Tony Blair and Military Intervention: Protector or Provocateur?

Peter Lee

In 1994, genocide made front page news across the world as neighbour turned upon neighbour in the East African State of Rwanda, ethnic tension erupting into a brutal and sustained massacre that would cost almost a million lives. The following year, genocidal violence returned to Europe for the first time since the Second World War when 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys were massacred in Srebrenica at the hands of a Serbian paramilitary unit. In both cases, small and ill-equipped contingents of UN peacekeepers were forced to observe – impotently – as humanitarian catastrophes unfolded before them.

Against the backdrop of these atrocities in Rwanda and Serbia, Tony Blair – as the new Leader of the Opposition in the British Parliament – was setting out the policies that would shape his Premiership when he was elected Prime Minister in 1997. Key to his foreign policy was the belief that responsible, capable states should be prepared to use force to preserve the lives of innocents, like those in Rwanda and Bosnia, faced with mass displacement or extermination. By the time the Serb leader Slobodan Milosevic escalated violence against Kosovar Muslims in 1998–9, Blair’s outlook was fixed, viewing the Kosovo emergency primarily as a moral issue.1

For Blair, military intervention was, and would remain, a matter of humanitarian concern based on a moral responsibility to protect innocent victims of state-sanctioned violence: pre-dating Kofi Annan’s announcement of the UN’s adoption of the doctrine of Responsibility to Protect in 2005.2 In his now-famous Chicago Speech of 24 April 1999 Blair proposed a new Doctrine of the International Community. There he set out the global political context in which states should be willing to interfere across internationally recognised borders – violating the sovereignty of degenerate or failing states – to prevent genocide, ethnic cleansing or other crimes against humanity. The questions he asked himself as he considered his response to a number of international political crises included: ‘should this be allowed to happen or not? Should this

---

regime remain in power? Should these people continue to suffer injustice? These questions, and many others besides, have been addressed or at least touched upon in numerous ways.

John Kampfner provides a journalistic overview of Blair’s foreign policy through the prism of the five interventionist operations or wars into which the UK was led by the then Prime Minister. Kampfner prioritized the political aspects of Blair’s military interventions, interviewing more than forty key actors. However, apart from recognising that there was a moral dimension to Blair’s actions Kampfner offers no analysis of the moral basis of Blair’s arguments. David Coates and Joel Krieger focus on the 2003 Iraq War, exploring whether he was justified in doing so. While emphasizing US strategic aims and linking those to Blair’s response to 9/11 and his commitment to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the US, they also address the moral argument in terms that belong to the just war tradition – though this is not explicitly invoked by the authors – asking whether there was a just cause and legitimate international authorisation, and whether military action was a last resort and pursued with honest intentions (rather than for the strategic aim of securing mineral resources). Philippe Sands provides a coruscating critique of the legal basis of the Iraq invasion. With the insight of a QC Sands identifies the flaws in the legal arguments of both the Bush and Blair administrations, though the focus of this paper will be on Blair’s declared moral, as opposed to legal, motivations and arguments. Examples from the academy include Paul Hoggett’s analysis of ‘the security case, the global strategic case and the modernising case for war’, which sets aside the moral dimension. David Fisher and Nigel Biggar use just war criteria to assess the morality of the 2003 Iraq War. However, in arguing the humanitarian aspect of the justification of intervention Biggar refers solely to Saddam’s historical atrocities and not the contemporary (at that time) threat to the civilian population. In contrast, Oliver Daddow begins from Blair’s moral imperative before arguing the significance of domestic politics in shaping the then prime minister’s foreign policy. Elsewhere, I have explored Blair’s moral justification of the 2003 Iraq War at

3 Blair, A Journey, p. 229.