

Mercy Under Fire

War and the Global Humanitarian Community

Larry Minear
Thomas G. Weiss



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and Thomas G. Weiss**

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For Beth and Priscilla



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Preface

This book describes the experience of the international community in responding to the increased violence against humanity of the early post-Cold War era. It reviews international efforts to provide assistance and protection to civilian populations caught in situations of armed strife. Conflicts in the Persian Gulf, the Horn of Africa, Central America, Cambodia, and the former Yugoslavia are featured. Other struggles are mentioned as well.

The volume is written for the concerned international public, upon whom sustained and effective humanitarian action depends. We believe that if the public understands better the awesome dilemmas faced by humanitarian organizations, it will support continued and even expanded efforts—and hold humanitarian practitioners to higher standards of accountability. However, a more informed public requires a broader sense of the major humanitarian actors, a deeper understanding of their principles, and a fuller appreciation of their challenges.

The illustrative material used in this book draws on more than a thousand interviews conducted over the past five years with individuals involved in humanitarian activities. The research has formed the core of the Humanitarianism and War Project, an independent research initiative launched in 1991 to reflect upon recent experience and to make recommendations to strengthen future activities. The project built upon an earlier case study of Operation Lifeline Sudan conducted in 1990.

The project was cosponsored initially by the Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies at Brown University and the Refugee Policy Group in Washington, D.C., and, more recently, by the Watson Institute alone. To date it has published a wide array of articles and books, many of them listed in the suggested readings and some of them in use for training humanitarian practitioners. In addition to studies of conflicts in particular countries and regions, the project has



Rwandan refugees set up camps outside Goma because of a cholera epidemic in the city. (UN Photo 186811/J. Isaac)

produced *Humanitarian Action in Times of War: Handbook for Practitioners*, now available in Spanish and French as well as in English, and an edited volume of essays on critical issues of humanitarian theory and practice, *Humanitarianism Across Borders: Sustaining Civilians in Times of War*. We are grateful to Lynne Rienner Publishers for permission to draw on these earlier works.

Unlike earlier publications, the current volume provides nonspecialists with a close-up picture of the challenges faced by humanitarian professionals. Although we quote extensively from project interviews, we have tried to limit the number of references to other scholarly works. These are found in the endnotes at the back of the book and in the suggested readings. Practitioners themselves may find this book of interest; many acknowledge that they have a better sense of individual “trees”—a region, program specialty, or aid organization—than of the humanitarian “forest” as a whole.

The Humanitarianism and War Project has been underwritten by funds from the several dozen United Nations, governmental, and private aid organizations and foundations listed at the end of this vol-

ume. We express gratitude to them for making our work possible and for their continuing interest in our findings and recommendations. We are especially indebted to the Rockefeller Foundation, whose study and conference center in Bellagio, Italy, provided the setting in July 1993 for the initial work on our manuscript. We also wish to acknowledge support from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the United States Institute of Peace, which enabled us to update and polish the text in 1994.

We also express special appreciation to a wide range of agencies and colleagues who have assisted us in our research and have helped shape our own perceptions of the issues. Among the institutions involved in our work are the Arias Foundation of San José, Costa Rica, and the InterAfrica Group of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Initial research on major conflicts was done in 1991 by Laura Holgate, Eugenia Jenkins, Arthur Keys, Hazel McPherson, Cheryl Morden, Joy Olson, and Bill Rau. Serving on various country and regional studies have been U.B.P. Chelliah, Jarat Chopra, Jeffrey Clark, Roberta Cohen, Jeff Crisp, Cristina Eguizábal, Iaian Guest, David Lewis, John Mackinlay, and Peter Sollis. An earlier draft of our manuscript was read by three colleagues, Mary B. Anderson, Juergen Dedring, and Giles Whitecomb, whose candid reactions figured prominently in substantial revisions.

Administrative support to the project has been provided by a number of persons. In Washington, Judy Ombura has been tireless in addressing day-to-day needs as they have arisen. In Providence, Alexander Thier, Sarah Lum, David Lewis, and Suzanne Miller have also been helpful. Invaluable editorial assistance at the Watson Institute came from Fred Fullerton and Mary Lhowe, and production help was provided by Susan Costa, Amy Langlais, and Jennifer Patrick.

We are also extremely grateful to Dennis Gallagher, executive director of the Refugee Policy Group of Washington, D.C., who provided a home for the project in its early years, contributed substantively to our approach to the issues, and served on the team that reviewed the UN's response to the crisis in the former Yugoslavia.

We would be remiss if we failed to express gratitude to those around the globe, too numerous to list individually, who took time to share with us their insights, experience, and recommendations. Their reflections have enriched and shaped our work. We view this as their book, too.

The illustrative woodcuts in Chapters 1, 2, and 5 were originally published in "Humanitarian Principles and Operational Dilemmas in War Zones." They are reprinted with permission from the Disaster Management Training Programme (DMTP).

Notwithstanding the many institutions and individuals who helped to make this book possible, we are fully responsible for any errors and shortcomings.

Larry Minear
Thomas G. Weiss
May 1994

Acronyms

ACROSS	Association of Christian Resource Organizations Serving Sudan
ACUNS	Academic Council on the United Nations System
AID	Agency for International Development [United States]
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CERF	Central Emergency Revolving Fund [United Nations]
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIREFCA	International Conference on Refugees in Central America
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CNN	Cable News Network
CONADES	National Commission for the Displaced [El Salvador]
CONGO	Conference of Nongovernmental Organizations in Consultative Status with ECOSOC
CPR	Communities of People in Resistance
CRS	Catholic Relief Services
CSCE	Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DHA	Department of Humanitarian Affairs [United Nations]
EC	European Community
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
ECAFE	Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East
ECE	Economic Commission for Europe
ECHO	European Community Humanitarian Office
ECLAC	Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean
ECOMOG	Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council [United Nations]
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States

ECWA	Economic Commission for Western Asia
EEC	European Economic Community
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
ERA	Eritrean Relief Association
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization [United Nations]
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front
G-77	Group of 77 developing countries
GONGO	Government-organized nongovernmental organization
IADB	Inter-American Development Bank
IBRD	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development [World Bank]
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
IGADD	Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development
IGO	Intergovernmental organization
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INSSBI	Nicaraguan Social Security and Welfare Institute
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JRP	Joint Relief Partnership [Ethiopia]
LWF	Lutheran World Federation
MPLA	Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
MSC	Military Staff Committee [United Nations]
MSF	Doctors Without Borders
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Nongovernmental organization
NIEO	New International Economic Order
NPA	Norwegian People's Aid
OAS	Organization of American States
OAU	Organization of African Unity
ODA	Overseas Development Administration

OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OEOA	Office of Emergency Operations in Africa [United Nations]
OLS	Operation Lifeline Sudan
ONUC	United Nations Operation in the Congo
ONUCA	United Nations Observer Group in Central America
ONUMOZ	United Nations Observer Mission in Mozambique
ONUSAL	United Nations Observer Mission in El Salvador
ONUVEH	United Nations Observer Group to Verify the Electoral Process in Haiti
ONUVEN	United Nations Observer Group to Verify the Electoral Process in Nicaragua
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
PAHO	Pan-American Health Organization
PRODERE	Development Program for Displaced Persons, Refugees, and Repatriates
PVO	Private Voluntary Organization
QUANGO	Quasi-nongovernmental organization
RASS	Relief Association of the Southern Sudan
RENAMO	Mozambique National Resistance
REST	Relief Society of Tigray
SPLA	Sudanese People's Liberation Army
SPLM	Sudanese People's Liberation Movement
SRRA	Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association
SWAPO	South-West Africa People's Organization
TPLF	Tigrayan People's Liberation Front
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
UNAVEM	United Nations Angola Verification Mission
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDOF	United Nations Disengagement Observer Force
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNDRO	United Nations Disaster Relief Organization
UNEF	United Nations Emergency Force
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFICYP	United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus

UNGOMAP	United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNIFIL	United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon
UNIIMOG	United Nations Iran-Iraq Military Observer Group
UNIKOM	United Nations Iraq-Kuwait Observation Mission
UNITA	National Union for the Total Independence of Angola
UNITAF	Unified Task Force [Somalia]
UNMOGIP	United Nations Military Observer Group in India and Pakistan
UNOMIL	United Nations Observer Mission in Liberia
UNOMUR	United Nations Observer Mission in Uganda and Rwanda
UNOSOM	United Nations Operation in Somalia
UNPA	United Nations Protected Area
UNPROFOR	United Nations Protection Force [in the former Yugoslavia]
UNSEPHA	United Nations Special Emergency Programme for the Horn of Africa
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia
UNTAG	United Nations Transition Assistance Group [in Namibia]
USC	United Somali Congress
VOLAG	Voluntary Agency
WEU	Western European Union
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

Introduction

Events in the late 1980s that signaled an end to the Cold War—the toppling of the Berlin Wall, the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the disintegration of the Soviet Union—were accompanied by widespread euphoria. After more than forty years of East-West struggle during which geopolitical considerations had dominated the international agenda, the human needs of civilians would at long last receive overdue attention—or so the reasoning went. Even developed countries, it was hoped, might finally address their own deferred social agendas.

Years later, early optimism about the prospects for reconstruction, democratization, and peace have given way to a more sober assessment of the likelihood of continuing and rising levels of armed conflict.¹ Moreover, as the dust of the Cold War has settled, the wide gash left in the fabric of the world's economic and social life has become more apparent.² The nature and cost of rehabilitation needs, to say nothing of longer-term development challenges, is staggering. Progress on unfinished business in major industrial nations such as the United States and a united Germany also has languished.

The various regional and national conflicts that raged during the Cold War have responded differently to its passing. Attempts to reach political solutions to the struggles in Central America, Cambodia, and the Middle East have benefited from the easing of superpower tensions, which has made political resolution of their conflicts more possible. Yet in Afghanistan, Angola, and Mozambique, conflicts fueled largely by superpower rivalry have taken on lives of their own. Moreover, strife dampened for decades by the Cold War is being rekindled in the Balkans and various republics of the former Soviet Union. In settings with no direct links to East-West rivalry such as the Sudan, Liberia, and Sri Lanka, seething ethnic and religious tensions have continued unabated.



Refugees wait near the northern border of Kuwait in March 1991, during the Iraqi occupation. (UN Photo 158237/J. Isaac)

In the early post-Cold War years, local factors have assumed greater importance in their own right. Civil wars are no longer as easily internationalized as when rival factions served as pawns in a big-power chess game. In some instances, fragmentation has led to the virtual absence of law and order and the deterioration or disappearance of civil society, as reflected in the concept of “failed states.”³ In armed conflicts in places such as Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda, and perhaps soon Zaire, the lack of accountable authorities has created a precarious situation for civilians and humanitarian workers alike. Both are denied the necessary recourse to the structures that facilitate their normal functioning. Civil wars, as someone has pointed out, are anything but civil.

The waning of superpower engagement in developing countries also has been accompanied by an increased level of international humanitarian involvement in what were once considered the internal affairs of states. The centuries-old notion that sovereign states are beyond challenge in treatment of their own citizens has given way to a new sense that sovereignty must be used responsibly if it is to be respected

internationally. Challenges have come not only from insurgent forces whose own exercise of authority often has left much to be desired but also from the emerging global humanitarian community, which has become more prepared to insist that reprobate regimes act responsibly in matters of humanitarian access and human rights.

In another striking irony, civil wars have increased the need for humanitarian assistance and protection, but at the same time have made such succor more difficult to provide effectively. As those under fire have found themselves in more desperate need of mercy from the outside world, those seeking to provide assistance have more frequently come under fire themselves.

In fact, humanitarians have come to resemble the objects of their labors. Those who work for the Red Cross or the United Nations often are denied their right of access, harassed and held hostage, injured, and killed. Long-established symbols no longer command automatic respect or assure implicit protection. In many conflicts, relief convoys have been hijacked or blocked, drivers wounded or killed, and emergency assistance activities commandeered or shut down. International humanitarian actors suffer indignities differing only in degree from those experienced by distressed civilian populations.

In earlier wars, civilian populations were from time to time caught in the crossfire or displaced by the fighting. (A frequently cited statistic places civilian casualties at about 5 percent of the total casualties in World War I.) The peril of civilians, and occasionally as well of those who came to their aid, was incidental to the warfare. By contrast, civilians are often now the explicit objects of military operations. Humanitarian organizations and activities are equally vulnerable. Civilians now constitute about 95 percent of the casualties in places such as Somalia and Bosnia. Food and medicine are often withheld from civilian populations. They are the ready weapons in the arsenals of governments and insurgents who manipulate them in ways that violate basic provisions of international law as well as the fundamental tenets of civilized societies.

Why is the present historical moment such a watershed? Massive alterations have taken place in the geography of the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, including some twenty new states born from the former Soviet Union and Yugoslavia. In a development once unthinkable, there is now only a single superpower on the world stage.

The ripple effects, not only on the societies and peoples involved but also on international political, economic, and military institutions, have been far-reaching.

The United Nations, which had been largely paralyzed by East-West conflict, has assumed a more central place on the world stage.⁴ After a decade during which "UN bashing" was a favorite sport along the Potomac and in a number of other Western capitals, the world organization went through a renaissance of sorts, beginning in the late 1980s. Although its operational and political warts have not disappeared, the UN nonetheless occupies a prominent place on the front pages of newspapers and in the policy calculations of major and lesser powers. The revitalization of multilateralism is a major contemporary leitmotif.⁵

Changes in the international geopolitical climate also have had an important bearing on the humanitarian arena, affecting the perception of fundamental values and the possibilities for concerted action. During the Cold War, geopolitics infiltrated such cardinal principles as the sanctity of life. In the frenzied competition between communism and anticommunism, a premium was placed on scoring ideological points rather than on protecting human lives. The right to food or to freedom from persecution was treated in many quarters as anything but absolute or universal, upstaged by considerations of whether a given regime using food as a weapon or violating the human rights of its citizenry was deemed "friendly" or "unfriendly."

East-West rivalries spurred action—or deterred it, as the case might be. Washington, Moscow, and their respective allies judged a Nicaraguan life as more—or less—important than a Salvadoran, the welfare of a Cambodian refugee as more—or less—valuable than that of an Angolan. National and international responses to human rights violations in East Timor were calibrated according to the perceived importance of the Indonesian government, not according to the nature and pervasiveness of the abuses.

Foreign ministries evaluated entire regions and populations according to their strategic significance. Flip-flops in the Horn of Africa dramatized the primacy of ideology over humanity. The face-off between the United States and the Soviet Union initially was reflected in support for Washington's principal regional client, Ethiopian Emperor Haïle Selassie, or for Moscow's favorite, Somalian strongman Siad Barre. Shortly after the coup d'état against Selassie in 1974, the super-

powers, in an ideological do-si-do, exchanged partners and adjusted flows of military and economic aid accordingly. The ripples have contributed to the instability that is part of the current legacy of Ethiopia and Somalia.

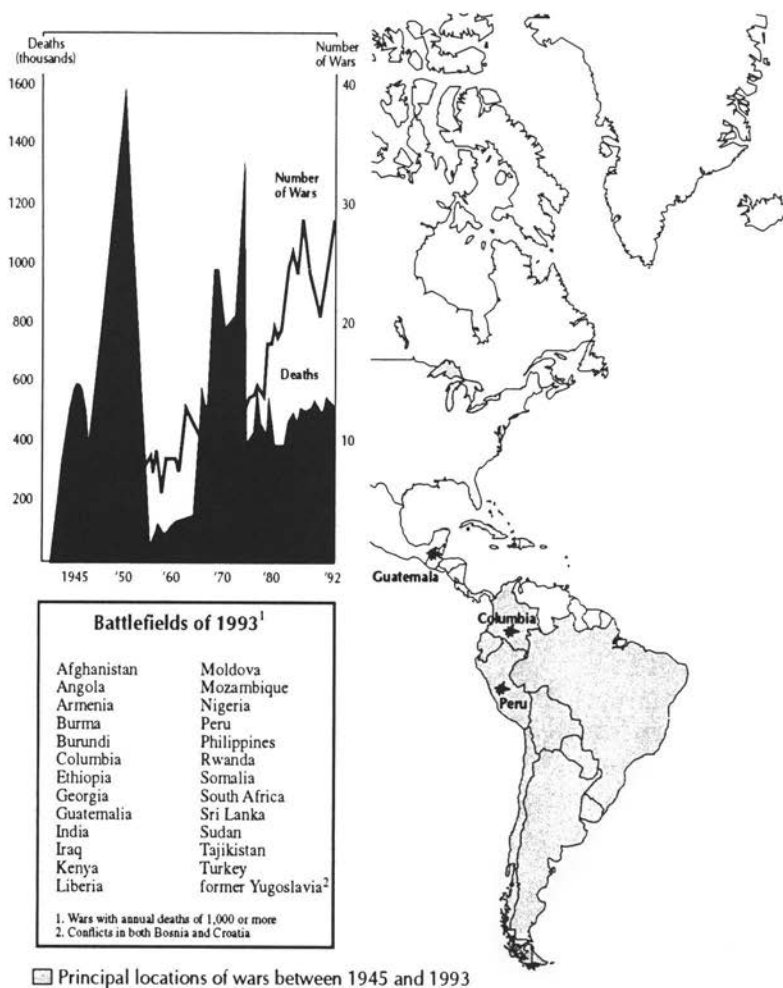
Geopolitical instincts politicized humanitarian impulses. Initially, the Reagan administration treated the massive suffering in the Ethiopian famine of 1983–1985 as the responsibility of the Soviet Union, which proffered only limited assistance. Pressed by the American public and humanitarian groups to view U.S. values and interests as better served by helping rather than hindering aid delivery, Washington eventually was embarrassed into becoming the main provider of relief assistance to the Ethiopian people.

The affiliation of a government or insurgent group in the global struggle affected the international attention paid to the emergency needs of people within its jurisdiction. Even the work of the humanitarian agencies of the United Nations system was politicized, reflecting pressure from the United States, the UN's principal financial backer. The UN Security Council, the international community's most influential and powerful organ, never vigorously addressed humanitarian issues during the Cold War.

Geopolitical fault lines notwithstanding, East-West tensions did not divide the world neatly into two camps. Some governments and private relief organizations sought to remain steadfastly above the fray and to give unswerving priority to the sanctity of human life. However, so thorough was the prevailing politicization that few humanitarian organizations effectively challenged the constraints on their freedom of action imposed by the Cold War psychosis. The prevailing bipolar divisions cut surprisingly wide and deep. "People second, ideology first" might stand as an appropriate humanitarian epitaph for this period.⁶ In retrospect, the perversion of principle seems as questionable and as calamitous as does the construction of nuclear weaponry without proper attention to the disposal of radioactive ingredients or the conduct of Cold War medical experiments on unwitting subjects.

Things are different now. The transformation in world politics has illuminated the extent of human need and elevated the relative importance of humanitarian considerations. Humanitarian values are coming to be viewed as important in their own right, not as a means to the attainment of political objectives. As a corollary, the need to build or

Wars Between 1945 and 1993



Source: Adapted from Ruth Leger Sivard, *World Military and Social Expenditures 1993* (Washington, D.C.: World Priorities, 1993), p. xxv



rebuild institutions that can effectively assist and protect people has taken on new urgency.

There are, to be sure, major obstacles to more effective humanitarian action during the remainder of the century and beyond. First, some basic humanitarian instincts and the humanitarian apparatus that exists to put flesh on them have atrophied during the Cold War interregnum. Like a patient released from the hospital after an extensive stay, the world must relearn the use of long-dormant capacities and limbs. In particular, the humanitarian organizations of the United Nations system, itself enjoying a renaissance, are now faced with higher expectations and new demands. They have yet to fill the bill.

Second, there is something of a failure of worldwide humanitarian fortitude in the face of the apparently intractable situations in which human suffering is set. When centuries-old animosities erupt in the "formers" of this world—the former Yugoslavia, the former Soviet Union—many people of goodwill sense the limits of intervention. Like governments that are willing to commit troops to the United Nations only for duty when "hot war" has cooled, some favor dispatching humanitarian resources only when the situation has stabilized. Logical at face value, such an approach makes succor least available when it is most needed.

Third, the resources at the disposal of the international community are limited. Having skewed their budgets and deepened their levels of national indebtedness to wage the Cold War, the United States and other major donors are now confronted with the bill for domestic spending on overdue economic and social priorities. On the international front, in a combination of rationalization and reason, they now plead "donor fatigue." The resources that they do provide tend to be earmarked for particular crises, or particular countries and activities in a given crisis, and tied to the procurement of goods and services that will benefit their own suppliers.

Fourth, a new paradigm has yet to be developed to replace the Cold War rationale for involvement in international affairs. The East-West fight offered an all-purpose rubric under which appropriations for aid—military, economic, and humanitarian—could be justified. Absent the need to do global battle with the forces of communism, what is the energizing rationale for helping to prevent starvation in Somalia or rape in Bosnia, to say nothing of carnage in Rwanda or human rights abuses in Tibet?

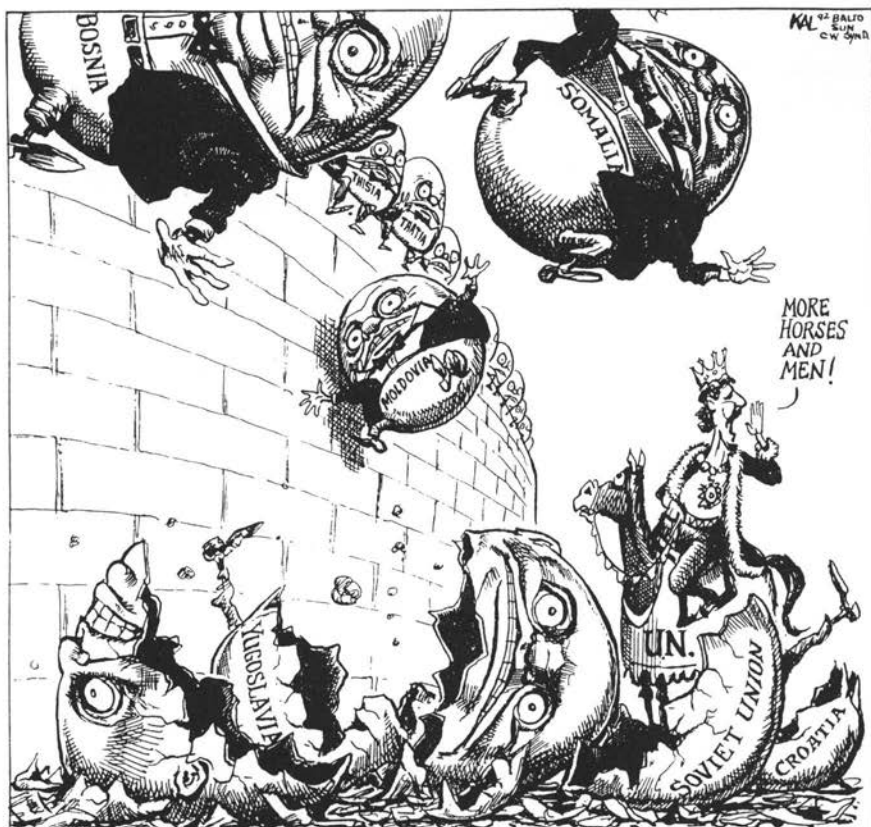


Figure I.1

Source: *Baltimore Sun*, August 29–30, 1992. KAL/Baltimore USA Cartoonists & Writers Syndicate

Such clouds on the humanitarian horizon do not alter the fact that internationally the moment is propitious for directing overdue attention to assist and protect those affected by wars. Within that context, this volume seeks to review the humanitarian system—some professionals use the term “regime” for the emerging network of principles, rules, and procedures—as it has developed to date. This book also identifies the major humanitarian challenges the world faces and proposes a number of improvements for the current system.

Chapter 1 examines the setting within which humanitarian action takes place. Elaborating on the current historical moment, it introduces a set of basic concepts, examines what is understood by the term