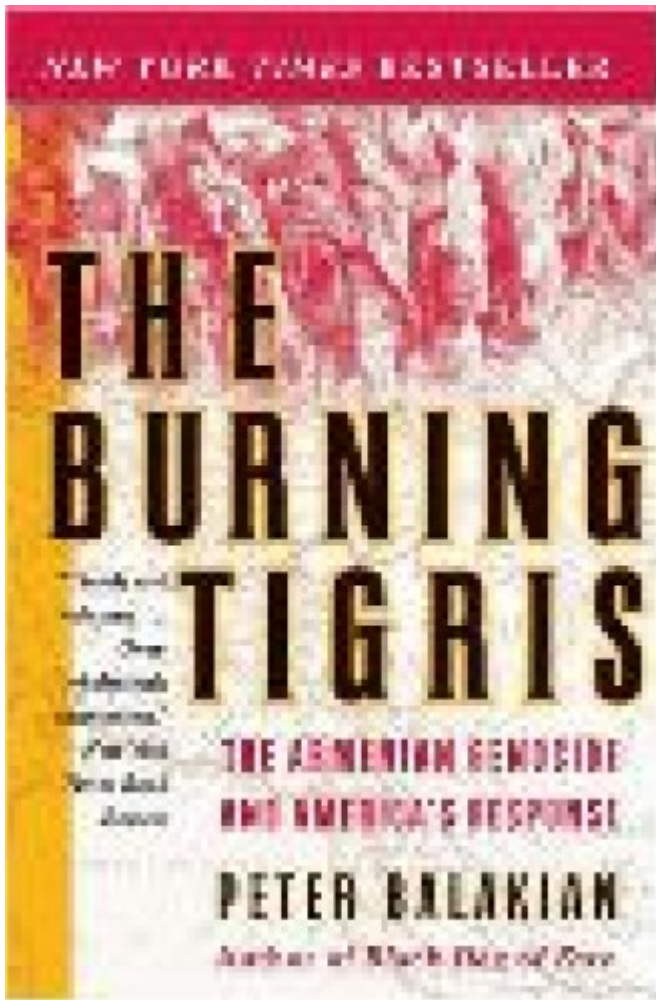


Do-gooder dilemma

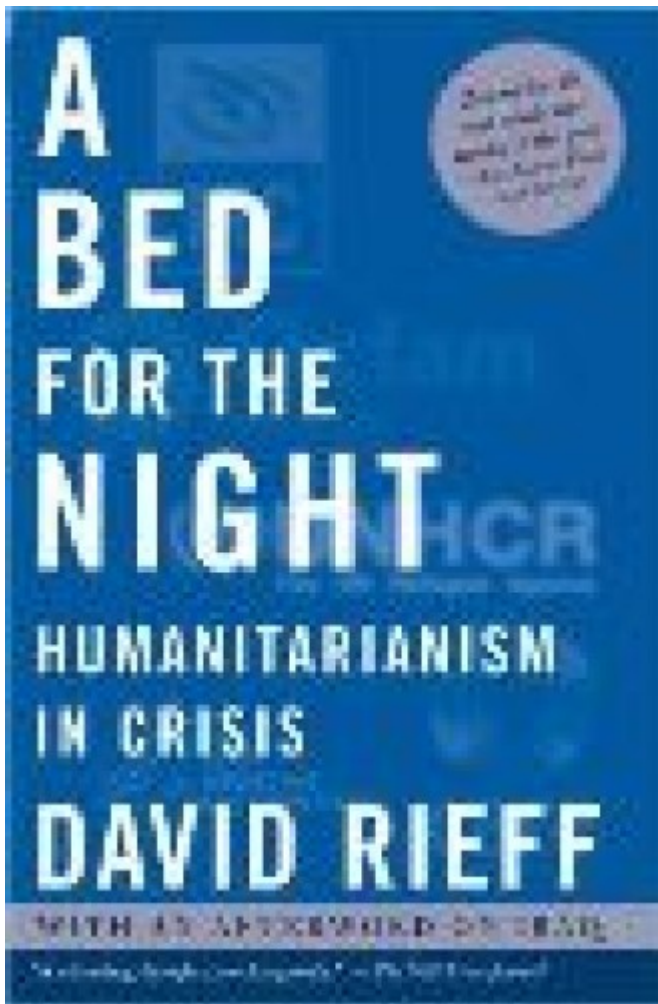
By [Victoria Barnett](#) in the [August 10, 2004](#) issue

In Review



The Burning Tigris: The Armenian Genocide and America's Response

Peter Balakian
HarperCollins



A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis

David Rieff

Simon & Schuster

During the 1890s, almost 200,000 Armenians were murdered on the orders of the sultan of Anatolia, in what is now Turkey. It was the first modern manifestation of a phenomenon that has become all too familiar. The Armenians were the minority Christian culture in the Ottoman Empire, second-class citizens without many of the rights Muslims enjoyed. In the late 19th century they began to mobilize politically. The resulting Armenian reform and protest movement gained strength at a time when the Ottoman Empire was “the sick man of Europe,” disintegrating under a burden of debt and corruption. Afraid that the Armenian movement could become a viable political opposition, Sultan Abdul Hamid II gave the Muslim Kurds—who shared the same territory as the Armenians—the arms to “defend themselves.”

The world was outraged. U.S. journalists and activists, including Clara Barton, president of the American Red Cross, traveled to Armenia. International relief committees were formed, Christian and Jewish religious organizations sent aid to the Armenians, and the U.S. Congress passed a resolution condemning the massacres. None of this prevented the events that unfolded some years later, early in World War I, when the Turkish government decided that the Armenians posed a threat to national security and began to arrest, deport and murder Armenian leaders. This was followed by several waves of killings between 1915 and 1922. More than a million Armenians died through starvation, torture and outright murder.

Peter Balakian's *The Burning Tigris* places the story of the Armenian genocide in its larger historical context, which includes the international response and the emergence of a fledgling human rights movement that, two decades later, turned its attention to events in Nazi Germany. Balakian's book also illustrates how quickly the victims of history are pushed aside and forgotten in the greater geopolitical picture. Adolf Hitler, addressing his generals as they prepared to invade Poland in 1939, told them to be as ruthless as Genghis Khan and ominously asked, "Who today . . . speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?"

This is a powerful book, not only because it offers a compelling, readable narrative of the Armenian genocide, but also because it takes up the larger humanitarian and political questions genocide raises. The Armenian genocide, the Holocaust and the Cambodian, Rwandan and Sudanese genocides (or politicides, depending on one's interpretation) have sparked growing acceptance of "humanitarian intervention" that includes political and military initiatives as well as the more traditional humanitarian aid. This development has opened a Pandora's box of political dilemmas and—in the opinion of David Rieff—altered the very nature and integrity of humanitarian work.

What can history teach us here? One of the strengths of Balakian's book is that it conveys the complexity and chaos in which genocides usually occur. The second wave of mass violence against the Armenians began during the early part of World War I, when the world's attention was on the larger picture. Still, leading diplomats and politicians in Europe and in this country immediately sounded the alarm. Henry Morgenthau Sr., U.S. ambassador to the Ottoman Empire from 1913 to 1918, began sending dispatches to Washington as soon as the murders began and pushed ceaselessly for aid and intervention to stop the slaughter. Public figures ranging from Theodore Roosevelt to the British pacifist Bertrand Russell called for outside

intervention. More important, a network of aid and Armenian solidarity groups still existed to attempt to aid the victims and to mobilize public opinion.

All this, however, was shaped by the context of the war and its immediate aftermath in Europe. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to maintain diplomatic relations with Turkey and thus opposed intervention. Though sympathetic to the Armenians' plight, he hoped to address it through structures like the League of Nations. Armenia's friends abroad supported a new, independent Armenia, yet that new nation came under renewed Turkish attack in 1919 and 1920, and the territory became contested by both Turkey and the new Soviet Union. Again thousands of Armenians were slaughtered. During those years, the politics of oil became important as the victorious European allies divided the region's oil fields. As U.S. oil companies sought to gain a foothold there, U.S. policies toward Armenia shifted toward disengagement.

In 1927 the U.S. established diplomatic relations with Turkey, and a strange new chapter in the history began: the Turkish government has steadfastly denied that the Armenian genocide ever occurred. For decades, Turkey's strategic importance in the cold war gave its leaders leverage against any U.S. attempt to recognize the genocide; a Senate resolution commemorating the Armenians in 1974, for example, was shelved. Even after the end of the cold war the game continued. In 2000, a House of Representatives resolution condemning the genocide was dropped under pressure from Turkey. While Congress has issued statements on the Armenians' suffering, there still has been no official acknowledgment of the Armenian genocide.

Balakian's book is a chronicle of terror, hope and occasional heroism, and—like most such tales—of the international community's resounding failure to prevent or stop acts of violence against a people. The Armenian genocide is a haunting early portent of the puzzling century that brought the many countries of the world closer than ever before and at the same time bloodily illustrated how difficult true coexistence is.

Yet it also raises some questions about a frequent assumption: that during the Armenian genocide and the Holocaust, the world was silent and largely apathetic, and that mobilizing an effective response to such crises depends largely on informing people and getting them to care about what is happening elsewhere. Balakian confirms much of what I've found in my own research on the international religious response to the unfolding Holocaust. A number of influential people spoke

out. They worked to pass resolutions condemning the violence and expressing solidarity with the victims. They lobbied for changes in immigration laws and raised money for refugees. Organizations on the ground tried to rescue people and tended to the victims.

But this wasn't sufficient—not, I think, for lack of caring. Balakian's book eloquently illustrates the difficulty of translating humanitarian will into policies that can address such crises effectively. What we see historically as "apathy" may sometimes be a by-product of the genuine powerlessness people feel in complex situations. Even where the desire to help exists, the pragmatic question is how to translate compassion into policy, particularly policy effective in a context that often includes war and widespread destabilization.

The Burning Tigris is part of an ever-growing body of literature on the complex problem that may constitute the greatest threat to world peace in the 21st century—genocide and the "complex political emergencies" that spawn mass murder, refugee crises and pervasive political instability. It also addresses the policies that have emerged to address this threat. Samantha Power's *"A Problem from Hell": America and the Age of Genocide*, Michael Ignatieff's work on the former Yugoslavia, Philip Gourevitch's book on Rwanda, and many other powerful works are both studies of the recent history of genocide and calls to action. Combined with the increase in public awareness of the Holocaust, these books have created a sense of urgency that has grown into a kind of moral imperative for intervention in human rights crises.

The Nazi genocide was indeed stopped, and the Nazi regime brought down, by the Allied military. This historical fact and the subsequent success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding Europe have made the Holocaust a paradigm for the interventionists in some parts of the human rights community and among U.S. policymakers. The interventionist argument is fueled by the seeming inadequacy of diplomatic and traditional humanitarian avenues to prevent or stop the kinds of slaughters that have taken place in the Balkans, Rwanda and elsewhere.

The political and military realities of such intervention, and the moral dilemmas that emerge from it, are the topic of David Rieff's book. Rieff convincingly argues that the very nature of humanitarian work in crisis areas is profoundly affected by larger political agendas. Throughout the world, security, political aims and humanitarian considerations have become inextricably linked.

Humanitarian work invariably occurs within a larger political—usually military—context of intervention. This has always been the case, of course, and it has always led to ethical dilemmas. One of the most poignant historical examples is that of the International Red Cross during World War II, when its access to Nazi camps like Theresienstadt was gained by maintaining its neutrality—a pragmatic decision that took the IRC into murky ethical territory, even, according to some, into actual complicity with the Nazis.

The dilemma faced by the IRC lies at the heart of humanitarian work in such situations. To reach the victims at all, organizations have to maintain some form of communication and rapport with the perpetrators. Compromises with the devil are part of the picture. As Rieff put it at a forum several years ago, “It is the job of humanitarian relief workers to work with monsters.”

Coupled with this deliberate neutrality toward all parties in a conflict has been the ideal of humanitarian work as an act of charity and compassion extended toward all victims, independent of larger political alliances and agendas (the international organization that Rieff considers the model of this approach is Médecins Sans Frontières). In an age of genocide and terrorism, both these ideals have disintegrated. Rieff’s chapter on the Rwandan genocide is particularly instructive. Relief workers from all organizations were caught in a nightmare of warring factions and bloodshed that led most of them to call for international intervention.

Rieff describes the slippery slope confronted by such calls: “Was such an intervention to be in support of the Rwandan Patriotic Front that was also pledged to stop the genocide? Or was the RPF, which would itself go on to murder massive numbers of civilians, not worthy of support? If that was the case, then the goal of any intervention would probably have to include setting up some sort of international protectorate. . . . What this meant in practice was a new humanitarian colonialism. . . . It was not clear, when they advocated intervention in Bosnia and Rwanda, that relief agencies fully understood the political as opposed to the humanitarian implications of what they were calling for.”

As this passage suggests, *A Bed for the Night* documents the shift among humanitarian aid workers from neutrality to advocacy. Rieff is critical of this development, although his descriptions of the nightmares in Rwanda and elsewhere certainly illustrate why, for many in the humanitarian NGO community, it appears to be the only moral or practical recourse. He cites a British relief worker who calls for

a “new humanitarianism. . . . It is principled, ethical, and human rights-based. It will not stand neutral in the face of genocide or human rights abuses. . . . It will withhold aid if to deliver it could prolong conflict and undermine human rights.” The principle of neutrality, she concludes, is both “morally repugnant” and “unachievable in the complex political emergencies of the post-Cold War period.”

This stance leads to an intrinsic alliance of humanitarian aid with greater political agendas—as Rieff’s afterword on Iraq illustrates. It quotes Andrew Natsios, USAID administrator there, who describes humanitarian NGOs in Iraq as “an arm of the U.S. government.” Since September 11, the talk in the policy community has even been of “preemptive” intervention. Early in 2001 an international commission of experts submitted a policy paper to the UN titled “The Responsibility to Protect,” which made the case for international intervention in cases of human rights violations and humanitarian emergencies. In January 2004, *Foreign Affairs* published “A Duty to Prevent,” by Ann-Marie Slaughter and Lee Feinstein of Princeton’s Woodrow Wilson Center, which built upon the earlier paper but made the case for preemptive intervention for security reasons.

There is indeed both an ethical and a pragmatic mandate for an international response to humanitarian emergencies. The ethical and moral dimensions are clear. In *Rethinking Humanitarian Intervention* Brian Lepard argues that ethical teachings in support of such intervention exist in all major world religions. The pragmatic mandate is simply that humanitarian emergencies are inherently destabilizing and escalatory. Left alone, they are potentially explosive. The human and political effects of such explosions—the plight of victims and refugees, the political violence that spills over borders, the shifts in alliances and the emergence of extremist groups—are so catastrophic that they cannot be ignored. To that extent the pro-interventionists could be viewed as realists who seek to prevent things from getting worse and are willing to assume the risks of intervention.

For, make no mistake, the risks can be no less catastrophic than the original crisis: the further spread of violence and instability, an increase in the number of refugees and other victims. Intervention unleashes new, often unforeseen forces. Rieff is ruthlessly honest about the alternatives. As he has said elsewhere, “The choice is often imperialism or barbarism. It is just that I think imperialism is also barbarous and we delude ourselves if we imagine otherwise.” It might be useful to distinguish between responses for humanitarian reasons and those for political reasons—a distinction Rieff himself has made. He supported the intervention in Bosnia, he has

said, for political, not humanitarian, reasons. And he opposed the war in Iraq on the same grounds.

Rieff cautions that a policy driven by moral imperatives risks becoming ideological. Interpretations of where it is “morally imperative” to intervene remain selective, and intervention is never purely based on high moral or humanitarian grounds; there are a number of humanitarian emergencies and nasty dictatorships throughout the world in which the international community has not stepped in. What disturbs Rieff most, however, is the prospect of humanitarian organizations as an instrument of “the new imperialism” and the way this role alters the very nature of relief work. Yet one of the factors that has changed humanitarianism is certainly the nature of the conflicts in which it must operate. As the very term “complex political emergency” suggests, humanitarian workers in many parts of the world do indeed confront problems from hell, and there are no easy answers.

Any analysis of the current state of humanitarian aid and the policies of intervention should take into account both the historical realities presented in books like Balakian’s and the grim political realities that Rieff outlines. A year and a half after the beginning of the war in Iraq, it seems appropriate to take a hard look at the issues they discuss, particularly the notion of intervention as a moral imperative, which drives much of the discussion and has certainly become a central feature of U.S. policy.