powers could provide them, but the Sarajevo airlift could be maintained only so long as NATO provided the planes and the personnel. As Eric Dachy of MSF-Belgium pointed out caustically, "The UN troops were instructed to use force to protect the aid supplies—but they were prevented from using force to protect people." Writing more generally of this form of militarized humanitarianism, Dachy concluded that "the scandal is not that the humanitarian movement is unable to prevent atrocities committed against communities. The scandal is in seeing some of the world's most powerful governments and armies playing the role of aid workers, implying their acceptance of a whole string of massacres, which they are unable to consider from a different perspective."

UNHCR officials, both in Bosnia and at the headquarters in Geneva, often grew restive in the agency's role of providing a principal rationale for nonintervention. The best of them were outraged and sickened by it. And at least once, in the summer of 1993, the agency tried to suspend its operations. But it was quickly overruled. "The international community" knew what it wanted. David Owen, the European Union's negotiator, recalled in his memoir, *Balkan Odyssey*, that "it was we as peace negotiators who had persuaded UNHCR to stay." But there was broad consensus on the subject.

Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, under pressure from Western donor governments, quickly ordered UNHCR back into action.

For the Bosnians, UNHCR's success in carrying out the role the great powers had assigned it represented both a triumph and a tragedy. Fundamentally, the better the job UNHCR and the NGOs that worked with it did in Bosnia—and, given the appalling, impossible circumstances, the job they did was magnificent—the more cover they provided for the great powers to avoid doing anything to stop the slaughter. Had the operation been perceived as a failure, a Mitterrand or a John Major could not have hidden behind the excuse that a military intervention would harm the humanitarian effort. But since the Sarajevo airlift *was* successful, and relief convoys were able to reach large areas of Bosnia, the humanitarian alibi could be employed again and again and again by officials in London, Paris, and Washington.

As Nicholas Morris, who was the agency's special envoy in the Balkans from late 1993 through 1994, would put it later, "In Bosnia the UNHCR operation was, in a sense, a substitute for political action. Ensuring its success, and its perception as a success, was important to key governments." Perhaps this is why most UN officials hewed to the line that, from a humanitarian point of view at least, much was achieved throughout the Bosnian war. They knew what was expected of them. They also knew, just as the press did, that it was in periods when the humanitarian effort was at its least effective that the groundswell of support for military intervention would build in the West, just as it was when the humanitarian operation seemed to be going smoothly that Bosnia would begin to recede from public consciousness.

The important thing for the major Western powers and the UN was to keep control of the humanitarian operation and let in as few outsiders as possible—above all as few critical outsiders apart from

the press, about whom there was not much the UN could do. To further this end, governments effectively gave UNHCR a free hand to run the entire relief effort in Bosnia. In UN parlance, it would be the "lead agency," determining not only where other UN agencies worked but where the humanitarian NGOs worked as well. Neither Jose María Mendiluce, nor Morris himself, nor his successors were hesitant about exercising this authority. As Morris put it, "In Bosnia UNHCR . . . effectively controlled access to, and participation in, the humanitarian operation." As a result, he added, with what appeared to be unintentional irony, "coordination was relatively simple."

Mark Cutts, who worked as a senior UNHCR official in Bosnia during the war, was more blunt. "The way in which UNHCR carried out its role as the lead humanitarian agency put it in the strange position of being both a 'facilitator' and a 'regulator' of the activities of other humanitarian organizations," he wrote. "As regulator, UNHCR took on the role of a quasi-government. Those operating under the UNHCR umbrella [in practical terms, Cutts meant all humanitarian organizations except the ICRC] often had to negotiate with UNHCR for access rather than with the warring parties."

Cutts said this in a study of the agency's operations during the war in Bosnia he did for UNHCR in 1999. To the extent he is critical, he follows the familiar "buck-passing" line of most UN officials and argues that "ultimately it was not humanitarian organizations like UNHCR who called the shots." This is true as far as it goes. But Cutts does not ask himself the more serious question of why an agency that, in terms of bringing relief aid, had been largely nonoperational could consider itself qualified to act as what he himself calls a quasi-government, except in the obvious bureaucratic sense that it had the permission of the UN and the major Western governments to do so. It is true, as Cutts asserts, that the major donors were more interested in the continuation of the humanitarian mission on almost any terms. The rationale was that the humanitarian mission was buying time for the political negotiations to achieve some result. In fact, as Mendiluce pointed out over and over again, this represented the triumph of the "big lie" put out by the major Western powers—a falsehood, however, in which UNHCR collaborated.

The quasi-government was more often than not ineffective in negotiating humanitarian access with the Serbs, as the catastrophe in Srebrenica would eventually demonstrate even to the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations. But it was extremely effective in keeping Bosnians penned in. Cutts, an official of a refugee agency whose original mandate and self-proclaimed reason for being was to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers, writes disdainfully of "Bosnian civilians, particularly draft age males, who applied for work with humanitarian agencies for the sole purpose of obtaining [UNHCR] ID cards which would enable them to get through checkpoints and flee the country." Such complacency gives new meaning to a phrase of the great American aid worker Fred Cuny, murdered in Chechnya, who restored the gas lines of Sarajevo in 1993 and would have restored the water in the capital as well had the Bosnian government not betrayed him. "If the UN had been around in 1939," he liked to say, "we'd all be speaking German."

The agency's conduct with the humanitarian NGOs was less morally problematic, but equally imperious. Cutts writes that UNHCR would only issue its ID cards, the so-called Blue Cards, to those organizations that "reported [to the agency] on their activities and attended inter-agency coordination meetings." For all intents and purposes, this meant that for much of the war UNHCR was in a position to determine which humanitarian organizations were allowed to operate and which were not. When Jose María Mendiluce decided that the French NGO Équilibre's effectiveness was becoming questionable, he revoked the aid workers' ID cards. More important, the

sheer size of the operation meant that UNHCR was in a position not just to control the NGOs but to contribute to their success. In effect, many of these agencies, particularly the ones with less access to independent sources of funding, were dependent on UNHCR's doling out assignments and subcontracts. And success bred success. The more work an NGO had, the more likely it was that it would receive further funding, both from UNHCR and from the major donors. Small wonder that what began to take shape in the Balkans in the early 1990s was a humanitarianism that was more conformist than it had ever been before, more intent, agency by agency, on its own institutional self-preservation, and, by the end of the Bosnian emergency, more persuaded that it had to become political in order to do its job.

As for the other UN agencies, they might be resentful, but it was more a matter of institutional jealousy and competitiveness than of a principled critique of UNHCR's approach. As one World Food Programme official put it years later when asked what his agency would have done differently in Bosnia, "We would have gotten there before UNHCR." UN agencies like UNHCR and WFP had long vied with one another for the right to implement certain programs that could arguably fall under either's mandate. But this time Ogata had gotten there first. UNHCR would not only organize refugee camps, it would run the food side of the relief operation as well. By the end of the Bosnian war, UNHCR would in effect have secured a kind of humanitarian monopoly in Bosnia.

At the time, this appeared to have been what Ogata wanted. Her agency was, indeed, now as "relevant" as she had hoped it would be. And yet eventually UNHCR would be weakened, not strengthened, by Bosnia. It was suffering—to use the U.S. military's expression—from a bad case of "mission creep." Above all, its mission to protect the rights of refugees and asylum seekers—a mission that lay at the

heart of the agency's raison d'etre, UNHCR officials kept reiterating, both in public and in private—was at least partly sacrificed as its frantic effort to transform itself into a relief agency gathered momentum. This was not only a question of resources, although by the end of the Bosnian war, according to Gil Loescher, something like a quarter of its staff and a third of its resources were being devoted to Balkan programs very different from the protection and resettlement issues the agency had focused on before the 1990s. The problem ran deeper than that.

By giving much-needed aid to Bosnia, UNHCR was also in effect contributing to successfully carrying out one of the major donor countries' chief priorities—to prevent more Bosnians from trying to leave. Rather than supporting its traditional role of guardian of refugee rights, UNHCR's activities were designed to prevent people from becoming refugees in the first place. The Kurdistan operation of 1991, in which UNHCR had undertaken a full-scale relief effort in a conflict zone, already provided a model for this sort of activity. As in Bosnia, UNHCR tried to prevent people from leaving or reduce the number that left. In both cases, instead of standing on international law, and above all the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees that had accompanied its founding, and insisting that asylum seekers could not be turned away, UNHCR did the work of the Western countries that wanted no more asylum seekers. This is in no sense to ignore the enormous amount of good the agency did in Bosnia during the war. Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of Bosnians are alive today because of the relief effort. And the UNHCR's willingness to denounce not just individual Serb atrocities but Milosevic's ethnic fascism was an honorable exception to the callous refusal of most UN officials to acknowledge the difference between the Bosnian victims and the Serb victimizers.

Nonetheless, UNHCR made itself relevant to the major Western

donors by serving as a buffer between the Bosnians under siege in their own country and Western countries eager to limit the flow of refugees. (Hundreds of thousands still managed to make their way to the West.) In Sarajevo, UNPROFOR and UNHCR made it virtually impossible for ordinary Bosnians to get out of the city on their relief flights. They did this, they said, because otherwise the Serbs would have shut the airlift down. Perhaps. In a moment of outrage in 1993, George Soros called Sarajevo a "giant concentration camp." That was an exaggeration. But it was a giant UN internment camp. And how an agency could be both warden and advocate posed a moral challenge that UNHCR, for all the good it did in Bosnia, was never able to resolve. Many observers of the agency have gone further, concluding that it never regained the commitment to refugee protection that had been its fundamental mission before its engagement in the Balkans.

It was a cruel dilemma, but less cruel than those that confronted UNHCR in the field. Time and again, the agency was compelled to evacuate Bosnians from areas the Serbs had conquered. UNHCR officials believed they had either to collaborate with Serb "ethnic cleansing" or stand by while people were murdered. Angrily, guiltily, they nonetheless believed they had to save as many lives as they could. What this left in the minds and hearts of officials who had to make this impossible moral choice, however, was the conviction that this was a choice they should never have to make again. Not only was humanitarian action no substitute for political commitment, it could actually be forced to serve as an unwilling accomplice to "ethnic cleansing" and fascism. Ogata might, on balance, have been pleased by her agency's newfound relevance. But in the field—and this is to their great credit—UNHCR staff were as often overwhelmed by shame and in despair as they were sustained by justified pride in what they were able to accomplish.

There were so many hidden agendas in the humanitarian operation in Bosnia—agendas that many of us who covered the war and the relief effort did not begin to understand at the time. We were so disgusted by our encounter, both in Bosnia and at UN headquarters in New York, with what the former American diplomat Michael Barnett has called the "UN syndrome"—a "refusal to see themselves as being in charge or having any real autonomy" and a "veritable petri dish for moral amnesia and the distortion of ethical principles"—that we sometimes lost sight of the deeper culpability of the great powers whose agendas UN bureaucrats carried out.

Our anger was stoked by the gap between the claims the UN made for itself—above all, as Barnett has pointed out, that it is "the bureaucratic arm of the world's transcendental values"—and the reality in the field, in which moral imperatives seemed to carry little weight. It was perhaps too easy to judge governments less harshly because most governments and their supporters (with the intermittent exception of the United States) do not claim to be charged, as William Shawcross said of Kofi Annan, with "the moral leadership of the world." Equally, it made us almost absurdly grateful for the moral backbone UNHCR exhibited in Bosnia. But what we did not understand was the tremendous manipulation of relief that was taking place—a manipulation in which UNHCR was not simply a victim, as people like me imagined at the time, but, at least at Ogata's headquarters in Geneva, a willing participant.

Under international law, the Bosnians who had not fled across an international border were not refugees at all. Technically, they were either internally displaced people (IDPs, as they are called by relief workers and UN bureaucrats) or simply people who were in difficulty where they were. Why, for example, should a refugee agency like UNHCR have looked after the citizens of the Bosnian capital? They were not refugees; and while some would have fled had they

been able to do so, most had no wish to become refugees. What they wanted was for someone, preferably the same Western governments that were funding the aid effort, to put a stop to the shelling and sniping that would, by the end of the war, kill ten thousand people in the city, including three thousand children. Stop the war, they said, and there will be no humanitarian emergency. Let the war continue, and you will just be creating well-fed corpses. But as the Bosnians eventually realized, UNHCR was there precisely so that Western governments did not have to do any such thing.

UNHCR officials were themselves the first to admit that not only were they improvising, they were stretching both their own mandate and their own field guidelines beyond the breaking point. As Jose María Mendiluce told me in 1992, "The first thing I did when I arrived here was throw away the Blue Book"—UNHCR's operational manual. To their everlasting credit, UNHCR officials from Mendiluce on down refused to play the standard UN game of complaining off the record about being misused while boasting on the record about how many lives they were saving. Mendiluce in particular repeatedly denounced to anyone who would listen the ways in which humanitarianism, and UNHCR in particular, were being misused. "You don't reply to fascism with relief supplies," he would say, "and you don't counter ethnic cleansing with reception centers for the displaced."

Mendiluce was one of the first relief workers to opt out of the new state humanitarianism that took shape during the Bosnian emergency. The Western intervention that Bernard Kouchner would clamor for, and help unleash in Kosovo eight years later, was what Mendiluce wanted all along in Bosnia. During the time he ran UNHCR, he made no secret of the fact. That put him at odds with many of his colleagues on the ground, and with his superiors in Geneva. Exhausted, frustrated, and ill, Mendiluce resigned from

UNHCR and went into European politics, eventually gaining a seat in the European Parliament. For him, the humanitarianism to which he had devoted so much of his life was being distorted beyond all recognition. His attitude was paradoxical. Mendiluce was both justifiably proud of what he had accomplished in Bosnia and disgusted at the role he had been forced to play.

He knew that not only had Western governments taken shelter behind his efforts, but that the Milosevic regime and its surrogates among the Bosnian Serbs had realized that as long as the international response was fundamentally humanitarian, and UN peacekeepers in Bosnia would act only to assist in the relief effort, not to impose peace, let alone protect Bosnian civilians, they were free to do as they pleased. In this sense, Mendiluce insisted, the logic of humanitarianism in Bosnia, despite all the undoubted good that it accomplished, was also the logic of the Srebrenica massacre in 1995, when eight thousand Bosnian men and boys were murdered by the Serbs as the UN peacekeepers and their superiors in New York claimed there was nothing they could do to protect them. You tried to feed; you tried to shelter, clothe, and provide medical assistance. But when the Serbs started killing, you got out of the way. "Only a fool would not have expected it," Mendiluce said of Srebrenica, adding that the UN force commander "[shared] the responsibility for the genocide."

The fall of the enclave, Mendiluce wrote bitterly in its immediate aftermath, "should have taken with it the empty hopes of all the innocents still deluding themselves that they could continue the game of mediation and neutrality amid the planned slaughter of the Bosnian people."

Mendiluce had always believed there was something better. For him, his success as a relief official in Bosnia had also been a measure of his own society's cowardice. This did not mean that he

dreamed of a humanitarianism that would return to an ICRC-style neutrality, or would stand aside from politics and, MSF-style, largely restrict its activism to "testimony" about what it witnessed. To the contrary, the lesson he drew from Bosnia was similar to the one Bernard Kouchner had drawn—that states had an obligation to intervene militarily when humanitarian principles were being trampled, human rights abused, and victims in desperate need. His disillusionment with the limits UNHCR was forced to work under, people close to him said, was the chief motivation for him to go into politics. For Mendiluce, the problem in Bosnia was not that humanitarianism had no business cooperating with states, but rather that states needed to act more morally. When the limits of humanitarianism were reached, it was time for the soldiers to act.

"Only if we stop being neutral between murderers and victims," he said, "if we start regarding Bosnia as our ally, if we decide to back its fight for life against the fascist horror of ethnic cleansing, shall we be able to contribute to the survival of the remnants of that country and of our own dignity."

Mendiluce's despair at the misuse of humanitarianism that he had witnessed in Bosnia was shared by many of the best, most committed relief officials from the mainline NGOs. For many of them, the age of apolitical, neutral humanitarianism that remained autonomous had passed. The so-called international community had seen to that in the Balkans. And if these were indeed the new rules of the humanitarian game, then relief workers were going to have to learn how to use them for their own purposes and in accordance with their own principles. Otherwise, the mistakes of Bosnia and humanitarianism's susceptibility to being used as a fig leaf were sure to be repeated. As John Fawcett, who had run the International Rescue Committee's programs in Sarajevo during the siege, put it,

"Since we have decided we are going to send in aid for political purposes, then it is incumbent upon us to look at what's happening to that aid and how it's having an impact on that society."

Fawcett was widely considered by his peers in Sarajevo, where he spent most of the war, to be one of the most creative and original thinkers in the humanitarian world. Better a savvy politicized humanitarianism, he thought, than a co-opted humanitarianism that was obliged to be the mute accomplice of states intent on using its prestige for their actions or their inaction. Their bitter experience in Bosnia had persuaded Fawcett and many of his colleagues that the chaos of crises like the one that had taken place in the Balkans were also opportunities for an entirely different kind of humanitarianism. It would be political. That they viewed as inevitable. But it would not be merely governmental and it certainly would not be impotent. To the contrary, the humanitarianism many of the veterans of the Bosnian aid effort envisaged was one that might actually succeed in forcing governments to live up to their responsibilities and thus let the humanitarians live up to theirs. The conviction that these relief officials shared was that since states were using aid to ends the humanitarians found abhorrent, relief workers themselves would have to find a way to turn the tables.

As Claude Moncorge, the president of Médecins du Monde-France, would put it later, "A positive synergy can exist between civil society, the NGOs, the humanitarian actors and the political authorities." If it did not yet exist in Bosnia—if, in fact, the synergy there had been negative rather than positive—this only increased the need for the NGOs to try to create an alternative model of cooperation with states. Moncorge phrased the question well. "Is it possible," he asked, "to establish a link between a humanitarian diagnosis, disconnected from all political interest, and a political diagnosis, dis-

connected from *realpolitik?*" His answer, like that of a John Fawcett, a Fred Cuny, or a Bernard Kouchner, was clearly yes. But it was not obvious why it should have been.

Everyone agreed that the old modalities had failed. If UNHCR had, in the minds even of many of its best people, been forced to act in ways that were not only at variance with its fundamental mandate but were morally questionable, the other traditional responses had failed as well. In particular, the conduct of the ICRC in the early days of the Bosnian war reminded many unpleasantly of its behavior during the Nazi period. The ICRC had known about the Serb concentration camps in northern Bosnia, but had said nothing. Ed Vulliamy, the British reporter who finally uncovered the horrific truth of these camps in the summer of 1992, later reported that, rather than go public, ICRC officials had a "shockingly defensive state of mind." He went on: "There was blanket refusal to apportion responsibility or blame for these camps." And Jose María Mendiluce had much the same impression. When he raised the issue of the camps, he recalled, the ICRC "were very clearly telling me: 'Don't mess around with this. It's our area of responsibility.'"

Cornelio Sommaruga, the head of the ICRC, might say that every moment the organization spent today on "our humanitarian responsibilities to assist victims of war and political violence" reminded him of "our institution's moral failure with regard to the Holocaust, since it did not succeed in moving beyond the limited legal framework established by states." But many in the organization continued to insist that, in the words of an ICRC spokesman, Kim Gordon-Bates, there were fears "the work we were doing, probably quite well, with respect to the POWs would have been jeopardized by being too outspoken about the Nazis, with dire consequences for those we were helping, without helping those we were not helping."

But although the ICRC might have claimed to have turned over a new moral leaf, in Bosnia the arguments it used for not going public with what it knew about the Serb concentration camps were remarkably similar to those it had used until well into the 1990s to justify its conduct during the Holocaust. "In Banja Luka," an ICRC official told Ed Vulliamy, "we had to decide: do we want to continue to work with the inmates of the camps, or do we take a stand which will cost us our presence in Banja Luka?" The fact that prisoners continued to be tortured and killed while ICRC officials flattered themselves about their heroic efforts to secure visiting rights seems to have troubled these officials not a whit. To be sure, Sommaruga would make a rather nondescript speech a few months later denouncing "ethnic cleansing." (The ICRC hailed the speech as pathbreaking, which it was, but only in internal institutional terms.) But on the ground, his delegates acted as they had always acted, with ironclad discretion.

Trapped between a state-imposed misuse of humanitarianism and the ICRC's unacceptably rigid notions of neutrality, the most creative, diligent, and morally responsible relief workers began to dream of a humanitarianism that would become a force for change, a species of democratic activism. These aid workers thought they saw the way out of the humanitarian dilemma in the language of rights, above all the language of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which they interpreted as guaranteeing them access to the victims of war, and guaranteeing the victims access to relief. To the Western powers' politics of substituting relief for rescue, the humanitarian international proposed a politics of human dignity that would force states to live up to their obligations under human rights law and the laws of war. Given what had taken place in Bosnia, such a response was understandable. It was more than understandable; it was, to use a most unfashionable word, noble. But it was not coherent, and, as events would prove, it was probably not wise.

This was a humanitarianism that thought it could change the

world, or at least, by insisting on the rights of the victims, turn the world toward thinking about crises in the same way that it did—not simply in terms of altruism, or philanthropy, but in terms of a human solidarity grounded in binding legal norms. But there was no reason to believe, just because certain international legal documents and conventions existed (no matter how binding on states they were in theory), that the world had changed. No reason except that mixture of hope and despair that had always animated the best humanitarian relief workers. In fact, international law was no better respected at the end of the Bosnian war than it was at the beginning. And no amount of ad hoc war crimes tribunals, or integration of human rights concerns into the daily practice of relief workers, could change that fact. Indeed, as Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier, MSF's resident expert on international humanitarian law, would point out, compliance with the law plummeted in the 1990s, even while Western governments and the NGOs themselves paid lip service to its authority as never before at the UN.

Some thoughtful UN humanitarian officials agreed. For example, Sergio Vieira de Mello, who spent most of his career as a UNHCR official before going on to run the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and then becoming the UN's proconsul in East Timor, put it starkly. "Recent history may suggest that evil is prevailing," he said in a speech. "The body of international law is under severe challenge, particularly in the humanitarian sphere. It is, in fact, being systematically flouted and disregarded . . . deliberately violated. Does this mean a breakdown of these norms? I don't think so. What it means is a breakdown of respect for those norms."

Despite the gap he correctly identified between norms and realities, de Mello remained enough the career UN official to insist that this "behavioral breakdown," as he called it, could be addressed successfully. Unlike Bouchet-Saulnier, who, despite her lifelong commitment to human rights, was brave enough to recognize the gap between admirable norms and vile facts, de Mello was too much the conformist international civil servant, pledged to optimism no matter what the intellectual cost, to entertain profoundly the possibility that things were getting worse, not better.

For humanitarians in the field, however, the distortions produced by the Bosnian experience, above all the increasing dominance of the notion that since aid inevitably had political consequences, relief workers always needed consciously to adopt a political approach, even if this meant violating the principle of neutrality and taking sides, were very much the product of the Bosnian—i.e., the European—experience of relief work. Of course, what they meant by this was far more than the obvious and unarguable point that all actions in the public sphere are in some sense political. Relief workers were talking about policy. As John Fawcett had rightly said, in the Balkans aid was systematically used for political ends.

Moreover, in Bosnia most, though by no means all aid workers believed that in the Milosevic regime and its Bosnian Serb creations the world was facing a new fascist threat. Bosnia had something of the same moral significance that the Spanish Civil War had had sixty years earlier. It was this conviction, along with the belief that humanitarian emergencies paradoxically offered opportunities to change societies for the better—an idea Fred Cuny spent his entire professional life trying to demonstrate—that had inspired George Soros to make a fifty-million-dollar grant to the humanitarian effort in Bosnia and hire Cuny to administer his programs. Soros always adamantly insisted that he was not a humanitarian, and had no interest in relief for relief's sake. But if humanitarian aid was the best mechanism to support an "open society" in Bosnia against the Serb fascists who wanted to destroy it, he would drape his democratic activism in the flag of convenience of humanitarianism.

Soros and Cuny were not alone in believing that humanitarian action could be honorably "borrowed" for such purposes. The rightness and urgency of the Bosnian cause alone seemed to justify such a conviction. But leaving aside the issue of the rightness of the Bosnian cause—and despite the disappointments of postwar Bosnia, I still believe that people like Soros, and Cuny, were right that the Bosnian government had justice as well as victimhood on its side—what many of us failed to see was how singular and nontransferable the Bosnian model was. The reality is that most conflicts in which humanitarian relief workers are needed do not have a clear-cut right side and wrong side. Indeed, the UN peacekeepers' routine insistence that all sides were villains in the Balkans, while false in the instance, was right about any number of other conflicts in the world, from Tajikistan to Burundi.

In particular, things looked that way in Africa, where often there was no "right" side. Moreover, by the standards of an Angola or a Liberia, the humanitarian needs that had existed in Bosnia, grave as they were, seemed comparatively minor. To say this is not to try to establish some idiotic and morally repellant hierarchy of want. Rather, it is to underscore that it was in sub-Saharan Africa that the most terrible and intractable humanitarian crises were taking place. Was the impartiality that had been so inappropriate in Bosnia really so wrong in the African context? Most relief workers who had served in Africa but had not served in the Balkans did not think so. Nor did the ICRC's approach seem nearly so open to reproach as it had in southeastern Europe in the early 1990s. Even events in Rwanda, which came closest to the "Bosnian" norm, would demonstrate how different the humanitarian imperative looked in the Great Lakes region of Africa from the way it did in the Balkans.

There is a sense in which the lessons drawn by relief workers from the Bosnian experience were the right lessons for Balkan wars

but the wrong lessons for humanitarianism. As Françoise Bouchet-Saulnier put it, "The particular became general. Humanitarianism legitimized the containment of refugees who themselves became human shields either around or at the heart of conflicts."

What the Bosnian catastrophe seemed to have demonstrated was that the possibility of a kind of humanitarian action that could remain apart from politics and reasons of state was a pipe dream. Even Médecins Sans Frontières, which unlike almost every other mainline NGO continued to remain steadfastly loyal to this conception of humanitarianism, was haunted by its own complicity in the illusion of safety that the presence of UN peacekeepers *and* relief workers had created in the minds of the people of Srebrenica. "The continued presence of MSF in the midst of [the population of] the enclave contributed to maintaining the illusion of international protection in the zone." To a considerable extent, MSF's own subsequent engagement in making sure the full truth about Srebrenica was revealed, especially the French government's complicity in the disaster, and above all its secret dealings with Bosnian Serb forces, was an act of contrition for its inadvertent collusion in the lie that was the humanitarian effort in the Bosnian war.

And even MSF did not come out against humanitarian intervention that protected civilians against aggressors. "Our demand," it said in its statement calling for a French government commission of inquiry into Srebrenica, "is not an anti-militarist crusade. On the contrary, we hope the commission draws the [right] lessons so as to avoid in the future deploying soldiers who would be tied hand and foot as they confront criminal policies against a [civilian] population."

Other agencies went further. Bosnia had been a failure, but henceforth humanitarianism would be one element of the response to such outrages by an "international community" sobered by its failures and alive to its responsibilities. That community did not yet

exist, but it was in the process of being born. "If humanitarianism knows that it is political," Bernard Kouchner wrote in 1995, just as the Bosnian war was drawing to a close, "and if it can succeed in constructing a new humanism," humanitarian action would be an integral part of that better world.

Was it realistic hope? Even in the Bosnian context, it presupposed political clarity, the commitment of donors, the engagement of the Western public, and the possibility of rescue. In those practically utopian conditions, the kind of politicized intervention a Fred Cuny or a Bernard Kouchner favored was at least possible, although eight years later Kosovo would demonstrate just how problematic the construct was. But *none* of these conditions prevailed in Africa. The public tended to be indifferent; the donors tended to be unwilling to spend the sums needed on alleviation, let alone intervention; and the aid workers and UN officials usually were correct in believing that between guerrillas and governments there was little if anything to choose.

In such a context, the sacrifice of humanitarian neutrality, even if it came wrapped in an appeal to international humanitarian law and a commitment to upholding human rights, was likely to be dangerous if not actually fatal to the humanitarian enterprise. For if Africa could not hope from the world what Bosnia or Kosovo could expect—attention, money, even the willingness to establish international protectorates—had the humanitarianism that had turned its back on neutrality taken a necessary step forward or, instead, seized upon what the French so aptly call a "false good idea"? A humanitarianism that would right wrongs rather than alleviate them. It sounded marvelous. But it sounded marvelous because it was only a dream.