

# Good of others

DAVID ARMITAGE

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< P>Gary J. Bass *FREEDOM'S BATTLE* The origins of humanitarian intervention 509pp. Knopf. \$35. 978 0 307 26648 4

The nineteenth century has had a reputation among historians of human rights akin to that of the Bermuda Triangle among Atlantic mariners. By many accounts, the great ship *Rights of Man*, fitted out by Jefferson and Lafayette to plans laid down by Locke, Paine and Rousseau, vanished not long after its maiden voyage during the Age of Revolutions. Suspects in its disappearance were legion: variously Bentham, Marx, Mazzini and Gobineau. Their legacies of utilitarianism, socialism, nationalism and racism allegedly formed the ideological Sargasso which swallowed the mighty vessel for well over a century. Only the shock of the Second World War could dislodge it, as it reappeared, majestically but mysteriously, sixty years ago as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This “long gap in the history of human rights, from their initial formulation in the American and French Revolutions to the United Nations’ Universal Declaration in 1948”, Lynn Hunt argued recently in her *Inventing Human Rights* (2007), “has to give anyone pause”.

Yet where some have seen mystery, others have found a more tangled history. Talk of rights might have been muted for much of the long nineteenth century, but the defence of “humanity” was widespread. One historian has called the anti-slavery tribunals Britain created in concert with other powers between 1817 and 1871 “the first international human rights courts”. In similar vein, another has described support for Jewish relief in Ottoman lands after the Crimean War as “an imperialism of human rights”. And, most ambi-tiouof all, in *Freedom’s Battle: The origins of humanitarian intervention*, Gary J. Bass hears strains “rich in what we today would recognize clearly as human rights rhetoric”, from late eighteenth-century abolitionism to the protests against Belgian atrocities in the Congo, by way of philhellenism, panSlavism and support for minority rights in the Ottoman Empire. It seems that human rights had not disappeared after all; historians had just been looking for them in the wrong places and under the wrong names.

Bass finds defenders of human rights in some unlikely settings: the foreign ministries of Britain and France; the embassies of the Great Powers; and among the commanders of Europe’s navies, for example. These were the men - his main cast of characters includes no women - who urged and executed action on behalf of beleaguered minorities between the 1820s and the 1870s. In their faraway “world of gaslight and empire”, Bass discerns a “basic belief in human nature” which trumped national interest and overrode state sovereignty. Byron died for it at Missolonghi. Canning and Napoleon III defended it in Lebanon. And Gladstone became almost deranged defending it against “Bulgarian horrors” in the Balkans. Bass hopes such “rare lights along an otherwise dark road” might illuminate contemporary dilemmas surrounding state action on behalf of suffering humanity.

*Freedom’s Battle* is an impressively researched and engagingly written history of early humanitarian intervention. Bass acknowledges it is “a book about the nineteenth century, as an imperfect way to understand our own current predicament”, but he is too scrupulous to omit hard cases or anomalous examples even if he sometimes plays down their significance in his story. He pursues three main contentions: that humanitarian interventions “are not just a newfangled exper-iment from the 1990s”, as putatively realist opponents of them

like Henry Kissinger have claimed; that there is a link between freedom, especially a free press, at home and promoting freedom abroad; and that the ways in which nineteenth-century politicians managed intervention can still inform twenty-first-century policymaking, especially in the United States: “we are all atrocitarians now”.

The term “humanitarian intervention” was a coinage of the late nineteenth century, but its earliest uses cross-cut humanitarianism with hierarchically ordered conceptions of civilization. As John Stuart Mill put it in 1859, the “sacred duties which civilized nations owe to the independence and nationality of each other are not binding towards those whose nationality and independence are either a certain evil, or at best a questionable good”. There is clearly a gulf between such a conception and contemporary norms, if not always with current practice. For an operation to qualify as a humanitarian intervention in the twenty-first century, at least four criteria must be met. To be “humanitarian”, the mission should aim to halt or forestall what is generally agreed to be extreme suffering. Unlike a medical emergency or famine relief, that intervention should be directed against deliberate violations of its victims’ human rights. And to be an “intervention”, it must involve the deployment of military forces across national borders without the permission of the local sovereign authority. It should also be led by a state or group of states, rather than an NGO, to help people other than their own citizens. Various interventions over the past century or so would qualify on most of these grounds: for example, the US in Cuba in 1898, India in East Pakistan (1971), Vietnam in Cambodia (1978), Tanzania in Uganda (1979) or NATO in Kosovo (1999). However, none could be called unreservedly humanitarian. Indeed, the most stringent accountants of intervention, like Michael Walzer, have counted no such examples, but “only mixed cases where the humanitarian motive is one among several”.

Bass’s three central case studies - the Greek independence movement of the 1820s, French intervention in Syria in the 1860s, and the response to massacres in the Balkans in the 1870s - were likewise mixed. Outside support for Greek independence rose in response to the Scio massacre of 1822, when reportedly 20,000-25,000 Greeks died at the hands of Ottoman forces, yet philhellenism remained mostly a private, non-governmental, enterprise. Jeremy Bentham, David Ricardo and other members of the London Greek Committee might have been, as Bass calls them, “distant but unmistakable ancestors of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch”, but they received little political support. Only in 1827 did states intervene when the navies of Britain, Russia and France crushed the Ottoman fleet at Navarino. Bass shows that the formal incursion to end what Britain’s naval commander called “the brutal war of extermination” pursued by the Ottomans’ Egyptian ally, Ibrahim Pasha, was overdue, reluctant and strategically misguided. Nonetheless, he argues that this was “the first modern humanitarian intervention”, with the dashing Byron its poet and proto-martyr.

Most interventions of the mid-nineteenth century were decidedly anti-humanitarian, directed by sovereigns against uprisings within Europe or deployed to extend empire beyond it. Bass’s next example of a professed “mission of humanity” does not come until 1860-61, when Europe’s great powers, led by France, joined the Ottoman Porte in protecting Maronite Christians in Syria, thousands of whom had died in earlier clashes with the Druzes. In what Bass sees as an early example of the “CNN effect”, press reports inflamed British and French public opinion to demand effective action. Yet by the time the multinational force led by Napoleon III’s troops arrived in Lebanon, the massacres were over; the leading diplomatic question soon became the timetable for withdrawal. Nothing became the French in Syria like the leaving of it, though the mission had “suited French imperial interests”, which were expanding at the same moment in China and Vietnam. This intervention was therefore not straightforwardly humanitarian nor, thanks to Ottoman acquiescence, was it even strictly an intervention.

Bass’s last major instance, the European response to revolt, war and massacre in the Balkans in 1875-6, is still more ambiguous. Press reports that 25,000 Bulgarians had died stirred the sympathies of, among others, Tolstoy, Victor Hugo and, above all, Gladstone, whose wildly bestselling *Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* and barnstorming speeches roused mass support for intervention. Yet Russia attacked the Ottoman Empire before Disraeli had to decide whether to send troops. For Britain at least, this was the intervention that never was. That did not trouble Tony Blair in 1999 when, during the Kosovo war, he asked an audience in Sofia,

“Can the outside world simply stand by when a rogue state brutally abuses the basic rights of those it governs? Gladstone’s answer in 1876 was clear. And so is mine today”. As *The Economist* noted at the time, no British troops went to Bulgaria and Gladstone supported ethnic cleansing of Turks (“I hope they clear out from the province they have desolated and profaned”): hardly ideal models for Blair’s own policy in the Balkans, or indeed for the counsels of today’s great powers.

Freedom’s Battle concludes with briefer accounts, drawn mostly from US policy, of more recent interventions and non-interventions such as Cuba, Armenia, the Holocaust and Rwanda. More attention to 1898 as the last nineteenth-century intervention would have given greater balance to Bass’s argument regarding the effect of the press on public policy. In such matters it could be a demagogic, as much as a democratic instrument: recall William Randolph Hearst’s apocryphal order, “You provide the pictures, I’ll provide the war”. The media may be less manipulable now than in 1898, but dodgy dossiers will always be with us. Similarly, more examination of twentieth-century interventions, like those in Cambodia or Uganda, could have shown how today’s customary norms on intervention were forged after the Second World War. Bass goes beyond those norms to recommend treaty-based “spheres of humanitarian concern” around the world together with greater multinational participation in interventions and stricter constraints on their timing, deployment of forces and justification: “The challenge is finding the right middle ground: a mission big and lengthy enough to be effective, but small and swift enough not to be mistaken for imperialism”. As this conclusion shows, Iraq in 2003 is at least as much on his mind as Kosovo in 1999.

Bass stresses the continuities between the nineteenth and twenty-first centuries to persuade his readers in Foggy Bottom and Whitehall that the past can hold operative lessons for the present. However, the discontinuities remain just as striking. It is not clear that Victorian invocations of “humanity” were equivalent to contemporary conceptions of “human rights”, though both have been as easily abused as they have been misunderstood. In at least one crucial respect, state sovereignty became more hard-edged in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth: in this regard, Article 2, section 4, of the United Nations Charter (“All Members shall refrain ... from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state”) remains a major stumbling block on Bass’s path back to the future. The emergent norm of a responsibility to protect (or “R2P”), vested first in states over their own populations, but then in the wider international community in cases of dereliction or incapacity, has also recast the debate on intervention in ways that fit many of Gary Bass’s own prescriptions, but that might constrain them more firmly than he admits. Bad history will always be a poor foundation for sound policy, but good history cannot by itself guarantee good statecraft.