Humanitarian intervention in the long nineteenth century
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Published by Manchester University Press

Heraclides, Alexis and Ada Dialla.
Humanitarian intervention in the long nineteenth century: Setting the precedent.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/51531.

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Part II

Practice
Introduction

Our criteria for selecting the armed humanitarian interventions of the nineteenth century are the following (which conform with the understanding in the long nineteenth century, as elucidated in chapters 4 and 5): (1) governmental onslaught against unarmed people or atrocities by both sides in a protracted internal war; (2) humanitarian concern, that is, stopping the ‘effusion of blood’, as one of the main reasons and official justifications for intervening; (3) military intervention, ranging from ‘peacekeeping’ (in today’s parlance) to hostilities or a full-scale war; and (4) intervention opposed or reluctantly condoned by the incumbent.

A clarification is in order as regards the second criterion, motivation, which harks back to the ‘right intention’ of the ‘just war’ doctrine (see chapter 2). One view is that pure humanitarian motives are of the essence, ‘altruism writ large’. A more pragmatic line is that there is always a mix, for, as Rougier had put it, with the nineteenth-century experience in mind, ‘it is practically impossible to separate the humanitarian motives of intervention from the political motives and assure that the intervening parties are absolutely disinterested’. Thus several authors yesterday and today are prepared to regard a case as humanitarian if there is a combination of motives and the humanitarian motives are no sham.

A third line is that since even the best of motives or intentions may turn out disastrously in the field, the crux is a positive humanitarian outcome irrespective of the real motives, but this is probably going too far.

On this basis of the above four criteria we will examine four cases. The case of Crete, which appears in some discussions on humanitarian interventions in the nineteenth century, will not be included. In fact Crete presents two cases, in 1866–68 and again in 1896–98. The former witnessed reports of massacres while in fact the Ottoman authorities tried to be restrained in subduing the Cretan uprising so as not to allow foreign intervention on humanitarian grounds. Apart from diplomatic support for the Greeks from Russia, great power involvement was limited to the sending of warships to gather fleeing Greek Cretans. As for 1896–98, the six European powers were requested by the Porte to curb Greek
aid to yet another Cretan uprising and the powers actually intervened as peace-
keepers in Crete (with warships and troops) on behalf of the Ottomans. Other
cases that happen to be included in some lists of humanitarian interventions, such
as the Armenians or the situation in Macedonia in the Ottoman Empire at the
turn of the century, did not involve military operations but diplomatic pressure.

Humanitarian reasons have also been referred to by some commentators with
regard to the outbreak of the First Balkan War. In fact the official humanitarian
justification at the time was bogus. The aim of the coordinated acts of aggression
by Greece, Bulgaria, Serbia and Montenegro was to oust the Ottomans and annex
as much of Macedonia as they could, a process which had begun in the 1890s
with guerrilla warfare by rival Greek and Bulgarian volunteers supported by
their respective governments.\textsuperscript{6} Ottoman rule had its flaws, in particular under
Abdulhamid, and especially in the case of the Armenians, but the Ottoman
Empire, following the 1908 Young Turk Revolution (which was heralded by the
minorities and by neighbouring states), had become an imperial republic, with a
parliament representing most of the minorities. Ironically (and tragically), when
the four states launched their attack in October 1912, the Ottoman government
was under the firm grip of liberal elder statesmen bent on curbing the influence
of the nationalist Young Turks.\textsuperscript{7} Moreover, in the course of the 1912 war, Greece,
Bulgaria and Serbia acted in a manner that was hardly within the confines of
humanitarian law, committing a series of atrocities against unarmed Muslims.\textsuperscript{8}

At this juncture an additional point is worth making with a bearing on th e
presentation of the case studies. The field of international relations as conceived
by the traditional realist paradigm (which dominated the scene from 1945 until
the mid-1970s and is hardly a spent force today) is statist: it regards states as the
key units of analysis, seen as unitary actors, akin to billiard balls\textsuperscript{9} whose outer
shells (diplomats, foreign ministers, prime ministers and heads of state) are in
contact. Further, a clear distinction is made between domestic politics and int er-
national politics, with the former being seen as having little impact on the latter
save as regards aspects of power (power inputs).\textsuperscript{10}

Such views may seem today \textit{passé} and social constructions by recalcitrant
realist scholars, but they are a fairly accurate depiction of the state of play in the
nineteenth century, the golden age of traditional diplomacy, with the making of
foreign policy in the hands of a small elite circle of foreign ministers, ambassadors
(and other professional diplomats), monarchs, presidents (in the US case) and
prime ministers, and a limited number of figures inside and outside government. This small circle shaped foreign policy and kept it away from the ‘prying eyes’ of
an increasingly vocal public. As Richard Pipes points out, foreign policy relations
‘proved to be that area of politics which was resisted most successfully the en-
croachments of democratic control’.\textsuperscript{11} There was also the implicit assumption
that responsible governments and diplomats knew how best to promote national
interest and \textit{raisons d’état}, away from the passions, sentimentalism or jingoism of
the public. These few individuals played a key role in foreign policy and, despite the ‘unspoken assumptions’ of a state’s foreign policy, they at times held divergent views within the same decision-making milieu, views that are well worth referring to, and show that foreign policy was then hardly as uniform and coordinated as is often assumed.13 This divergence of opinion within the same decision-making body was also symptomatic of the acute dilemmas posed by humanitarian plights.

On the basis of all of the above, the presentation of the four case studies will for the most part be traditional, with emphasis on diplomatic history and the views of key individuals.

Notes

3 It has been argued that ‘concern with interests can help to give humanitarian war the kind of political anchorage that it may require in order to remain limited. As long as the interests in question are neither illegitimate nor preponderant, their presence need not subvert the justice of the war’. See A. Coates, ‘Humanitarian Intervention: A Conflict of Traditions’, in T. Nardin and M. S. Williams (eds), Humanitarian Intervention (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 77.
4 Some authors distinguish between intentions and motives, pointing out that what matter are intentions (namely the intention to save people from massacre) and not motives, which are almost by definition bound to be mixed (they include instrumental motives) and hardly purely humanitarian. See on this point in particular F. R. Tesón, ‘Humanitarian Intervention: Loose Ends’, Journal of Military Ethics, 10:3 (2011), 200–6.