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Book review: 'War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times' by Linda Polman

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Book Review of 'War Games: The Story of Aid and War in Modern Times' by Linda Polman. London: Penguin, 2010. 218pp. £12.99. ISBN: 978 0 670 91896 6
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If there is any doubt left that emergency- or humanitarian aid has a dark side after the recent rash of publications on the subject by David Rieff, Michael Barnett and Thomas Weiss, David Kennedy, David Keen *et al*, 'War Games' will dispel it. The book is sold as a 'devastating expose of how the humanitarian aid industry, the media and war mongers the world over are locked in a cycle of mutual support' (back cover), and it is packed full of deeply depressing stories. Here we have refugee camps infiltrated by genocidal militias, who continue to kill with impunity. Tyrants who engineer famines then invite the international media to film the results and generate aid flows to the offending regime. Parents and carers selling children who have had limbs hacked off by rebel fighters, and who US politicians use in publicity material for their election campaigns. International do-gooders advising on gender awareness during the day and using child prostitutes at night. Journalists wantonly misrepresenting political crises as heart-rending natural disasters and all aid recipients as 'innocent victims'. All of which is covered up by aid workers who close their eyes to what they witness in order to uphold their foundational principle of 'neutrality', who collude with appalling regimes by paying 'taxes' on the aid they distribute or allowing their supplies to be looted by warring factions, or who do not dare to make public the dark side of the 'humanitarian situations' they are attempting to assist in, as to do so would threaten their revenue stream from donors. These accounts of the wretched, the gullible, the inept and the corrupt do seem, at times, a little too close for comfort to a kind of 'disaster porn', particularly when the bookshelves of academics who research in this area are now creaking under the weight of devastating exposes of aid. Polman's book, however, is designed to reach a wider audience, so her desire to pull no punches to a group of readers assumed to still be true believers in aid is perhaps understandable.

By far the most valuable aspect of 'War Games' is the detail it gives about the economics of humanitarian aid. The aid industry is big business, with an estimated 37,000 international NGOs competing for donations from the public and for contracts, worth more than \$11bn annually, given out by governments, UN agencies and other donors for the implementation of aid projects. These NGOs then spend and spend the aid they are able to distribute until they have saturated the 'absorptive capacity' in a given crisis zone, seemingly unconcerned with the proportion of their money which is actually doing any good. Polman shows that too often, and inevitably, the aid industry funds wars, feeds soldiers, distorts or destroys economies, keeps some of the world's worst regimes in power, and draws women and children into prostitution.

While the book does provide a gruesome glimpse into aid and the situations it is used in, the answers to two significant questions are missing: why should we believe Polman? And what should we change about the aid industry if we do believe her? There are real questions over the reliability of the accounts given here, and, even if they are accurate for the most part, the reader is left with no pay-off at the end of the horror beyond a suggestion to ask questions of humanitarian NGOs which Polman seems to have already answered in the text.

The book is a journalistic account, based on ‘decades of first-hand experience’ (back cover). As such, the author has chosen to give only the very minimum number of footnotes, leaving the majority of quotes and statistics used in the book to illustrate her stories unverifiable by the reader. The success of this kind of book in the professional field depends on the reader trusting that the author has got her facts straight and that the (often anonymous) sources she quotes are telling the truth rather than grinding axes or self-aggrandising. Unfortunately, length of time spent in war zones is not a guarantee of expertise in the field. When discussing Sierra Leone, Polman makes two errors, sufficient to call into question her judgment of the Sierra Leonean situation, and to make this reader at least wonder whether her knowledge of the other humanitarian situations covered is as thin. She describes visiting the RUF stronghold of Makeni in 2001. While watching rebels dressed in ‘stolen’ leather coats, shades, gold chains and Nike Airs breakdance at a drug-fuelled, UN-funded ‘Peace Concert’, she notices graffiti reading: ‘West Side Niggers Don’t Play With Us God Is With Us’ (p151). Polman wonders if the graffiti might be a ‘warning to the government of Freetown perhaps. The capital lies to the west of Makeni’ (ibid). It does not seem to cross her mind that the graffiti is far more likely to refer to the notorious West Side Niggaz, also known as West Side Boys, who were a breakaway faction of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council, occasionally allied to the RUF, more often opposed to them. They received steady international attention during the conflict due to their penchant for alcohol, drugs, women’s wigs and American ‘gangsta rap’, but became widely featured in international press coverage after they took 11 members of the Royal Irish Regiment hostage in 2000 and were subsequently defeated by British special forces in Operation Barras.

In the same chapter (Chapter 10) Polman relies heavily on an interview she conducted in 2001 with ‘RUF leader Mike Lamin’ (p152) in which Lamin explains that the suffering in Sierra Leone was the fault of the international community. There was, according to Lamin, no reason for Sierra Leoneans to stop fighting, because they needed the international community to intervene to fix the broken country, so had to escalate the violence to the point of mass amputations to ensure the internationals intervened. This point should give the reader much food for thought – the leader of the most powerful rebel group in the Sierra Leonean civil war explaining that his soldiers were forced to amputate the limbs of civilians in order to get the world to notice their plight and parachute in the aid angels. However, Mike Lamin was never leader of the RUF. Foday Sankoh, described by Polman as ‘a member of the RUF’ (p154) was founder and leader of the movement until his arrest in Freetown in May 2000, after which Issa Sesay was appointed as interim leader by Charles Taylor (if one is to believe the Prosecution at the Taylor trial) or the then presidents of Nigeria, Togo, Mali and Gambia alongside Mr Taylor (if one is convinced by the Defence). According to Sesay’s testimony at the Taylor trial in August 2010, Sankoh favoured Lamin as his successor, but the West African leaders overruled him and installed Sesay. One can only guess at why Polman claimed her interviewee to be the leader of the RUF – the RUF clearly splintered after Sankoh’s arrest, Lamin was a senior figure, and regional commanders may well have claimed overall leadership of the movement. But in a book such as this, in which the reader cannot verify most facts by following footnotes, one wants the author to have at least attempted to verify the stories told by their informants instead of taking them at face value.

The second question left to be answered is 'if not this, then what?' It is not news that the aid industry has some fairly appalling externalities. Journalists know it; aid workers know it; donors know it; policy-makers know it; academics know it; the public may even know it if they followed the recent news of \$8.7bn that the Pentagon cannot account for from the 'Development Fund for Iraq'. But what are we to do? Polman's suggestion that 'we no longer exempt the system from criticism' seems redundant – she herself lists a number of studies carried out by INGOs to 'learn lessons' (p161). She seems to favour not just criticism but a robust enforcement of standards. For instance, she states that 'no aid worker or aid organisation has ever been dragged before the courts for failures or mistakes, let alone for complicity in crimes committed by rebels and regimes' (p158) and argues that 'if the aid industry is left to control itself instead of being controlled, then reforms aren't going to happen anytime soon.' (p161-2). But she does not elaborate on who should control the industry, or which court aid workers should be dragged before. Instead she ends the book by imploring us, as donors, to '[d]are to spoil the atmosphere during national fundraising campaigns: ask the aid workers questions!' (p163). But she has already answered for us the questions she lists. Who will be helped? Not just the 'innocent victims' (assuming there are some innocents in the first place). What is the maximum acceptable proportion of money and supplies to go missing during an operation? Most of it, as long as something gets through and some lives seem to be saved. Are aid organisations sufficiently independent to decide who gets their aid? No. Polman sets up the book with a question about whether international aid workers should have supplied humanitarian aid to Nazi concentration camps in 1943 if the camp management was going to decide how much would be given to its own staff and how much to the prisoners in the camp. In the end, the book does not bring us any closer to knowing the right answers.

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