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Operation Starvation

Alex de Waal on Counter-Humanitarianism and the Return of
Famine as a Weapon of War

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In its primary use, the verb ‘to starve’ is transitive: something people do to one another, like torture or murder. Mass starvation on account of the weather has all but disappeared: today’s famines are all caused by political decisions, yet too often, journalists use the phrase ‘man-made famine’ as if it were a surprise.

Over the last half century, famines have become rarer and less lethal. Last year I wrote in the *New York Times* that they might be abolished for good.¹ But this year, mass starvation is back and we face the possibility of four or five simultaneous famines in the world. In March, the then head of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the East-African born former Tory MP Stephen O’Brien, told the Security Council that ‘we stand at a critical point in history. Already at the beginning of the year we are facing the largest humanitarian crisis since the creation of the United Nations.’¹ ‘Critical’, I’d argue, not because it is the worst crisis of our lifetime, but because a long decline – seven decades – in mass death from starvation has come to an end; in fact it has been reversed.

O’Brien had no illusions about the causes of the four famines, actual or imminent, that he detailed in north-eastern Nigeria, Somalia, South Sudan and Yemen. In each case, the main culprits are wars fought in ways that destroy farms, livestock herds and markets, and commanders’ decisions to block humanitarian aid.

In Nigeria, communities caught up in the war between the extremist group Boko Haram and the army have been stripped of assets, income and food; besieged and isolated, they starved.

As the Nigerian army slowly rolls back the areas under Boko Haram control, they find small towns where thousands starved to death last year. As the counter-insurgency grinds on, the food security and nutrition specialists who compile the data that are fed into the blandly-named ‘integrated food security phase classification’ (IPC) system, are fearful that in this year’s ‘hungry season’, approximately from June to October, communities in the war zones will again be dragged up the gradient of the IPC scale: from level four (‘humanitarian emergency’) to five (‘famine’). Last year in Nigeria, the UN and relief agencies can say, they didn’t know the full extent of the crisis, pleading innocence through ignorance. This year we have been given due warning.

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In South Sudan, government and rebel armies have fought their civil war less against one another than against the civilian population. In the summer of 2016, evidence from aid agencies showed nutrition and death rates that met the criteria used by the UN for determining that a food crisis had reached famine levels. Fearing that declaring ‘famine’ would antagonise the South Sudanese government, already paranoid and cracking down on international aid agencies—including robbing, raping and murdering aid workers—the UN and other humanitarians prevaricated. By February, even the veterans of South Sudan’s horrendous famines of the 1980s were saying that this was as bad as anything in their experience, and perhaps worse. The government’s lack of mercy was no longer open to

doubt, even among the most stubborn optimists. The UN duly declared ‘famine’.

Yemen is the biggest impending disaster, possibly the famine that will define this era. Don’t be fooled by pictures that show hungry people in arid landscapes: this is entirely a famine crime, and the weather had nothing to do with it. More than seven million people in Yemen are hungry. The number of Yemenis likely to die of starvation and disease is far greater than those dying in battles and air raids. The coalition led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates has strangled the country’s economy. Before the war, eighty percent of Yemen’s food was imported, mostly through the Red Sea port of al-Hudaida. At Saudi insistence, backed by the US and the UK, the UN Security Council imposed a blockade on Yemen. There’s an exemption for food, but the inspection procedures are slow and laborious. Saudi aircraft bombed the container docks at al-Hudaida so that all ships must now be unloaded the old-fashioned way, using derricks and stevedores. Roads, bridges and markets have been damaged or destroyed, slowing commerce to a crawl. The Bank of Yemen, relocated from the Houthi-controlled capital Sana’a to the enclave controlled by the recognized government, no longer pays salaries. The Houthi forces aren’t innocent either: they impose their own blockades, notably laying siege to the highland city of Taizz. Food is the biggest weapon, and lack of food the biggest killer, in the Yemen war.

Unlike their blunt statements on war crimes in South Sudan, UN and aid agency statements on Yemen are muted: it’s hard to escape the conclusion that they feel unable to criticize Security Council decisions. While the famine deepens, the British and American navies persist in helping enforce the blockade and diplomats at the

Security Council discuss how they could recalibrate the embargo. All are in danger of becoming accessories to starvation.

Only in Somalia does a modicum of blame attach to drought—though the ongoing war between a coalition of north-east African armies and the militant group al-Shabaab is primarily responsible for the immiseration of the worst-affected areas in the south of the country. Until this year, Somalia had the sad distinction of being the only country this century where the UN had declared ‘famine’: that was in 2011. In their recent book—which should be compulsory reading for all concerned with today’s humanitarian crises—Dan Maxwell and Nisar Majid describe this famine as a ‘collective failure.’¹

To war and drought we should add incompetence on the part of the Somali authorities and corruption. A final element in the 2010-2102 famine -- still rankling in the memories of aid professionals who struggled to halt an eminently preventable disaster -- was the restriction on humanitarian work imposed by the USA Patriot Act of 2001. Intended to criminalise support -- material or symbolic, deliberate or inadvertent -- for any group on the terrorist list, the Patriot Act meant that it was practically impossible for an aid agency to operate in the famine-stricken area without risking prosecution in a US court. This applied not just to American agencies, governmental and private, but to the UN and any charitable organisation. In principle, if al-Shabaab hijacked a truckload of food provided by an agency such as the Red Cross, that agency would

be criminally liable. Even the threat of prosecution posed a reputational risk that aid agencies weren’t ready to run. Staff in USAID and the State Department worked assiduously to find a way around this provision, but the Department of the Treasury was immovable until the UN’s declaration of famine prompted belated agreement on a workaround. In the eight months that it took the DoJ to come up with the formula, the world’s biggest aid donor shipped no food to Somalia. Perhaps 260,000 Somalis, mainly children, died. Most if not all of the deaths could have been prevented if the Obama Administration had been more alert to a disaster caused by its decision to prioritise counter-terror in this inflexible way.

The humanitarian workaround—‘carve out’ is the term that’s used—of the Patriot Act is still in place. But it’s provisional and unclear, and the broader chilling effect of security surveillance of humanitarian actions in places such as Somalia, Syria and Yemen, has not changed. Feeding the hungry, treating the sick, and tending to strangers in need, are all subject to security screening. It’s not only burdensome and intrusive, but deters the kinds of energetic and creative aid work that is needed to provide relief in these crises.

Perhaps even more damaging has been the clampdown on money transfers. Remittances from the diaspora contribute at least 30 percent of Somalia’s national income, and in the absence of a normal banking system, the funds are transmitted through companies that use the *hawala* system. The businessmen who run these corporations are

¹ *Famine in Somalia: Competing Imperatives, Collective Failures, 2011-12*, by Daniel Maxwell and Nisar Majid. Hurst, 2016.

interested in profit not ideology, but the approach of counter-terrorists since 2001 has been to target them as possible accomplices to terror, rather than treating them as commercial service providers who might be ready to cooperate in a regulatory framework that serves everyone's interests. Since November 2001, when the US shut down the biggest money transfer company, al-Barakaat on (unfounded) allegations of being involved in terrorist financing, the Somali financial sector has been repeatedly battered by arbitrary restrictions and their knock-on effect, which is commercial banks' refusal to do business with them.

Even as we acknowledge that drought and crop failure are playing a role in this year's hunger in Somalia – level 4 'humanitarian emergency' on the IPC scale today, but threatening level 5 famine in the coming months – we shouldn't overlook the fact that a much more widespread drought in neighbouring Ethiopia last year passed off without famine because of an expeditious relief effort led by the government. At the peak of their effort, the Ethiopian government and the UN World Food Programme were feeding 18 million Ethiopians, a higher number than the in-need populations of all the four countries on today's danger list. There's nothing natural or inevitable about people dying from hunger when the rains fail.

That's a fact that can never be repeated too often, because it corrects the most common misconception about famine. Try a Google images search for 'famine' or 'starvation' and by far the single most common pictures that pop up are of hungry African children. You will find images of droughts and deserts, illustrations of the Great Famine in Ireland and distastefully-posed black-and-white photographs of colonial era famine victims, but very few images of war or of deliberate starvation. When I tried this, from the top 250 images (125 'famine' and 125 'starvation'), just two showed scenes of war. Two showed pictures from Nazi concentration camps and a handful were from the starvation inflicted during the World Wars and the Russian civil war of 1919-21. The Google search straw poll points to the black hole at the centre of our intellectual history of the ideas of famine and starvation.

My organisation, the World Peace Foundation, has compiled a catalogue of every case of famine or forced mass starvation since 1870 that killed 100,000 people or more (so-called 'great famines').² There are 61 episodes in this list, which in total killed a minimum of 105 million people. About two thirds of the famine deaths over the last 147 years were in Asia, about 20 percent in Europe and the USSR, just under 10 percent in Africa. The biggest killers on record were the vast political famines, among them the gilded age famines (aptly called 'Late Victorian Holocausts' by Mike Davis³), the Great War famines in the Middle East including the forced starvation of a

² [<http://fletcher.tufts.edu/World-Peace-Foundation/Program/Research/Mass-Atrocities-Research-Program/Mass-Famine>] The definition of 'great famines' is from Paul Howe and Stephen Devereux, 'Famine Intensity and Magnitude Scales: A

proposal for an instrumental definition of famine,' *Disasters* 28/1 (2004) 353-72.

³ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World*, London: Verso, 2002.

million Armenians, the Russian civil war famine of 1919-21, Stalin's starvation of Ukraine during 1932-34 (now known as the Holodomor), the Nazi 'Hunger Plan' for the Soviet Union, the Chinese civil war famines, the starvation inflicted by the Japanese in World War Two, and Mao's 'Great Leap Forward' of 1958-62, the largest famine on record, which killed at least 25 million people.

Yet these political famines seem scarcely to register in our collective imagination. They are strikingly absent from the canon on which theories of famine and policies for food security have been constructed. Even Amartya Sen did not take them into account when developing his 'entitlement theory' of famine causation, which correctly overturned explanations of famine based exclusively on food shortage.⁴ In the WPF's catalogue of great famines, 72 million deaths occurred in episodes in which famine was used either as an instrument of genocide or recklessly inflicted by government policy. Ignoring these famines, or misclassifying them as caused by natural disaster, is an error—as though the history of democracy were written without mention of the United States, or life on planet Earth without including the oceans.

There's another blind spot which is even more remarkable: the neglect of starvation by genocide scholars. It's striking because the intellectual father of genocide studies, Rafael Lemkin, was keenly interested in the politics of food and famine. In fact, in his famous book, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), Lemkin devoted more

space to starvation and related kinds of deprivation than to mass killing. Elaborating on the physical debilitation or annihilation of groups as a technique of genocide, he began by describing 'racial discrimination in feeding' and detailed the Nazi occupation guidelines specifying the percentages of required basic nutrients allocated to different groups, ranging (in the case of carbohydrates) from 100 percent to Germans through to 76-77 percent for Poles, 38 percent for Greeks and 27 percent for Jews. The second mechanism described by Lemkin was the endangering of health through overcrowding in ghettos, withholding medicine and heating fuel during winter, and inflicting suffering during transportation in cattle trucks and freight cars. The third was mass killings, which he succinctly described in just a single paragraph.⁵

When Lemkin began writing his seminal book, starvation was indeed the Nazis' single biggest instrument of mass murder. It was a weapon of economic warfare and genocide. The rationale for Operation Barbarossa (the invasion of the Soviet Union launched in June 1941) was to seize control of the Ukraine and southern Russia, fertile and resource-rich lands that would, according to Nazi plans, provide the *Lebensraum* for the German people. In turn, central to the planning of Barbarossa was the question of how to feed the Wehrmacht. At the immediate post-Nuremberg 'Ministries Trial' of senior civil servants in 1947, the prosecution reproduced a document entitled 'Memorandum on the Result of Today's

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981.

⁵ Rafael Lemkin, *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1944, pp. 87-8.

(footnote continued)

Conference with the State Secretaries concerning Barbarossa', and dated 2 May 1941, just a few weeks before the invasion.⁶ It begins: '1. The war can only be continued if the entire Armed Forces are fed from Russia during the third year of the war. 2. As a result, there is no doubt that 'x' millions of people [*zig Millionen Menschen*] will starve to death if we take out from the country whatever we need.' It was written by Herbert Backe, State Secretary of the Reich Ministry for Food and Agriculture. While the memo left the number of victims unstated, Backe's alimentary arithmetic suggested that the entire urban population of the European Soviet Union – 30 million 'surplus eaters' – should be starved to death.

The *Hungerplan* began with the forcible starvation of Soviet prisoners of war. Crowded into vast camps without any shelter, 1.3 million captives died of hunger, disease and exposure in the first four months following the invasion. The historian Timothy Snyder wrote in 2010: 'As of the end of 1941, by which time the Germans, with local help, had already murdered about 1 million Jews, the starvation of Soviet prisoners was still the greatest German crime'.⁷ About 2.5 million died this way by the end of the war.

The *Hungerplan* proved impossible to implement fully. Starving people in large numbers is extremely hard work. Stalin's administration of famine in Ukraine a decade earlier had called on the entire apparatus of the Communist Party, and

the German invaders had no such infrastructure. They besieged Leningrad, where a million died. In the occupied cities of Kiev and Kharkov they restricted food supplies and similar numbers perished. But in the countryside, peasants who had already honed their survival skills during two previous famines since the 1917 Revolution did not easily succumb, and the Wehrmacht lacked the logistics to impose starvation on the scale intended.

German soldiers were also eating locally-grown food, and subsequent administrative

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orders from Backe's office were that peasants should be permitted to carry on producing crops, and so should not be starved. The hunger planners fell short of their target by more than 20 million.

Even at this reduced scale, the *Hungerplan* was a crime in numerical terms comparable to the Final Solution. Indeed, forced starvation was one of the instruments of the Holocaust. Eighty thousand Jews starved to death in the Warsaw Ghetto. Rudolf Höss, commandant of Auschwitz from May 1940 to December 1943, testifying before the Nuremberg Tribunal, 'estimated that in the camp of Auschwitz alone in that time 2,500,000 persons were exterminated and that a further 500,000 died from disease and starvation.' In her book on food and hunger during World War Two, Lizzie

⁶ Nuernberg Military Tribunals, 'Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law No. 10, Volume XIII: The Ministries Case', Nuernberg, October 1946-April 1949, p. 845.

⁷ Timothy Snyder, 'The Reich's Forgotten Atrocity', *The Guardian*, 21 October 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/21/secondworldwar-russia>

(footnote continued)

Collingham makes the point that the failure to starve ‘useless eaters’ in sufficient numbers, sufficiently quickly to create Lebensraum for the occupation, became a rationale for expediting their mass murder by killing squads and gas chambers.⁸

Yet Backe has achieved none of Eichmann’s notoriety. Backe was interrogated but committed suicide before he could be indicted, fearing that he would be handed over to the Soviets. The post-Nuremberg ‘Ministries Trial’ began in December 1947, by which time he was dead. His predecessor as Minister for Food and Agriculture, Walther Darré, an ideologue of ‘blood and soil’ and the aggressive eastward expansion, was found guilty of crimes against humanity, plunder and despoliation, and sentenced to seven years in prison but released after just two. The judges didn’t find his economic theories criminal, writing in their decision: ‘Some of his ideas were novel and somewhat bizarre, but it is not a crime to evolve and advocate new or even unsound social and economic theories. This Tribunal is only interested in what he did and what he advocated which comes within the scope of the indictment.’⁹ Darré had been removed from office before Barbarossa, and though Backe’s 2 May memo was produced as evidence, the *Hungerplan* was not mentioned by name. The Allies were in no hurry to criminalise famine or economic warfare more generally.

By the standards of recent war crimes prosecutions, which have taken years, the Nuremberg and post-Nuremberg trials were expedited and minimally-staffed. Developing new law on famine crimes was not a priority. The legal difficulties with prosecuting starvation as a crime include the questions of whether starvation is itself unlawful, what sort of a crime it might be, and how guilt might be proven. Notoriously, the laws of war did not prohibit starvation in pursuit of a military goal: it was legitimate to starve a besieged city into submission, or blockade an entire country. In the post-Nuremberg High Command Trial, the American prosecutors brought charges against Field Marshal Wilhelm von Leeb and other generals, including for crimes committed during the siege of Leningrad. But there was no legal basis on which to find Leeb guilty of starving the city, or even of sustaining the pressure of hunger on the residents by firing artillery at civilians trying to leave. The judges found Leeb’s orders extreme but not criminal—although they added that they wished the law were otherwise.¹⁰ They cited the Lieber Code—drawn up for the Union army in the American Civil War – which permitted starvation if it hastened military victory. In October 1948, Leeb was sentenced only to time served, for transmitting the Barbarossa Jurisdiction Order, and released.

By the time Britain declared war, the Royal Navy was already an accomplished practitioner of

⁸ Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the battle for food*, New York, Penguin, 2012.

⁹ Nuernberg Military Tribunals, ‘Trials of War Criminals Before the Nuernberg Military Tribunals Under Control Council Law No. 10, Volume XII-IV:

The Ministries Case’, Nuernberg, October 1946–April 1949, p. 555.

¹⁰ United Nations War Crimes Commission, *Law Reports of Trials of War Criminals. Volume XII: The German High Command Trial*. London, HMSO 1949, p. 59 and p. 84.

maritime blockade. In 1909 the House of Lords had refused to ratify the London Declaration on the laws of naval war, on the grounds that doing so would have restricted the Navy's discretion in blocking the flow of foodstuffs to an enemy. Establishing an international Prize Court to determine the legality of intercepting ships on the high seas, the Lords felt, would amount to a contravention of British sovereignty. Britain blockaded Germany in World War One, and about 750,000 German civilians died from hunger. That blockade was kept in place (and in fact tightened) for seven months after the Armistice in order to compel the final German signature on the terms of the Versailles agreement: German children continued to starve. In 1942 Churchill came under heavy pressure to lift the blockade on Greece, and only reluctantly and minimally relented—an episode that gave birth to the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, later known as Oxfam. The following year, the British War Cabinet made

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feeding the British Isles a higher priority than preventing famine in Bengal, a decision that cost as many as

three million lives. Most tellingly, the aerial mining of Japanese harbours in 1945 by the US air force was named 'Operation Starvation', though in the event Japan surrendered before the logic of hunger could reached its dreadful conclusion.

The Nuremberg Charter did not (contra Lemkin's urging) include genocide, but it did encompass 'crimes against humanity'. Starvation was not mentioned *per se* but the possibility of starvation-related prosecutions was subsumed under the

provisions prohibiting 'inhumane acts', 'extermination' and 'persecution'. There's a rationale for this: depriving someone of food can be a form of torture, the infliction of suffering with some other goal in mind (such as forcing that person to abandon his or her home), or an act of murder. Had the drafters of the Charter specified starvation as a crime in its own right there would have been uncomfortable implications for the Allies' own blockades. The final judgments at Nuremberg use the term 'starvation', but only as ancillary to the wider crimes committed by the Nazi leadership.

Prosecuting starvation as murder (or extermination) faces extraordinary evidentiary problems. Only in the case of prisoners, where the victims and their food supplies are entirely controlled by the jailer, can there be proof beyond reasonable doubt that the perpetrator is responsible for the death of the victim. In other instances, the defence could argue that the victim failed to make use of opportunities to escape or find other sources of food, or might have survived were it not for other contributory factors over which the defendant had no control, such as crop failures, high food prices, or infectious disease. Yet no charges were brought at Nuremberg for the killing by forced starvation of millions of prisoners of war.

Faced with the problems of defining the crime and proving culpability, prosecutors since Nuremberg have pursued charges other than famine crimes. In 1991, I tried to persuade the Ethiopian Special Prosecutor, to press famine-related charges against the officials of the former military regime of Mengistu Haile Mariam (1974-91). Although the incoming government of former guerrillas from the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front was sympathetic—and their own

monument to the martyrs of their struggle in Mekele, Tigray region, includes statues representing the starving alongside other victims of war—the prosecutor was too conservative to consider setting any such precedent. The International Criminal Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia did not prosecute General Stanislav Galič, who administered the siege of Sarajevo, for starvation on the grounds that while people had gone hungry, no Sarajevan had actually died of hunger. These examples show how the jurisprudence of famine crimes is sorely underdeveloped. The best opportunity for specifying starvation as a crime arose with the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, set up to try the leadership of the Khmer Rouge for crimes committed during 1975-79, when more than a million Cambodians died from starvation. But the prosecutors took the route of their forebears at Nuremberg and dissolved famine crimes within other charges.

The law has tightened, somewhat, since Leeb was released from prison. In 1977, the International Committee of the Red Cross argued successfully for the ‘Protocols Additional to the Geneva Convention’: Article 54 of Protocol I states outright that ‘starvation of civilians as a method of warfare is prohibited.’ It is a bold statement of humanitarian law, but its application is limited. First, it obtains only in international conflicts, not in civil wars. And second, as David Marcus, a legal scholar in this field has pointed out, the obligation on warring parties to permit relief aid ‘retreats in the face of military necessity of blockade’.¹¹ In

1998, when the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court (ICC) was negotiated, a Cuban proposal to prohibit blockade was rejected. At precisely the same time, the US and its allies were enforcing sanctions on Iraq, despite a heavy death toll among Iraqi children. This permissive approach to starvation is a legacy of the maritime powers, which have always seen it as a weapon of war. Apparently they are reluctant to change.

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The reluctance to acknowledge famine crimes seemed to matter less for as long as famines were becoming rarer and less lethal. Other measures, legal, humanitarian and political, would suffice, as the abolition of famine came tantalisingly within reach. And because acts of starvation are invariably associated with other war crimes or crimes against humanity, outlawing and prosecuting those already-prohibited acts was an indirect way of enforcing the norm against famine. Once again, following the Nuremberg model, judges in international tribunals repeatedly expressed their abhorrence of starvation, and found defendants guilty of war crimes and crimes against humanity that plainly overlapped with faminogenesis – Marcus’s term for creating or compounding famine.

Practical humanitarian action—the delivery of food and medicine to the needy in wars—seemed in the period to offer a workable alternative to criminalising famine. From the 1980s onwards, international relief operations expanded hugely. For a relief worker in the field, the priority is

State Food Crimes, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2016.

¹¹ David Marcus, ‘Famine Crimes in International Law,’ *The American Journal of International Law*, 97/2 (2003) 245–281, p. 269. See also, Rhoda E. Howard-Hassmann,

getting assistance to the hungry: documenting and exposing the crimes that gave rise to that hunger are more than a distraction, they can be an obstacle. In 1988, during the early months of the civil war in Sudan, thousands of southern Sudanese were dying in displaced camps controlled by pro-government militia along the north-south internal border, with the worst death rates in the small town of Abyei. I argued with a relief worker about the need to condemn the army officers who were responsible for this. He was having none of it, and said, 'I would sup with the devil to get food to Abyei.' The following year,

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James Grant, then head of UNICEF, accepted a dinner invitation from General Fadallah Burma Nasir, coordinator of what was then

called the 'militia policy'—a forerunner of the Janjawiid who similarly pursued counter-insurgency on the cheap by dint of massacre and pillage. Grant emerged from dinner with a life-saving agreement, which turned into Operation Lifeline Sudan, the first-ever UN relief effort that crossed the battle lines in a civil war.

In my 1997 book *Famine Crimes* I excoriated the humanitarians for neglecting—and therefore, I argued, perpetuating—the political and military causes of famine.¹² Twenty years on, mass starvation is still caused by the same toxic mixture of war, dictatorship and atrocity. But over the decades, famines have become less lethal: with

better humanitarian responses, each disaster kills fewer people. Grant's choice to meet immediate humanitarian needs and turning a blind eye to the causes has surely saved many lives.

The success – and eventual thwarting -- of apolitical humanitarianism was most starkly evident under Bush II. Campaigning in New Hampshire for the Republican primary in 2000, Bush promised that he would never use denial of food as an instrument of foreign policy. He picked Andrew Natsios as his administrator of USAID, a figure with extensive humanitarian experience both in official disaster assistance and as head of the aid agency World Vision. A few years earlier, Natsios had taken a controversial public stand in favour of aiding North Korea during that country's famine, on the grounds that it was morally right to send US aid to feed the hungry of a nation with a hostile government and might make good political sense as well. On taking office, he called USAID's senior staff together and instructed them that they should be alert to the danger signs of famine, and always make it a priority to prevent it. In one of the most significant and under-acknowledged actions of his tenure, he authorised aid to Darfur in September 2003, six months before the humanitarian crisis there became a public scandal. Loudly attacked by the Save Darfur Coalition for his pragmatism and reluctance to describe Darfur as genocide, Natsios did more to save Darfurian lives than all of his critics put together.

The Bush Administration vividly illustrated that a political commitment to 'no famine on our watch' can yield results. But the Global War on Terror and the invasion of Iraq turned out to be an even more

¹² Alex de Waal, *Famine Crimes: Politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa*, London, James Currey, 1997.

compelling demonstration that starvation has a promising future once the norms of liberal internationalism are violated. Each of today's famines has a component that can be traced to the Bush-Cheney doctrine of national security and counter-terror trumping all other considerations. Their argument was that relief aid would feed terrorist insurgents, or help them to legitimize their rule over captive population. Meanwhile, those militant groups are paranoid that western aid is a weapon against them – to undermine their standing with local communities, or as a tool of espionage. The presumption that relief supplies and relief workers are neutral – providing what aid workers call 'humanitarian space' – is vanishing. It's evident in the Nigerian war on Boko Haram and in the Saudi-Emirati onslaught on Yemen. Somalia today hasn't recovered from the devastation of the 2011 famine, in which counter-terrorism overruled a humanitarian response until too late. And South Sudan owes its independence, in a roundabout way, to the support extended during the 1990s to the rebels of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) by the Clinton Administration, with the expressed intent of creating a new state with a 'regime that will not let Khartoum become a viper's nest for terrorist activities.'¹³ The SPLA leadership internalised the doctrine: they were entitled to become a member of the club of nations but didn't need to abide by

its rules—as long as they had the status of victims, and enemies of the Islamists in Khartoum.

The western humanitarian international was compromised once the counter-terrorism enabled the overruling of humanitarian principles by security dictat—as Peter Gill has explained in *Today we drop bombs, tomorrow we build bridges*.¹⁴ Seven weeks after 9/11, Secretary of State Colin Powell announced: 'I am serious about making sure we have the best relationship with the NGOs who are such a force multiplier for us, such an important part of our combat team.'¹⁵ Powell's message was not lost on militant jihadis, who deliberately blurred the distinction between intelligence agencies and aid agencies in their clampdown on foreign relief.

Counter-humanitarianism strikes from three quarters. One is the extremist rejection of humanitarian agencies, by movements such as ISIS and al-Shabaab. Another is the decision to discard humanitarian concerns and prioritise national security, as demonstrated by the Assad regime in Syria, the Saudi and Emirati blockade of Yemen, and the contempt of the regime in South Sudan for its erstwhile philanthropic fellow-travellers. Counter-terrorism and the legal and moral exceptionalism its proponents have granted themselves is a version of this. The third is xenophobia: famine prevention is based on the now-jeopardized notion that the poor, strangers,

¹³ Unnamed spokesperson for US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, 'Quote of the Day,' *The Washington Post*, 11 December 1997, p. A30.

¹⁴ Peter Gill, *Today We Drop Bombs, Tomorrow We Build Bridges: How foreign aid became a casualty of war*, London: Hurst, 2016.

¹⁵ Colin Powell, 'September 11, 2001: Attack on America: Secretary Colin L. Powell Remarks to the National Foreign Policy Conference for Leaders of Nongovernmental Organizations,' 26 October 2001, at: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/sept11/powell_brief31.asp.

and outsiders are as worthy of life-saving assistance as friends and familiars.

Drawing on a long Anglo-American tradition of economic warfare and blockade, the counter-humanitarian trend in London and Washington is both morally distasteful and practically stupid. When they fail to feed the hungry and treat the sick, extremist projects founder. Counter-terrorists appear just as inhumane as their enemies allege, when they impede aid and harass aid workers. If security strategists and xenophobes think that humanitarian crises will burn themselves out at a safe distance they are mistaken: the biggest demographic outcome of famine has always been migration: the Gulf countries are learning this lesson, as millions of Yemenis cross their borders.

The threat to the values of the humanitarians coincides with dramatic demands on their knowledge and skills. And they are desperately in need of money. Will they sup with the devil to get food to Abyei? When the liberal multilateral humanitarian project was in the ascendant, its advocates could quarrel among themselves over the precise course and direction of their upward climb. Today they will have to defend their values, and stand in solidarity with their fellow humanitarians from stricken countries such as South Sudan, Syria and Yemen, doing whatever they can to protect them from the threats they face. In a time of retrenchment, the best strategy

is to take the initiative: humanitarians should start by proposing that starvation should be added to the list of crimes against humanity.

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