

Book Review: *Peacekeeping Under Fire: Culture and Intervention*, Robert A. Rubinstein, Paradigm Publishers

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With the arguable connection between the collapse of the Soviet Union, the rise of ethnic conflict, and proliferation of civil wars, a great burden has fallen on response humanitarian actors – among them peacekeepers. As such, the scope, importance and number of peacekeeping missions have all greatly increased. For example, twenty-six UN missions were established between 1988 and 1995 – double the amount from the preceding four decades. Billions of dollars have been dedicated to this cause, and millions of people are affected by the peacekeeping process. While immense in scope, it is not a well understood institution. How exactly do soldiers of different upbringing work together in peacekeeping missions? Does culture influence the success of a mission, or only further its failure? As the world gets “smaller,” and the melting pot is introduced with new cultures and ideas, these questions take central stage.

Peacekeeping Under Fire, a short, yet encompassing book, provides a convincing perspective on questions dealing, in part, with the military make up of peacekeeping missions. The research and information presented in the book is the result of Dr. Robert A. Rubinstein’s long career as an anthropologist. With the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism approaching, and the implications which came as consequence, this book serves to provide a timely message. While major warfare between nations is largely absent from international affairs - it has expanded and ballooned in the intra-national perspective. Humanitarian organizations and peacekeepers alike are challenged to provide service in a world of increasing ethnic and religious animosity and misunderstanding. Victory is no longer defined by resources or territory, but rather by greatest attention to detail, culture and stability.

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At times, we have seen peacekeeping fail. While we can point to disastrous peacekeeping missions (i.e. 1994 Rwanda), there are many examples of failure that are the result of subtle misunderstanding. Rubinstein examines a key element leading to failures, or near failures: “cultural considerations affect all levels of peacekeeping, including the most microlevel interactions on the ground and the most macrolevel interactions in the international community.” (138) From daily food distribution to working with organizations on the ground, culture can become the crucial breaking or solidifying point of a mission. This is especially evident when we remember that peacekeeping forces are often made up of soldiers from various cultures, and work on a staggered schedule. With barely enough time to become accommodated to the nuances of the country they are serving in, those soldiers are deployed elsewhere, opening the door for newcomers.

Peacekeepers, which are ultimately made up of the servicemen of a traditional national army, often have to leave behind their national military upbringing in exchange for the ideals of that peacekeeping mission. Rubinstein goes into detail comparing peacekeepers and the soldiers of traditional armies in their hierarchical standards, interaction with population among other criteria. One of the more striking chapters in the book outlines the importance of symbolism in those troops coming from traditional armies into peacekeeping forces. Considering that peacekeeping “engages people from all around the world and from all walks of life,” (86) creating strong links between servicemen of different upbringings provides a culture of teamwork and understanding within peacekeeping missions. Rubinstein outlines a comparison of American and non-American soldiers to interpret their understanding of their roles and their duties as peacekeepers. Both saw the missions as necessary, albeit for much different reasons. While most non-American forces see peacekeeping as a noble duty, American troops saw

peacekeeping as a route to a promotion, a transitional period for some earlier career mistakes, or as a burden.

From the most macro-level issues, such as reinforcing legitimacy, to micro-level necessities such as troop interaction during off-hours, culture plays a defining role in the success of a peacekeeping mission. Correctly, peacekeeping is coupled with the ideals propagated by the United Nations. With this impressive work, Rubinstein begins to unravel this often generalized and misunderstood branch of UN responsibility. Peacekeeping is not a remedy that is “one size fits all.” The intricacies that go into a successful peacekeeping force perhaps are not yet completely understood. The author has undertaken a monumental task in helping to unravel one of the most controversial, yet crucial, functions of the UN. This clarification of a highly complex issue is enough to regard *Peacekeeping Under Fire* as highly sophisticated.

Peacekeeping Under Fire does a fine job of transitioning from anthropology to international studies, and displays professional and seasoned research in both. Through interviews, site visits and various other methods, Rubinstein gathered research for this work. The major ethnographic research for this book took place from 1988 to 1992 when the author lived in Egypt and worked as an observer of the United Nations Truce Supervision Organization mission in that nation. The chapter of *Peacekeeping Under Fire* dedicated to the description of interviews, and growing rapport between the author and the on-site staff is interesting, but reads exceedingly like a personal journal. This is not a complaint: the attention to detail gives the text an almost novel-like feel at times and helps create a balance with the parts of the text which are heavy with academic wording.

While the book is interesting, insightful and timely, there were some minor complaints worth mentioning. The text is just shy of one-hundred and fifty pages, and leaves a reader

wanting more. Seemingly, the author could easily have dedicated more attention to topics touched upon but not expanded. More than anything, the book would have benefited greatly from a study of a failed peacekeeping mission, coupled with research on the extent of cultural considerations in that case. If in fact Rubinstein's claim that "in thinking about peacekeeping, culture is not a peripheral subject; it should be a core policy consideration," (42) hold true – an example of a culturally devoid peacekeeping mission would have been supportive.

As mentioned, the chapter describing the authors experience in Egypt reads less like an academic text and more like a journal. This is appreciate for a number of reasons, but sets a much different tone for the book – one that is reversed with ongoing chapters.

The possible audience for *Peacekeeping Under Fire* is wide. As a current graduate student, I can easily see this book being assigned for conflict resolution or a course dealing with humanitarian action. Having taken the later, I found Rubinstein's work an insightful contrast and companion to other reading on peacekeeping missions. As a recent undergraduate, this book would fit in well into a course on United Nations agencies and functions or international relations. The book is dense at times, but completely approachable and easily read.

In the process of writing this review, a news piece caught my attention. It tied well into the book material, and clarified a point of confusion for me. While the research for this book was gathered over twenty years ago within a field that is ever-adapting, the argument is relevant and timely. Starting in October, Al-Jazeera began running a string of interviews with Afghani soldiers who recently deserted from the NATO trained Afghani police to join forces with Talibani fighters. While trustworthy numbers were unavailable, it was not a one-time occurrence. Their conversation was due to the behavior of US and NATO troops who drank, took part in prostitution and gambled – all banned by Islam. Taking great offense to such behavior, the

Afghanis left the national army. Very clearly, their reason for leaving was cultural. With the exception of prostitution, behavior such as smoking, drinking and gambling is a common part of life for some western cultures. For the peace-enforcement mission in Afghanistan, this lack of cultural adaptation by NATO forces has translated to the highest presence of attacks by the Taliban since 2002. Part of Rubinstein's argument is that more attention to cultural misunderstandings such as the one illustrated here would ensure greater success in the peacekeeping process.

With the help of books like *Peacekeeping Under Fire*, we may come to a better understanding of the deterrents to an effective peacekeeping force – an often crucial part of modern humanitarian action.