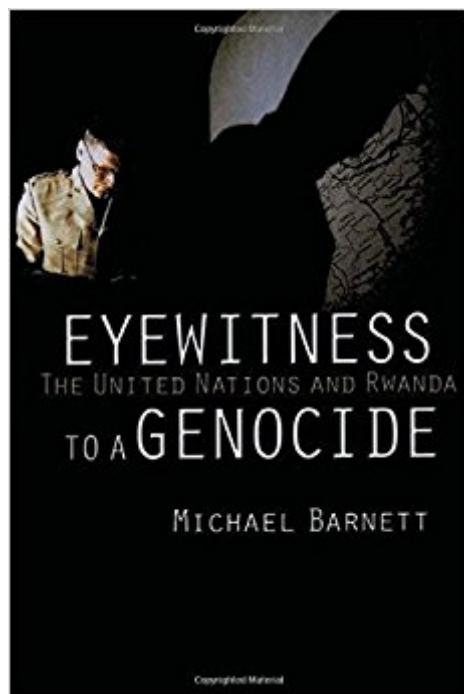


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# Eyewitness To A Genocide: The United Nations And Rwanda



## Synopsis

Why was the UN a bystander during the Rwandan genocide? Do its sins of omission leave it morally responsible for the hundreds of thousands of dead? Michael Barnett, who worked at the U.S. Mission to the United Nations from 1993 to 1994, covered Rwanda for much of the genocide. Based on his first-hand experiences, archival work, and interviews with many key participants, he reconstructs the history of the UN's involvement in Rwanda. In the weeks leading up to the genocide, the author documents, the UN was increasingly aware or had good reason to suspect that Rwanda was a site of crimes against humanity. Yet it failed to act. In *Eyewitness to a Genocide*, Barnett argues that its indifference was driven not by incompetence or cynicism but rather by reasoned choices cradled by moral considerations. Employing a novel approach to ethics in practice and in relationship to international organizations, Barnett offers an unsettling possibility: the UN culture recast the ethical commitments of well-intentioned individuals, arresting any duty to aid at the outset of the genocide. Barnett argues that the UN bears some moral responsibility for the genocide. Particularly disturbing is his observation that not only did the UN violate its moral responsibilities, but also that many in New York believed that they were "doing the right thing" as they did so. Barnett addresses the ways in which the Rwandan genocide raises a warning about this age of humanitarianism and concludes by asking whether it is possible to build moral institutions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

As a staffer on the U.S. Mission to the U.N. in 1994, Barnett observed the U.N.'s reaction to the

Rwandan genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 Tutsis were murdered by Hutus over a period of about three months; at the height of the killing, 5.5 deaths occurred every minute. Though officials at the U.N. Secretariat knew the facts, the U.N. took no meaningful action other than to declare that they remained "actively seized of the matter." (Barnett was himself initially opposed to intervention.) In puzzling through the U.N.'s decisions, the author offers not a scathing indictment of its timidity in the face of mass brutality so much as a searching and nuanced moral analysis. In his attempts to explain how "those working at the U.N. approached Rwanda not as individuals but rather as members of bureaucracies," Barnett carefully examines the U.N.'s institutional values and the ways in which decent international civil servants adhered to norms that repeatedly drew their attention away from the Rwandan crisis. All too aware of their powerlessness when member states refused to commit forces and desperate to avoid repetition of the debacle in Somalia (think *Black Hawk Down*), U.N. diplomats ultimately concluded that nonintervention was the ethical course. Barnett by no means exonerates the U.N.; in fact he insists that member states notably France and the U.S. knew of the genocide, had the power to act, yet failed to do so until it was too late. This insightful, balanced book reveals an unsettling paradox: in making choices it deemed moral, the U.N. tolerated the ultimate immorality of genocide. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Students of government are familiar with Graham Allison's *Essence of Decision*, which used the Cuban Missile Crisis to show how bureaucratic politics influence policy making. Barnett, who served in the U.S. Mission to the United Nations, has produced a worthy companion to Allison's work. A witness to UN inaction during the Rwanda genocide of the 1990s, he suggests that institutions can disfigure not only rational decision making, pace Allison, but also the character of the officials who work in them with disastrous results. The bureaucratic culture within the UN, maintains Barnett, produced a common understanding of the organization's role in world politics. This vision was embodied in abstract concepts such as neutrality, impartiality, and consent, as well as rules governing when peacekeeping was the right tool to defuse ethnic conflict. Applied to the Rwanda genocide, these benchmarks dictated inaction. As a result, many UN officials sincerely believed that standing idly by was not only correct but also the morally virtuous stance. A chilling work despite its pervasive academic jargon; recommended for all international affairs collections. James R. Holmes, Ph.D. candidate, Fletcher Sch. of Law & Diplomacy, Tufts Univ., Medford, MACopyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

great book

**Eyewitness to a Genocide The United Nations and Rwanda, by Michael Barnett (read 14 Nov 2016)**  
Having come to know someone from Rwanda, I decided to read this 2002 book by a professor who was working at the United Nations in 1994, when the genocide in Rwanda happened. The author, while calling his book "Eyewitness to a Genocide" was never in Rwanda, but has studied carefully the events which resulted in the United Nations failing to stop the genocide. The book carefully dissects the events and concludes there are various persons who failed in regard to the horrendous genocide. The Canadian general who was the head of the U.N. peacekeeping force in Rwanda sought to prevent the atrocity but the will to prevent it was lacking on the part of the people at the United Nations. The Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, shares some of the blame, as does the U.S. The book is thought-provoking in its earlier part but the learned study as to blame does get less interesting--especially since there seems to be enough blame to ascribe to many--besides, of course, the evil perpetrators themselves.

As stated above, Barnett was a staffer on the U.S. Mission to the U.N. in 1994 and thus had a first hand view of the workings/failure of the Secretariat, the Security Council, the United Nations and the international community as a whole. Unlike so many other books about Rwanda, Barnett refuses to simply write off the UN or the international community as uncaring or unconcerned about the unfolding genocide in Rwanda. Rather, he shows that those involved were deeply concerned but trapped by their own rules and internal bureaucratic logic, leading eventually to paralysis and inaction. Coming fast on the heels of Somalia and Bosnia, Rwanda was left to implode because everyone involved operated on a logical/ethical plane seemingly far removed from the actual humanitarian crisis on the ground. With the UN overstretched and concerned about its reputation/survival, the members states of the security council unwilling to send troops or supplies into a raging anarchy, and UN rules dictating when peacekeeping and intervention were justified, Rwanda was left to fend for itself. Barnett does a great job of presenting the facts and their corresponding arguments and explaining just how impossible a situation the UN was facing. As he says, none of this justifies UN inaction, but it does help us to understand how and why the world stood by as nearly 1 million people were slaughtered. This book would not serve as a good introduction of the genocide itself, as the focus is really on the United Nations and its handling of the situation. If it is the actual genocide you want to learn about, read another book ("We Wish to Inform

You That Tomorrow We Will Be Killed With Our Families" is a great introduction, as is Fergal Keane's "Season of Blood.") But if you want to understand how and why the international community so gravely failed Rwanda, this is the best book available.

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