



Roger Normand, Sarah Zaidi. *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice.* United Nations Intellectual History Project Series. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. xxxii + 486 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-34935-4; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-253-21934-3.

Reviewed by Hidetoshi Hashimoto (East Tennessee State University)

Published on H-Human-Rights (September, 2009)

Commissioned by Rebecca K. Root

A Historical Account of the Conception of UN Human Rights Mechanisms

Roger Normand, associate professor of Law at the Lahore University, Pakistan, and Sarah Zaidi, associate professor at the Lahore University of Management Sciences, have produced an impressive volume analyzing how the history of human rights evolved around the United Nations and critical roles played by governmental representatives, professionals in the UN secretariat, and nongovernmental organizations. This volume is a part of the United Nations Intellectual History Project (UNIHP) begun in 1999 as an independent research effort based at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies at The Graduate Center of The University of New York. The current volume, *Human Rights at the UN*, is the ninth volume in the series. The project is expected to produce fifteen volumes.

The book consists of three parts. The first part is entitled “Human Rights Foundations in the First Half of the Twentieth Century.” It begins with the Hague Peace Conference of 1899, the first attempt to internationalize rights in the framework of peace and security via international humanitarian law. The focus of chapter 2 is the failure of the League of Nations and the rise of fascism and communism between the world wars. In chapter 3, Normand and Zaidi argue that after the Second World War there was a revival of human rights with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s Declaration of Four Freedoms, which stressed human rights and freedoms from tyranny, and with dozens of bills of international human rights including the drafting of the UN Charter. Perhaps most important, Article 55 of the UN Charter proclaimed that all member states should “promote universal respect for, and observations of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all.” The contention of Normand and Zaidi is that human rights grew out of the triumph

of liberalism over communism and fascism.

The second part is entitled “Establishing the UN Human Rights Framework.” Normand and Zaidi discuss the institutionalization of human rights at the United Nations. This part deals with how a universally recognized set of international laws evolved into international enforcement mechanisms at the United Nations in order to prevent recurrence of the horrors of war. The authors point out that the supremacy of state sovereignty created inherent structural weakness in the human rights system. Chapter 5 discusses the formation of the Commission on Human Rights, a principal human rights organization at the United Nations. The decision made by the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to make the members of the Commission on Human Rights government representatives rather than independent experts greatly politicized the human rights project and ensured a rivalry between two great powers (i.e., the United States and the Soviet Union) within it. In chapter 6, the authors examine how the Commission on Human Rights produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and two legally binding covenants, namely, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. They argue that one of the weaknesses of the UDHR was the fact that it is based on the Western model of individual rights, which may not resonate with non-Western cultures where collective rights (e.g., family, society, state) take precedent over individual rights.

The third part is entitled “The Impact of Civil Society and Decolonization,” though there is more focus on decolonization than civil society here. As a result of decolonization, UN membership underwent explosive growth. This caused a tremendous change in the

dynamics at the United Nations. Chapter 8 discusses human rights of special groups including minorities, indigenous peoples, women, and children. The final chapter examines the emergence of the right to development. The concepts of a right to development and the New International Economic Order (NIEO) were conceived as means to narrow the gap between developed and developing countries and to realize economic justice and redistribution of wealth. However, the authors explain that the human rights framework is less equipped to redress socioeconomic injustice.

Normand and Zaidi argue that one of the core issues in a history of human rights is the tension between the realist outlook based on state sovereignty and international human rights law mandating protection of human rights and the pursuit of universal justice. The United Nations is an association of independent sovereign states based on the principles of political independence, territorial integrity, and nonintervention in internal affairs of sovereign states. As Luis Kunter argues, “total sovereignty is to the state what egoism is to the individual—the last, holiest, most highly treasured source of all disaster.”[1] The significance of the Nuremberg Trial is that it af-

firmed that individuals are subjects of international law by articulating that “crimes against international law are committed by men, not by abstract entities, and only by punishing individuals who commit such crimes can the provisions of international law be enforced.”[2] Today, human rights are considered the legitimate concern of the international community. Therefore, human rights concerns must prevail over state sovereignty.

Overall, this volume is extremely well written, organized, and researched, and provides a comprehensive understanding of the development of human rights at the United Nations. It is informative and an important contribution to the literature on the work of the United Nations in the field of human rights. I highly recommend the book to scholars and students interested in historical aspects of the UN human rights work.

Notes

[1]. Luis Kunter, *World Habeas Corpus* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1962), 168

[2]. Nuremberg Judgement, United Nations Document A/CN 4/1/Rev., I, February 10, 1949, 19-21.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Hidetoshi Hashimoto. Review of Normand, Roger; Zaidi, Sarah, *Human Rights at the UN: The Political History of Universal Justice*. H-Human-Rights, H-Net Reviews. September, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24885>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.