

Not Enough

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Two full days on "Genocide and Crimes Against Humanity" have been exhaustingly perplexing, challenging, and disturbing. They've been shadowed by the looming fact of the Holocaust, and provoked by the failure of the imperative "never again." Much has been made in these two days about the astonishing progress in human rights law over this decade, and especially about the existence today of two functioning and increasingly successful war crimes tribunals (not to mention the summer's accomplishments in Rome). And yet -- we have two tribunals because we have had two genocides -- two genocides in five years.

And so the conference speakers have asked us: how to orient ourselves toward these catastrophes? How to get our bearings in the face of the unimaginable, these all too real and even repeated and yet unimaginable events? They have largely rejected the easiest answers -- imagining that these things were inevitable, or that they can be undone, or that we can simply look forward to a future of new laws and robust institutions. No -- the speakers have been unrelenting in asking us to look directly at what happened in Bosnia and Rwanda, catastrophe and failure. This direct look is neither optimistic nor pessimistic -- the terms seems strangely inappropriate when the subject is genocide -- nor is it simply discouraged: there have been so many examples here of just the opposite, of extraordinary courage. Here the tone has been one of irrevocability, belatedness, untimeliness.

These catastrophes have happened: Judge McDonald said, simply and profoundly, that "the terror of the Holocaust ... is that it actually happened."

And more than the Holocaust has happened -- two genocides in this decade -- and they didn't have to: Tibor Varady said, "what happened was not unavoidable." His strange and marvelous story of the thesis defense taught us that Bosnia's implosion was preventable internally. There are functioning multi-ethnic societies -- Bosnia was one -- and there is no fatedness to the cats-and-dogs scenario of which Radovan Karadzic was so fond. And it was preventable externally: Bill Stuebner reminded us from the audience that in Bosnia we effectively knew everything, that the press and the officials on the ground did their jobs, told us if not everything at least most of it, and yet still it happened.

And we've heard many predictions that these events will return. Judge McDonald sadly underlined the fact that the existence of the ICTY did not deter the killers in Srebrenica or in Kosovo, and we have heard all too many warnings and predictions about the next catastrophes -- in Africa, Asia and Central Asia, and what's left of Yugoslavia, just for starters. How can we tolerate this? -- not just it's happening, but happening again? This is not merely a rhetorical question, but that we answer - more or less adequately -- everyday, like it or not. How do we tolerate this? How do we speak about it and remain comprehensible, polite, sensible? That we can at once not tolerate and yet attempt to address these catastrophes, that we can even (as so many Sarajevans did) develop a dark humor, a corrosive irony, about them, is the most remarkable and miraculous things of all.

This combination of an affirmative intolerance and the responsibility to continue addressing what happens might be summed up in the two words which have echoed through this conference: not enough. They seem particularly apt in thinking about the role of the news media and of humanitarian interventions in Bosnia and Rwanda.

On media. Bosnia and Somalia -- long shadow hanging over both Rwanda and Bosnia -- were remarkable for their visibility, their exposure and overexposure, and not simply in that we were witnesses to almost all that happened but that the pages of our newspapers and the screens of our televisions became in some sense places where fighting happened. Think of October 3rd, 1993, a date mentioned by many during the conference, when General Aidid did with a camcorder and a videocassette what he could not do with conventional weapons on the streets of Mogadishu. Or Bosnia, where cameras not only did the unthinkable -- visited functioning concentration camps -- but probably shut them down, where photographers waited at intersections in Sarajevo for people to be shot by snipers, and the Bosnian government felt, probably correctly, that the pictures were weapons in their otherwise undergunned cause.

But what we learned from Sarajevo (to the extent that it makes sense to mine Bosnia for lessons) is that cameras, and good (the best) reporters, weren't enough. Even a genocide conducted in the open was not stopped by truth, by the fact that it was in the open -- unarmed truths, truths that thought that truth was enough, failed. They failed at least in part because no truths, no pictures or reports, come without interpretations, and the context of interpretations was lost: all the other interpretations -- Bosnia was a 500 year old war, the Muslims shelled themselves, all sides were the same, it was a humanitarian crisis -- while never quite winning definitively, also never quite allowed the most compelling interpretation -- genocide -- to galvanize us into action. Perhaps the fact that it seemed so obvious stopped us from doing what we had to. How many real-time massacres, kids shot by snipers, standups from death camps, does it take, after all? Of course, there's no answer to these questions: media coverage may be the *sine qua non* of catastrophe today, but the media both start and stop things, accelerate and decelerate events. And information -- even in an information war -- was not enough. Without work, news goes nowhere.

On humanitarian intervention. "Do something." On more than one occasion, speakers remarked on the need for action, for action and not simply words, for reality and not virtual reality, or for words coupled with action: do not remain silent, they said, say something, and do something. But we also learned, over and over, about all that was done in Bosnia during the war and Rwanda after the genocide: doing something was the name of the game, and much was done, even overdone. A vast humanitarian effort in Bosnia, tens of thousands of soldiers and relief workers and international officials, a new Berlin airlift, and it all too often had the effect not simply of providing the proverbial fig leaf for inaction, but of actually blocking a military intervention. General Rose was right when he said that you can't fight a war in white-painted vehicles, but we can translate: with, thanks to, white-painted vehicles, you couldn't fight the war. Doing something -- doing the strictly humanitarian, evenhanded and neutral thing -- was not enough. It was the best way, it turned out, to avoid doing anything.

To conclude this brief conclusion ... just slightly less than 50 years ago, Hannah Arendt wrote searingly in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* about a profound discrepancy in the discourse of human rights:

No paradox of contemporary politics is filled with a more poignant irony than the discrepancy between the efforts of well-meaning idealists who stubbornly insist on regarding as "inalienable" those human rights, which are enjoyed only by citizens of the most prosperous and civilized countries, and the situation of the rightless themselves. Their situation has deteriorated just as stubbornly, until the internment camp -- prior to the 2nd world war the exception rather than the rule -- has become the routine solution ... (279)

Could even Arendt, with her astonishing sensitivity to what she called "the grimness of the present," have imagined not only that internment camps would persist but that concentration camps would reappear? We, sadly, don't need to imagine them. Facing them today, fifty years after the genocide convention and the human rights declaration, we have little reason to be hopeful -- we also have little reason to despair -- but we have a lot of reason to fight.