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Why the United Nations Cannot Stop Genocide

Cooper Scherr

Upon the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the United Nations was founded as an organization dedicated to preserving the postwar peace throughout the world. Ironically, the UN's conception marked the beginning of a chaotic postwar era marked largely by brutal violence and conflict in nearly every corner of the globe. During this new era of violence, two genocides occurred in the 1990s that truly demonstrated the UN's inability as a global organization to keep the peace. First, following Slobodan Milosevic's rise to power in Serbia and the splintering of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, ethnic tensions led to genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. From 1992 to 1995, Bosnian Serbs—with the support of Milosevic's government—used genocidal tactics against Bosniak Muslims in their efforts to carve out territory for ethnic Serbs. Meanwhile, in 1994, Hutu extremists in Rwanda mobilized a quick, popularized campaign of genocide against the Tutsi minority, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Rwandans. The bloodshed in both Bosnia and Rwanda occurred in the presence of UN peacekeeping forces who—despite their mission to prevent the violation of human rights—proved very incapable of stopping the killings.

In the aftermath of Bosnia and Rwanda, it was clear that the United Nations, as a slow, reactionary bureaucracy, failed to effectively combat the genocides. The UN's approach to the genocides was ineffective because of its aversion to military confrontation and an overall lack of organizational will to fully intervene. This lack of will stemmed from the reluctance of UN member nations to contribute to peacekeeping operations, and thus, the UN could not exert any influence throughout the world while possessing such little influence over its own members. Therefore, the UN served as a scapegoat as human rights violations went unpunished, when in reality, as a cumbersome bureaucracy with

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little support from its sovereign member states, it was in no position to be defending the world from such evil.

The futility of the United Nations' responses to the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides stemmed from errors in policy and action. As the violence in Yugoslavia escalated in the early 1990s, the United Nations implemented policies that it hoped would limit the spread of the conflict. First, in September 1991, the UN passed Resolution 713, which placed an arms embargo on Yugoslavian territories.¹ Then, in 1992, the UN stationed a peacekeeping force, UNPROFOR (United Nations Protection Force), in Bosnia so as to protect the civilian population from becoming casualties of the war. Finally, the UN continued to pursue a "negotiation process aimed at convincing the 'warring parties' to settle their differences."² These policies all failed to achieve the UN's goal of establishing peace in the region, and if anything, allowed the Serbs to continue their campaign of genocide. For instance, the arms embargo "froze in place a gross imbalance in [Bosniak] and Serb military capacity" and left the Bosniaks "largely defenseless."³ Thus, the blockade was "naïve and destructive... provid[ing] a major advantage to Serbian aggressors" and "play[ing] a key role in undermining the Bosnian state."⁴ Meanwhile, the UN desperately sought to appear impartial in the conflict by giving UNPROFOR a strict mandate to provide "only military assistance for humanitarian missions."⁵ This mandate placed "UNPROFOR in the impossible position of [being] a formally neutral force 'protecting' ... [the Bosniaks]," and clearly demonstrated the UN's

¹ James Mayall, *The New Interventionism 1991-1994: United Nations Experience in Cambodia, Former Yugoslavia and Somalia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66.

² Samantha Power, *A Problem from Hell* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 259-260.

³ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴ T. David Curp, "Human Rights and Wrongs in Failed States: Bosnia-Herzegovina, the International Community, and the Challenges of Long-term Instability in Southeastern Europe," in *Failed States and Fragile Societies: A New World Disorder?* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2014), 31.

⁵ Mayall, *The New Interventionism*, 75, 72.

reluctance to forcefully stop Serb aggression.⁶ UN squeamishness played right into the Serbs' hands, causing "the 'peace process' [to become] a handy stalling device" for the Serbs, and allowing them to appear cooperative while continuing the genocide in Bosnia.^{7,8}

United Nations policymaking for the situation in Rwanda was similarly misguided. After the Rwandan Civil War, a UN peacekeeping force—United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR)—was deployed to prevent the country from slipping back into war. UNAMIR's rules of engagement "allowed [the peacekeepers] to intervene and use... deadly force to prevent crimes against humanity," but upon President Habyarimana's sudden death and the resulting Hutu power grab, the UN seemed to forget about UNAMIR's stated rules of engagement.⁹ According to UNAMIR commander Romeo Dallaire, in a call to the UN offices in New York, his superiors informed him "that UNAMIR was not to fire unless fired upon—[they] were to negotiate and, above all else, avoid conflict."¹⁰ This hasty retreat at the first sign of conflict mirrored the UN response in Bosnia, and was due in large part to the fact that few UN policymakers "even possessed firsthand experience of Rwanda."¹¹ "There was no room for a detailed understanding of the [situation in Rwanda] on the two-page briefing papers given to high-ranking officials" and thus, Dallaire's repeated requests for more troops and permission to intervene were denied.¹² Unlike Dallaire, UN officials in New York could not see how "5,000 troops could have saved 500,000 lives," and therefore held UNAMIR to a strict policy of non-confrontation, which

⁶ Diana Johnstone, *Fools' Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 113.

⁷ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 260.

⁸ James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 138.

⁹ Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2003), 229.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

¹¹ Michael N. Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide: The United Nations and Rwanda* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 58.

¹² *Ibid.*, 59.

effectively served as a death sentence for hundreds of thousands of Rwandans.¹³ Thus, misguided UN policies in both Bosnia and Rwanda allowed for the proliferation of genocide.

The United Nations' grave policy errors were made even more evident through the actions—or lack thereof—of UN forces on the ground. Due to the UN's preference to avoid military confrontations at all costs, the few steps UNPROFOR and UNAMIR took were “always of limited value and reactive.”¹⁴ For example, one UNPROFOR mission was to establish a no-fly zone in Bosnia, so as to limit the Serbs' crushing military advantage over the Bosniaks—an advantage enhanced, ironically, by the UN-imposed arms embargo. However, continuous Serb violations of the no-fly zone demonstrated UNPROFOR's inability to carry out its own mission, prompting NATO to step in to enforce the directive; upon NATO's intervention, Serb airpower was neutralized and the tide of the war changed.¹⁵ UNPROFOR commanders in Bosnia would also at times call for air support, “but whereas action could only be effective if taken within minutes, clearance... took 6 hours.”¹⁶ Likewise, during the siege of Sarajevo, Serb forces prevented UNPROFOR from securing the city's airport as a means of delivering humanitarian aid to the city's inhabitants. Meanwhile, French president Francois Mitterand highlighted UNPROFOR's inadequacy by paying an unexpected visit to war-torn Sarajevo that sent a bold political statement to the Serbs and prompted them to relinquish control of the airport soon after.¹⁷ UNPROFOR's biggest failure in Bosnia, however, was allowing Serb forces commanded by General Ratko Mladic to capture the designated safe area of Srebrenica and proceed to murder thousands of Bosniak men and rape Bosniak women and

¹³ Kurt Mills, *International Responses to Mass Atrocities in Africa: Responsibility to Protect, Prosecute, and Palliate* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 57.

¹⁴ Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will*, 91.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

girls. According to Hasan Nuhanovic, a survivor of Srebrenica, upon Serb occupation of the city, “the Dutch [peacekeepers] just stood there” while the “Serb soldiers... push[ed] the men and boys away from their sisters, wives, [and] children.”¹⁸ In fact, the Dutch were so keen on avoiding conflict that they decided “to actually throw [the Bosniaks] out” of their base in Srebrenica.¹⁹ “[The UN peacekeepers] were supposed to protect [the Bosniaks] from the Serbs,” but instead, they pushed “about 20,000 people... outside the base,” abandoning them to the Serbian soldiers.²⁰ Over the next few days, the peacekeepers ignored the signs of the atrocities that were taking place in their vicinity: gunshots coming from fields where the Serbs were keeping Bosniak men; countless Bosniak bodies; reports of the widespread raping of Bosniak women. Despite these signs, UNPROFOR did nothing to stop the Serbs. The failures of UNPROFOR in Bosnia demonstrated the UN’s naïveté in avoiding combat, for “Serbian leadership [would] not respond to reason, but only to coercion.”²¹

In Rwanda, meaningful action from Romeo Dallaire and his UNAMIR peacekeeping force was also lacking. UNAMIR was a ragtag force of around 2,500 peacekeepers—most of whom lacked proper equipment—that hardly resembled a capable military unit. Unsurprisingly, UNAMIR received a constricting mandate that hampered the force’s ability to operate in Rwanda both prior to and during the genocide. For example, Dallaire and his forces could do little but watch as a string of political assassinations occurred in early 1994 and the *Interahamwe* militia units began to increase their activity. When Dallaire finally obtained permission to conduct weapons searches in the region, “the restrictive terms of UNAMIR’s mandate, including that any such operations be done in cooperation with the police,” meant that “few weapons were

¹⁸ Hasan Nuhanovic, “Srebrenica: A Survivor’s Story,” interview by Joe Rubin, *PBS Frontline*, March 28, 2006.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will*, 93.

found.”²² Once the genocide in Rwanda commenced, UNAMIR’s inefficacy became even further pronounced. The day after President Habyarimana’s death, Hutu militiamen stormed the compound of Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana—which was under the protection of Belgian and Ghanaian peacekeepers—assassinated the prime minister, and then proceeded to kill and mutilate the bodies of ten Belgian peacekeepers assigned to protect Uwilingiyimana. The peacekeepers had not fired a single shot. Just as the Hutus had planned, the shocking murder of the European peacekeepers prompted a Belgian “cry for either expanding UNAMIR’s mandate or immediately pulling out” of Rwanda.²³ In the eyes of the world, the current UNAMIR peacekeeping force was incapable of effectively controlling what was becoming a bloody hell in Rwanda. Member nations did not have the stomach for further UN casualties and thus, most UNAMIR forces withdrew from Rwanda, while the remaining peacekeepers were still instructed to avoid military confrontation. On their way to the Kigali airport, the withdrawing Belgian troops refused to protect thousands of Rwandans desperately pleading for help—a fitting portrait of the role the UN ultimately played in Rwanda.²⁴ Thus, the many failures of UNPROFOR and UNAMIR in action reflected the overarching flaws in UN policy.

The passive, ineffective nature of the peacekeeping missions in Bosnia and Rwanda sprung from the fact that UN interventions lacked the full support of UN member nations. The United Nations is an organized political body of separate, sovereign states. It draws its power and influence from these member nations, yet possesses no concrete power over them. Thus, UN action is dictated by the will of its members, none of whom were particularly eager to commit resources or troops to potential interventions in Bosnia and Rwanda. According to UNAMIR commander Romeo Dallaire, “UN force commanders... depended

²² Mills, *International Responses*, 62.

²³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 332.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 353.

on the generosity of donor nations for both troops and equipment.”²⁵ With most nations “peacekeepinged out,” it was no surprise that UNAMIR looked like a ragtag force compared to the “clean-shaven, well fed, and heavily armed” European commandoes who oversaw the hasty evacuation of expatriates from Rwanda.²⁶ The nation most fatigued by UN peacekeeping was the United States. After decades of foreign wars and many ill-fated interventions—Vietnam, Lebanon, and the most recent, Somalia—the United States was weary of its Cold War role as international policeman. In addition to their own foreign endeavors, the Americans had also contributed heavily to UN actions, and by 1994, “Congress owed half a billion dollars in UN dues and peacekeeping costs.”²⁷ Thus, the United States “had tired of its obligation to foot one-third of the bill for... an insatiable global appetite for mischief and an equally insatiable UN appetite for missions.”²⁸ It was time to share the burden of global policing with European nations and other UN members. However, the United States’ role as Cold War superpower and its history of interventions in the latter half of the 20th century had established the Americans as the face of the West. Passing the baton to Europe would not be so easy. Thus, the United States’ unwillingness to act in Bosnia and Rwanda played a key role in deterring UN action.

Initially, Bosnia represented Europe’s chance to prove it could function outside the Americans’ shadow. At the outset of the war in Bosnia, the leading members of the UN—the United States, Russia, France, China, and the United Kingdom— “were... not inclined to support firm UN action in the Balkans”—in most cases of UN intervention, “firm action” meant U.S. involvement.²⁹ Instead, “their view was that the Europeans should take the lead.”³⁰

²⁵ Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, 84.

²⁶ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 353.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 341.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ Mayall, *The New Interventionism*, 65.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Indeed, the Europeans “[had] a more sophisticated historical knowledge of the region” than the Americans, and there existed fears that, should the U.S. jump in, it would “pursue ahistorical policies that would not achieve the desired result” in Bosnia.³¹ However, as the situation in Bosnia deteriorated, it became clear that the relatively new European Council was unable to stabilize the situation. Thus, all eyes turned to the United States to help prevent a “possible spillover effect on other countries in the region.”³² “The Europeans were waiting for American leadership... but [would not] get it for three years.”³³ Haunted by its past interventions, the United States looked to avoid engaging in the conflict at all costs, and “the one-word bogey ‘Vietnam’ became the ubiquitous shorthand for all that could go wrong in the Balkans.”³⁴ Despite the fact that “authentic intelligence analysis in the earliest days of the war corroborated the existence of [the Serbs’] genocidal plan,” the U.S. did not want to end up sending “thousands of body bags... [to] a new Vietnam.”³⁵ Thus, the Americans did not contribute any troops to UNPROFOR. The lack of American troops in UNPROFOR indicated that the force was more of an obligatory UN response to Serb atrocities rather than a staunch UN commitment to stopping the genocide.

In regard to the crisis in Rwanda, more recent history served to deter U.S. action and craft the tepid UN response. Less than a year prior to the Rwandan genocide, U.S. casualties in Somalia at the Battle of Mogadishu had horrified the American public and severely affected the United States’ will to intervene in similarly unstable areas. Therefore, “when the reports of the deaths of the ten Belgians came in, it was clear [to the Americans] that it was Somalia redux,” and the United States did not want to get roped in

³¹ James B. Steinberg, “History, Policymaking, and the Balkans,” in *The Power of the Past: History and Statecraft* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2016), 239.

³² *Ibid.*, 242.

³³ Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 325.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 284.

³⁵ Edina Becirevic, “Genocide in Eastern Bosnia,” in *Genocide on the Drina River* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 85; Power, *A Problem from Hell*, 284.

to another Somalia.³⁶ The Belgians wanted out of Rwanda too, and upon the withdrawal of the Belgian element of UNAMIR, Dallaire was left with the scraps of his already minimal force. In the hopes of avoiding a situation where the U.S. military would have to come to UNAMIR's aid, the United States advocated the complete removal of UNAMIR from the chaotic situation in Rwanda.³⁷ Therefore, rather than convincing the UN to send reinforcements, Dallaire's chief problem became convincing the UN to allow UNAMIR to stay. The Belgians' and Americans' responses to the situation in Rwanda were evidence of the fact that "for most countries, serving the UN's objectives has never seemed worth even the smallest of risks."³⁸ Therefore, "it was undoubtedly difficult for most states to imagine sending their troops into a demonic space where killings were accumulating in record numbers."³⁹ Thus, the U.S. refusal to intervene in Rwanda did not cause the failure of the UN mission. Rather, it demonstrated just how unpopular UN peacekeeping missions were among member nations, and how reliant the UN had become on U.S. support for these missions.

When the dust settled following the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, it was clear that the United Nations' peacekeeping missions in both countries had resulted in failure. The noble UN commitments to peace and neutrality had rendered UNPROFOR and UNAMIR bystanders to genocide, despite their stated intent to bring stability and protection to the war-torn nations. Thus, the UN was the wrong organization/entity to lead the world in its efforts to curtail the violence in Bosnia and Rwanda. Having been founded in the aftermath of World War II, under the understanding that war was "the scourge of mankind, the worst of all 'humanitarian catastrophes,'" the United Nations could be considered the

³⁶ Ibid., 366.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Dallaire, *Shake Hands with the Devil*, 89.

³⁹ Barnett, *Eyewitness to a Genocide*, 131.

antithesis of a martial organization.⁴⁰ Indeed, this was reflected in the naming of the peacekeepers. As the UN would have the world believe, the peacekeepers were not soldiers, but rather trained military professionals dedicated to protecting humanity from its greatest evil. Sadly, the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides demonstrated that, at times, prevention of humanity's greatest evil requires fighting fire with fire. Instead, the UN and its representatives—such as Brigadier General Henry Kwami Anyidoho, commander of the Ghanaian peacekeepers in Rwanda—remained committed to the idea that “negotiation [was] an effective mechanism for resolving conflicts,” something true of conventional conflicts between nations, not genocide.⁴¹ It also held that “neutrality in a conflict situation [was] a must for the peacekeeping forces,” failing to recognize that war rarely—if ever—leaves room for neutrality, especially for an intervening military force.⁴² Thus, the UN ethos of peace and neutrality spelled disaster for its military endeavors.

Years after the conclusion of the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides, the United Nations owned up to its shortcomings. In a self-critical UN report released in 1999, Secretary General Kofi Annan detailed the UN's grave policy errors and lessons learned with regards to the fall of Srebrenica, which served as a snapshot for UN efforts in Bosnia and Rwanda as a whole. The report admitted to a “philosophy of neutrality and nonviolence wholly unsuited to the conflict in Bosnia” and “criticize[d] those who negotiated with [Milosevic and Mladic] rather than using military force in the war's early stages.”⁴³ The UN therefore “[made] clear the inadequacy of [its] entire approach” and “the inadequacy of a system that allowed political considerations to color [UN] military

⁴⁰ Johnstone, *Fools' Crusade*, 3.

⁴¹ Henry Kwami Anyidoho, *Guns Over Kigali* (Woeli Publishing Services: Accra, 1997), 124.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Barbara Crossette, “U.N. Details Its Failure to Stop '95 Bosnia Massacre,” *New York Times*, Nov. 16, 1999.

decisions.”⁴⁴ Moving forward, the United Nations committed itself to avoiding the mistakes of Bosnia and Rwanda by recognizing “that a deliberate and systematic attempt to terrorize, expel, or murder an entire people must be met decisively with all necessary means.”⁴⁵

The UN report thus criticized strict adherence to policies of peace and neutrality, but in order to preclude another Bosnia or another Rwanda, the United Nations needed to make further changes to its peacekeeping approach. First off, the United Nations needed to garner full support for peacekeeping missions from its member nations. As Brigadier General Anyidoho observed, “it is upon strong logistics support that any mission will succeed,” and this held especially true in Rwanda, where “UNAMIR was exposed to extreme danger through a fragile logistics support.”⁴⁶ Therefore, in order to improve the chances of success for future peacekeeping missions, UN member nations had to contribute more troops and money to the cause. In addition to material support, the peacekeeping missions required a higher level of commitment from contributors. Peacekeeping was not intended to become a political game where UN members boosted their political prestige by betting on easy, low-risk missions and then bailed at the first sign of hardship or danger. Rather, successful peacekeeping required that “the military... maintain morale in the face of extreme danger” and “have a strong will to... attain the command mission despite the associated danger and difficulties.”⁴⁷ Peacekeeping missions had made a joke of the United Nations in the 1990s; only by bolstering the strength and commitment of future forces could the UN improve its international reputation. In conjunction with the organization’s stated commitment to increased use of force, UN commanders required more decision-making power in the field. In Bosnia, UNPROFOR’s adherence to

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Anyidoho, *Guns Over Kigali*, 122.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 124-125.

the strict UN mandate had allowed the Serbs to continue waging a campaign of genocide against the Bosniaks. In Rwanda, Romeo Dallaire and UNAMIR had struggled to obtain permission to intervene, only to be shut down by UN authorities outside of Rwanda. Thus, many echoed the call of Brigadier General Anyidoho “for a review of the UN system where a civilian controls... the military during peacekeeping.”⁴⁸ Key decisions during the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides had been made by UN authorities away from the battlefield, with little jurisdiction given to leaders on the ground. Thus, in order for peacekeepers to operate effectively in a theater of war and violence, UN military commanders—such as Dallaire—had to be given full “access to the assets [they] require[d] to accomplish [their] mission,” including increased autonomy in the field.⁴⁹ Finally, the United Nations needed to stop relying on the U.S. to “[contribute] the lion’s share” to peacekeeping efforts.⁵⁰ Given the huge U.S. contributions to peacekeeping and foreign interventions, the United Nations seemed to have morphed into the United States & Friends, and, as Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright stated in 1999, the weary U.S. “need[ed] the... leadership and help of [its] allies in Europe and... friends around the world.”⁵¹

Since its shortcomings in Bosnia and Rwanda, the United Nations has continued its peacekeeping efforts throughout the globe and tried to learn from its mistakes in the 1990s. The Bosnian and Rwandan genocides demonstrated major flaws in the United Nations’ approach to peacekeeping, as UN policies of neutrality that were designed to keep the peace instead led to UN inaction in the face of genocide. The inadequate UN responses in Bosnia and Rwanda underscored UN members’ lack of will to fully commit to peacekeeping and caused the UN to appear timid

⁴⁸ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Madeleine K. Albright, *Focus on the Issues: Europe* (Bureau of Public Affairs: Washington, D.C., 1999), 65.

⁵¹ Albright, *Focus on the Issues*, 61.

in the face of evil. While the United Nations cautiously avoided war—the scourge of mankind—at all costs, it allowed some of the greatest crimes against humanity to occur on its watch. The United Nations has yet to encounter another peacekeeping challenge like the Bosnian and Rwandan genocides, but one can only hope that the lessons the UN learned in the 1990s will help prevent genocide in the future.