

Review of Gérard Prunier's Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005)

By

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For decades Darfur has been neglected by the forces of globalization and development. Few agricultural improvement projects ever made their way to the foothills of Jebel Marra. No sweatshops exported clothing to Walmart. Is there even a cybercafé in El Fasher, one wonders? Darfur has also been neglected in academia. There have been only a handful of books based on field or archival research in Darfur for the past twenty year. A trio of books was published in the late 1980s: Alex de Waal's Famine that Kills; Dennis Tully's Culture and Context in Sudan: The Process of Market Incorporation in Dar Masalit; and Lidwien Kapteijns' Mahdist Faith and Sudanic Tradition: History of Dar Masalit, 1870-1930. Karin Willemse's One Foot In Heaven: Narratives On Gender And Islam In Darfur, West-Sudan, based on her 2001 doctoral dissertation, should be published at some point, and is eagerly waited. A genocide or its equivalent has happened in the meantime, and three books and one forthcoming do not amount to much to provide the appropriate historical and sociological context.. Even if they are based on the amazing earlier work of R.S. O'Fahey (well, earlier by five years from the first group), and even if they are supplemented by the occasional journal article from the likes of Abdullahi Osman El-Tom.

The first of an expected bumper crop of books about Darfur is important. The generalist books, such as that of Gérard Prunier, currently researcher with the CNRS, and director of the Centre français des études éthiopienne, are aimed at a wide audience and cover a lot of ground. They attempt to provide master narratives, while acknowledging complexity. The goals of those that follow will vary. Some will be aimed at exploring the military mechanics of the catastrophe. Some will analyze the international response. I am sure someday there will be a detailed mapping of rainfall patterns to village origins of SLA, JEM and *janjawid* fighters.

But for now we have the generalist books that offer broad overviews and interpretation rather than new research. Here is what happened according to Prunier. Darfur was a backwater with no development and little political influence in Khartoum for almost 100 years. In the 1980s, the area rather suddenly became an extended battleground for the Chad civil war and Libyan involvement in that war. Prunier is ambiguous about which effects of the 1980s were more important. He argues that the proxy extension of the Chad civil war into Darfur changed local attitudes about inter-ethnic relations, making people take sides, and organize ethnically in preparation for armed conflict. He also argues that government and traditional authorities were delegitimized in favor of the "power of the gun"; individuals were more likely to seek local, ethnic and violent solutions to conflict than to use national-level government institutions or even traditional tribal leadership institutions (p. 94). The area also became awash in weapons, making violence more lethal and retaliation quicker. Where before two or three persons might be knifed in a dispute, now automatic weapons might be used. Prunier further argues that two Libyan

proxy groups, the Failaka al-Islamiyya and the Tajammu al-Arabi, were deliberately poisoning some of the wells from which they drank water by spreading a racist pro-Arab propaganda. Into this mix followed a decade of generalized and diffuse insecurity. The insecurity started with the ill-fated attempt by Daud Bolad to open an SPLA front in Darfur. Throughout the 1990s the government in Khartoum was preoccupied with a larger project of spreading Islamic revolution and containing the SPLA and American hostility until oil exports could flow. When the oil started flowing in 1999, the regime quickly fractured, with al-Beshir ousting al-Turabi. In retaliation, according to Prunier, al-Turabi ignited the Darfur civil war. The regime's response, of authorizing a scorched-earth policy by the *janjaweed*, was a predictable political maneuver by a clique intent on maintaining ideology, power and privilege. The result was mass killing and displacement.

There are two building blocks to Prunier's narrative: first, explaining how many people in Darfur were willing to resort to violence and willing to maintain structures of 'command and control' for violent confrontations; and second, explaining how events in Khartoum pushed those violent structures into total war.

On the first building block, notice that the mobilization of ethnicity for conflict and the promulgation of ethnic-based hatred are different things. Prunier does not sharply differentiate between the two, but much hinges on the relative assessment of the weight of each factor. To me this is the crux of the matter in understanding the Darfur conflict and mechanisms to promote resolution. Evidence is key here. Prunier asserts (p. 61): "the Darfuri were increasingly contaminated with the atmosphere of violence and ethnic hatred that the outside forces were deploying..." but as evidence gives in the next sentence the 1987 massacre, by Rizeigat, of Dinka displaced persons in Ed-Da'ien, an event that had little to do with the present conflict in Darfur, and then the next sentence after that is about the Tajammu al-Arabi, as if by association (by closeness in sentences) somehow they had been involved organizationally in the Ed Da'ien massacre, for which no evidence or source is presented. Prunier is lackadaisical about evidence of the sociology of the fighter because his narrative is not one of animus motivating people. He believes, instead, that there is plenty of evidence that *ethnic-based conflict organized by outside forces* was a constant feature of the 1980s and 1990s and is at the heart of the catastrophe. Prunier does a nice job of tracing through some of the major battles (though that is too strong a word), and showing how Chadian forces, Libya, and factions in Khartoum were playing out proxy fighting in Darfur.

On the second building block of the narrative Prunier is quite sharp on how events in Khartoum in 1999 began the process leading to the 2003 conflict. Prunier argues that when al-Turabi was ousted in 1999, there was a deliberate attempt by his faction to resort to armed conflict in Darfur to weaken the regime (pp. 86-88). The evidence here is from a "high-ranking SPLA cadre," and so non-connected regular academics apparently will have to wait 50 years until the spies and operatives write their memoirs before we learn more. Or it may be that the investigators of the International Criminal Court will shed some light on the origins of the weaponry of the SLA.

Prunier argues that the military actions by the SLA and JEM in early 2003 generated a exaggerated response by the regime: here was a real threat, unlike the perennial, containable and cooptable southern rebels. He writes (p. xi) of a sense of desperation in the regime in February 2003: "It suddenly felt that the Muslim family was splintering." I worry that Prunier presents little evidence that the SLA presented a real threat. In hindsight, the SLA disintegrated with amazing rapidity, in conditions that should have strengthened it. Its nominal supporters were

subject to a vicious campaign, the use of proxy and disorganized militias meant there were plenty of opportunities to capture weapons, foreign powers and aid organizations provided resources to sustain the rebellion, and foreign intermediators quickly gave international standing to leaders and their supporters. If the SLA could not survive these conditions (when the Chad factions did), then the fear expressed by the regime seems, in retrospect, to have been a huge miscalculation.

Prunier does a nice job of setting up the background to the ruling elite in Khartoum that explains the exaggerated response. The *awlad al-beled*, the northerners who have dominated the government of Sudan through various Khartoum regimes, saw and see the country as “their” country. Factions within the group have repeatedly justified “any means necessary” to maintain their control over the seat of sovereignty. He is scathing on Sadiq al-Mahdi (e.g. pp. 52-55). Their actions have rarely drawn significant popular resistance from Khartoum and other urban centers with an educated population numbering in the millions. To that extent, one can speak of the regimes as a continuity of factions with a common thread of popular legitimacy. The regimes rule by consent, rather than by terror. Opposition figures cycle in and out of power and prison. Of course, there are numerous principled opponents who have been imprisoned, tortured and executed, but the large mass of northern Sudanese has never been persuaded into sustained, clandestine, and subversive political action. There has been no insurgency or *intifada* in northern Sudan. The Americans in Iraq only hope for that kind of minimal consent. The ruling elites in Khartoum are relatively unchecked when it comes to what they do on the periphery of their rule.

An aside on semantics is relevant here. Prunier’s dust jacket promises a correction to “generalizations and inaccuracies” that have portrayed the conflict “as an ethnic clash marked by Arab-on-African violence.” It turns out that in Prunier’s view the inaccuracy is that the Arab vs. African clash is not a *local* and *ethnic* one; it is a *national* and *racial* one. Prunier concludes the book with a discordant short chapter where he lays out this narrative for the Darfur conflict (p. 165): the “decision-makers” had decided on the course of “annihilation of a racial group” and so “Darfur was going to be yet another” genocide, following the South and the Nuba Mountains. He lays it on thick: the northern elite has been deepening its self-conception as a racial group, characterized by Arabness, rather than as a constellation of ethnic groups defined by tribal and geographic origins in Sudan or as the legitimate vessels of Sudanese nationhood (as Heather Sharkey argued for the generation of independence). Prunier unfortunately succumbs to some cheap but popular psychologizing about alienation and double alienation and paradoxes of identity (Arabs in Sudan but *‘abid* in Saudi Arabia, etc.), and presents no evidence for this provocative thesis. Do regime members, by their words, actions, art, culture, etc. express more Arabism than earlier generations? Are they marrying Saudi Arabian princesses? Sending their children to boarding school in Kuwait? Adopting new forms of dress closer to their ideal of an Arab? Erecting air conditioned tents and hosting afternoon tea? Plenty of room for future research there, though my sense is that a sociology or anthropology graduate student may not feel the provocation worth the effort. I personally think that ethnicity (or the local and tribal variety) remains the organizing structure, rather than a new or stronger racial identity.

In any case, for Prunier the two building blocks that explain the catastrophe in Darfur are really one: outside forces have been manipulating local actors. This is a hopeful analysis in the midst of tragedy. If outside forces are responsible, then they can be contained by other outside forces. It contrasts most strikingly with two other plausible candidates. The first is that structural but local conditions (especially changes in local ecology and growth of population) generate ethnic organizations that are unchecked by distant hegemony and so will likely continue to utilize violence on a large scale. Prunier has one mention of ecology (p. 47) and rightly, in my

view, drops the idea. Every region of the Sahel from Mauritania to Eritrea has similar political ecology issues, and the catastrophe of Darfur cannot be explained by them. The second is that ideological messages coming from Arabist organizations and organizers have captured the hearts and minds of youth in the region, become self-reinforcing, and generate racial conflict inspired by hatred and loathing. Without insightful long-term ethnography and plenty of critical analysis of local discourses, this hypothesis can go nowhere. Prunier does a very bad job of this possibility. He insists on using “Arab” and “African” sometimes in quotes and sometimes not in quotes, and like almost all writers invariably uses the passive voice when discussing local manifestations of these meta-identities. He gives passing glances to the keyword *zurga*, but never comes down clear on how and why he thinks “Black Africans” is an appropriate gloss into English for *zurga*.

As a generalist book, aimed at a wide audience and covering a lot of ground, attempting to provide master narratives while acknowledging complexity, Prunier does a fair job. One has to do a fair amount of reading between the lines. The desire to tell the facts in chronological order means that various strands of argument are picked up and left off in odd places. Surprisingly, the summary of developments and linkages to Chad is confused, with no effort to get the novice reader a sense of proportion. Goukouni Oueddei, for example, is only mentioned in one footnote, even though he ruled Chad for an important period for the roots of the crisis in Darfur. There is precious little mention of any relevant academic literature or findings, for example on the recruitment of child soldiers and strategies of rebel movements, the onset and prolongation of civil wars, the legal issues surrounding the Genocide Convention. The book is aimed squarely at the generalist interested in the particulars of Sudan and Darfur, rather than the academic putting Sudan in comparative perspective. The book will infuriate the bookophile by its sloppiness. Typos and grammatical mistakes are on practically every page. Cornell University Press and the editors of the series have some serious penance to pay. Could not have passed the book over to an editor and delay publication by one day in order to have something that could be assigned without shame to undergraduates?

Finally, a concern that provoked some internal debate among my colleagues and acquaintances interested in Sudan and Africa. Should a book be judged by its cover? In Prunier’s case, we have an unsavory image of a man praying over a desiccated corpse presumably found by chance on a desolate stretch of the Sahara. Sven Torfinn, a photographer based in Kenya, was there to take the picture. And his driver must have been with him. And the print journalist most likely accompanying him. And the man praying. All of them perhaps in a car, driving around in the hopes of finding stories and pictures to inform an audience, in lands far away, that was interested in reading and seeing. So what did the four of them say to each other after the picture was taken? Did they bury the corpse? Did the man have a name? Who decided to put the picture of this dead man on the cover of a book to be sold long after the desert winds and animals had left him a skeleton? I ask these questions because a book with the word genocide in the title, even if an ambiguous one, is a solemn and serious affair. The dead man deserves respect, and Prunier writes the book out of respect (on p. x in the introduction he explains his “respect for the dead”). But I believe that respecting the dead means not selling them, and I am afraid that in this case that is what has happened. A picture of a dead man has been sold to sell a book and to sell a story. I do not mean literally sold; even an academic book about a current genocide is unlikely to make very much money, and Torfinn probably gave the rights to the photograph for a token sum. I mean morally sold, in that an image of a dead man was subject to a calculus: Is the shock value worth the disrespect? If the cover compels people

to read the book, should not that be justification enough? The photograph is not standing as a testimony itself, the way Gilles Peress's sad book of photographs was testimony for Rwanda. Here the photograph is being used for a purpose. The more I thought about it the less happy I was with Cornell University Press. I contacted the photographer, Sven Torfinn, and here is part of the story of the photo, from the article published in the Guardian by Jeevan Vasagar on Tuesday August 31, 2004:

A rebel soldier, Ahmed Yusuf Ibrahim, identified himself as the brother of one of the victims. Mr Ibrahim, 45, said that at the time the government was destroying villages in the area, he and his younger brother, Mohammed Yusuf Ibrahim, were civilians. The market town in which they lived was attacked from the air and then on the ground by Sudanese soldiers in cars and Janjaweed on horseback. "I ran, and many women and children ran with me," Mr Ibrahim said. "I came to the summit of a hill, and I saw far away they captured many people. I ran further away, and I didn't know what had happened to my brother." Mr Ibrahim was taken to the scene and identified his 35-year-old brother from his jallabiya robe and his shoes. Questions remain about precisely who these men and boys were. Mr. Ibrahim is now a rebel fighter, and the rebels have much to gain from exploiting the sympathy of the West, but it is hard to fake the emotions he displays.