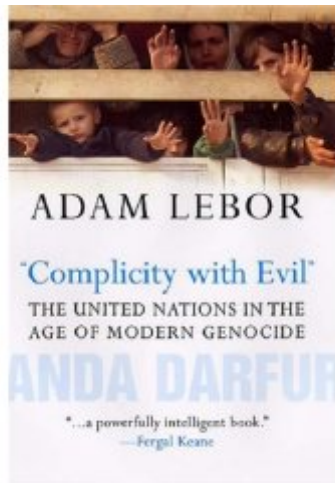


UN Lives on the Dark Side II, UN, genocide, 1992-2006



Adam LeBor, "Complicity with evil": The United Nations in the age of modern genocide, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, 326 pages.
Available at amazon.com

“From the killing fields of Rwanda and Srebrenica a decade ago to those of Darfur today, the United Nations has repeatedly failed to confront genocide. This is evinced, author and journalist Adam LeBor maintains, in a May 1995 document from Yasushi Akashi, the most senior UN official in the field during the Yugoslav wars, in which he refused to authorize air strikes against the Serbs for fear they would ‘weaken Slobodan Milošević.’ More recently, in 2003, urgent reports from UN officials in Sudan detailing atrocities from Darfur were ignored for a year because they were politically inconvenient.

This book is the first to examine in detail the crucial role of the Secretariat, in relationship with the Security Council, and the failure of UN officials themselves to confront genocide. LeBor argues the UN must return to its founding principles, take a moral stand, and set the agenda of the Security Council instead of merely following the lead of the great powers. LeBor draws on dozens of firsthand interviews with UN officials, current and former, and such international diplomats as Madeleine Albright, Richard Holbrooke, Douglas Hurd, and David Owen. This book will set the terms for discussion when UN Secretary General Kofi Annan steps down to make room for a new head of the world body, and political observers assess Annan’s legacy and look to the future of the world organization.”

From the book jacket

“Adam LeBor has crafted a top-notch exposé of the failings of the United Nations in the age of genocide. It is painful to be reminded of the organization’s errors and lies about Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan, but this is a book we should all be thankful for. LeBor makes a furiously persuasive case

that the United Nations must become a force against genocide rather than a cover for its execution.”

Peter Maass, author of *Love thy neighbor: A story of war*, from the book jacket

“Complicity with evil” highlights several key quotes from the seminal “Brahimi report” on the reform of peacekeeping operations of 2000, not least because one of them supplies the book’s title.

“No failure did more to damage the standing and credibility of United Nations peacekeeping in the 1990s than its reluctance to distinguish victim from aggressor.”

“Impartiality for United Nations operations must therefore mean adherence to the principles of the Charter: where one party clearly and incontrovertibly is violating its terms, continued equal treatment of the parties by the United Nations can in the best case result in ineffectiveness and in the worst may amount to complicity with evil.”

“The Secretariat must tell the Security Council what it needs to know, not what it wants to hear, when formulating or changing mission mandates.”

“United Nations peacekeepers – troops or police – who witness violence against civilians should be presumed to be authorized to stop it, within their means, in support of basic United Nations principles.”

“The Secretariat must not apply best-case scenarios where local actors have historically exhibited worst-case behaviour.”

The “Brahimi report”, Executive summary and p. 12 (and, in the book, Frontpiece, p. ix and pp. 213-214.) The full Brahimi report is available as UN document S/2000/809 of August 21 2000, available online at www.un.org/documents under "Security Council", "SG reports".

Mr. LeBor observes that the UN did not actively assist in the massacres in Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Darfur, and that Secretariat officials cite humanitarian operations and needs for “open channels” in their defense, arguing that the UN is merely the sum of its member states. But complicity also means failing to act on knowledge of actual or likely crimes, and blaming the “member states” only means that if everyone is guilty, then no one is guilty or responsible.

The United Nations is the primary instrument for the world’s “stuttering steps” to stop genocide. In the past decade, however, it has failed twice and is failing again. Mr. LeBor, who began his work on this topic in 1992 as a journalist accredited to UNPROFOR, the UN protection force in the former Yugoslavia, states that his conclusions are critical, but not a blanket condemnation. He commends the UN humanitarian staff working in crisis areas in the field, but notes as well that they

“often clash with the powerful Department of Political Affairs (DPA), the secretary general’s advisers, and the members of the Security Council, when their ideals conflict with the demands of superpower policy and realpolitik.”

“Complicity with evil” is based not only on Mr. LeBor’s own experiences in Bosnia, but also a detailed review of internal UN documents, and lengthy interviews with dozens of UN officials, diplomats, and statesmen and stateswomen involved in the Srebrenica, Rwanda, and Darfur crises. Part I of the book deals in detail with the Bosnian conflict in 1992; the political and policy struggles among the UN, NATO, the Americans, British, French and other countries to deal with it; the buildup of tensions around the UN “safe areas;” and the actual Srebrenica massacre; and the fallout, confusion and soul-searching that followed it, which led to the NATO air attacks in August and September 1995 and then the Bosnian peace accords two months later. The authority for the air strikes came from Security Council resolution 836, mandating UNPROFOR to ‘deter attacks’ on the safe areas. It had been passed more than two years earlier, in June 1993.

Part II of the book deals with the Darfur crisis which emerged in 2003 and 2004. It discusses a repetition by the Secretariat of its failure in Rwanda in handling the Darfur situation, despite the supposed “lessons learned” from the Srebrenica and Rwanda genocides; half-hearted attempts at an African peacekeeping force; concurrent events including Iraq and the lack of Arab diplomatic interest in Darfur, and slightly more successful peacekeeping efforts in Congo and Liberia. They all lead to “a meager reckoning” on the Darfur genocide, as of the spring of 2006 when Mr. LeBor finished his book. The chapter on “A Rwandan reprise” is particularly interesting. It details Kofi Annan’s expressions of concern about Darfur while failing to seize the moral high ground, take the initiative, and act in a preemptive way. Even as Mr. Annan was publicly outlining his plans in 2005 for a new set of measures against genocide, he was failing to act on those very measures to respond to the Darfur genocide.

Each chapter of the book begins with a disturbing quote illustrating how the failures came about, and an Appendix gives the full text of three key documents. Yasushi Akashi’s cable to Kofi Annan of May 1995 argued against air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs after Sarajevo was shelled. General Roméo Dailaire’s cable to Kofi Annan in New York, now known as the “genocide fax”, warned of a planned, even announced, mass slaughter, and asked for permission to raid Hutu arms caches in Rwanda (which Mr. Annan denied), just before the genocide began. And a humanitarian crisis expert, Doctor Mukesh Kapila, sent a special note in March 2004, for the attention of Kofi Annan and other senior UN officials, outlining the extent of human rights abuses and calling for further UN action on Darfur, to which he did not reply. The book also has an extensive bibliography (of books, articles, reports, and websites), plus a very detailed index and notes.

In his final chapter, Mr. LeBor notes that the Secretariat officials responsible for the UN failures in Srebrenica and Rwanda suffered no career damage. Indeed, Mr. Annan and his key aides moved on up to the top levels of the Secretariat. UN human rights bodies have ignored Darfur, and their overall performance has severely deteriorated. And criticism in the General Assembly and related organs was muted.

Mr. LeBor believes that the UN should follow the example of the European Union, which requires applicant states to meet standards of human rights, the rule of law, democratic elections, etc., and in theory can expel member states that flout them. But UN officials are disdainful of this precedent, arguing that the “world body” must remain all-inclusive.

LeBor concludes that the UN failed to stop genocides in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Darfur because both diplomats and Secretariat officials took bad decisions. The world needs a UN that defends human rights instead of its own interests, but this will demand a massive shift in mentality. Member states that fail to live up to basic UN mandates should be sanctioned, suspended, and in extreme cases, expelled. Otherwise, he observes, if the UN cannot or will not do this, what ultimately is the point of the organization?

The UN is led from the top, and it needs a secretary general who sets the agenda, does not pander to dominant member states, and will reinvent the organization as a force for greater good. Mr. Annan expressed sincere concern, but did not specify what should be done. Despite the catastrophic failures to prevent genocide, no one is ever held accountable for mistakes. Only when they are can we really be able to say “never again” to genocide.

Overall, despite the Brahimi report and a new doctrine of a “responsibility to protect,” little has changed. According to one UN human rights official:

“Every peacekeeping mission now has a standard paragraph in its mandate, saying the peacekeepers are obliged to protect civilians at risk and not only themselves when they are at risk. This is the institutional lesson, but it remains on a formal level. Member states do not yet understand and have not internalized what it actually means to go into a country and claim responsibility for that situation.”

The discussions, maneuverings, and political and administrative proposals concerning Darfur continue on, proving only, as another human rights official observes, “the lack of consistency and courage displayed by the international community and its leaders.” The sad reality, LeBor concludes, is that:

“Far from the UN complex in New York, far from the Secretariat’s nuanced deliberations, survivors of genocide now endure a kind of living death themselves, seeking the strength to carry on under the weight of unbearable grief. ...

A torn family photograph in the fields of eastern Bosnia, bones bleached white in the dust of Darfur – these remnants of lives lost symbolize the human cost of the United Nations’ failures to stop genocide. The pattern seems set and unbreakable. If and when the United Nations commissions an inquiry into its failure in Darfur, whole paragraphs of its report on Srebrenica could be pasted in.”