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**Neve Gordon and Nicola Perugini.** *Human Shields: A History of People in the Line of Fire.* Oakland: University of California Press, 2020. ISBN: 9780520301849 (hardcover, \$29.95).

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In March 2011, as the Arab Spring rippled across North Africa and vicious conflict erupted in Libya between rebel forces and the country's longtime leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi, the United Nations Security Council implemented a no-fly zone over the country, marking a dramatic escalation in the international community's involvement. Just days earlier, Gaddafi had promised an assault on any foreign troops should a no-fly zone be enacted. Caught up in the midst of this wrangling were four *New York Times* journalists who had been captured by Gaddafi's forces while covering the conflict and, at the time that the UN resolution was passed, found themselves in a well-appointed government jail in Tripoli. The group later wrote that "after the no-fly zone was imposed and we heard volleys of antiaircraft fire, we thought that a desperate government could make us human shields."<sup>1</sup>

I would have forgotten about this episode and the journalists' (well-founded) fears had it not been for Neve Gordon and Nicola Perugini's outstanding and thought-provoking book, *Human Shields: A History of People in the Line of Fire*. Theirs is a work laden with insights and offerings, the most salient of which force the reader to consider the innumerable ways in which a person can become a human shield, and, disturbingly, to confront the realization that not all shields – and thus not all humans – are created equal. In untangling the complexity of shielding, the authors have achieved that most elusive of feats, producing a book that is at once pathbreaking for the specialist and compulsively readable for the public.

The introduction frames the idea of the human shield fluidly and comprehensively. From the outset, the authors make clear that there are two types of human shields: involuntary (those coerced to serve as a buffer) and voluntary (those who put themselves between aggressors and an intended target). But, it soon becomes evident that political, social, cultural, economic, and geographic stakes attach different values to the "human" in human shields. As the authors note, "it is the value ascribed to the lives of some people that explains why their vulnerability can become a weapon of deterrence, while the lives of others are perceived to be expendable" (5). The death of Rachel Corrie, an American college student who placed herself between an Israeli bulldozer and the home of a Palestinian pharmacist in Gaza, shocked and appalled much of the world because she was a young, affluent, white Western woman volunteering with a humanitarian organization (1, 114-115). Similar headlines and outrage would likely not have appeared if the victim had been a Palestinian. The inherent disparity that characterizes human lives and determines who is an "effective" shield is accounted for in part by the laws of war, which reinforce how race, religion, gender, and class, amongst other conditions, have shaped contemporary and historical understandings of "the human" and, consequently, the ethics of violence (6). This dynamic, between violence and power relationships, most animates the authors and becomes the book's lodestar. "Human shields are the book's main protagonists," Gordon and Perugini write, "and the production of humane violence is the plot" (12).

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Shadid, Lynsey Addario, Stephen Farrell, and Tyler Hicks, "4 Times Journalists Held Captive in Libya Faced Days of Brutality," *New York Times*, 22 March 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/world/africa/23times.html>.

The book proceeds chronologically as the authors make their case. The first of its twenty-two snappy chapters addresses the American Civil War and the creation of the 1863 Lieber Code while the last offers a meditation on civil disobedience in contemporary protest movements, including Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter. Its temporal breadth is matched only by its geographic and thematic scope. The book moves from continent to continent, and conflict to conflict, detailing how human shielding is becoming more sophisticated and widespread while the laws of war and international humanitarian law (IHL) struggle to adapt to man's seemingly endless ability to out-brutalize himself. *Human Shields* can roughly be divided into three segments. Chapters 1-9 are geographically and temporally restricted, addressing discrete conflicts from the mid-nineteenth century through the Vietnam War. Chapters 10-17 revolve around different themes – environment; resistance; humanitarian crimes; manuals; scale; hospitals; proximity; info-war – that are sometimes bounded to a specific time or place but whose lessons can be applied to manifold conflicts, past, present, and future. The final five chapters, which are also largely thematic, move into decidedly modern realms and tackle thorny topics such as propaganda, social media, and post-human shielding. Sources consulted include scholarly literature in political science, international relations, law, and history; reports compiled by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the United Nations, and various governments; and countless investigative news articles, interviews, and legal records. Photographs, infographics, paintings, drawings, Tweets, and even stills from *To Kill a Mockingbird* and videogames regularly appear, providing compelling visual imagery to accompany the text.

The shielding narrative is twinned with the evolution of the laws of war and IHL from early modernity to the present. Despite the fact that Gordon and Perugini routinely argue that human shielding has “blurred” the laws of war, the book does not include a substantive discussion on the subject. On the one hand, avoiding a digression into the finer points and competing visions of the laws of war and IHL expedites the tantalizing read and propels the narrative forward; on the other, beginning in the seventeenth century, legal theorists Hugo Grotius and Emer de Vattel (both of whom are mentioned in chapter 2) addressed the complexities of man “presenting his Body as a Shield”<sup>2</sup> and the ethics of subjecting noncombatants to “terror to a certain degree” when circumstances demanded it.<sup>3</sup> Analyzing the work of Grotius, de Vattel, and other thinkers on their own terms rather than relying so heavily on secondary literature would only have enhanced the compelling arguments advanced throughout the book. It may also have elucidated other fascinating points that are raised but only cursorily addressed. For instance, a key argument in both chapter 3 (on the Boer War) and chapter 6 (on the Italo-Ethiopian War) is that colonialism and the enemy's race determined “which methods of warfare were perceived to be legitimate and humane” (37). Because the Boers were white, humanitarians balked at “their use as human shields” while the fledgling international community, which regarded Ethiopians as “‘white negroes,’ where whiteness denoted their sovereignty and acceptance into the League of Nations, while *negro* gestured to the population's ‘uncivilized’ nature,” brokered less resistance to the aerial bombings of medical units (41, 61). These issues were hardly novel; jurists had struggled since the Middle Ages to differentiate between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized,’ Christian and non-Christian, white and non-white, particularly in determining rights afforded to noncombatants.<sup>4</sup> By the early twentieth century, a robust framework that rested on edifices constructed by Grotius, de Vattel, and Samuel von Pufendorf, amongst others, *did* consider race and religion in the application of both humanitarian law and the laws of war. Examining the nuances within this legal scaffolding would sharpen Gordon and Perugini's significant contributions on how the laws of war have evolved to address shielding, complementing work by Anne Orford, Marco Sassòli, and Michael Schmitt.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625): Book I, Chapter II, Section 1.

<sup>3</sup> Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations, Or, Principles of the Law of Nature, Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns, with Three Early Essays on the Origin and Nature of Natural Law and on Luxury* (1757): Book III, Chapter XV, Section 228.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Theodor Meron, *War Crimes Law Comes of Age: Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Anne Orford, *Reading Humanitarian Intervention: Human Rights and the Use of Force in International Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Marco Sassòli, “Taking Armed Groups Seriously: Ways to Improve their Compliance with International Humanitarian Law,” *Journal of International Humanitarian Legal Studies* 1:1 (January 2010): 5-51, DOI:

Perhaps befitting of its title, *Human Shields* is at its best – which is often – in humanizing conflict. By focusing on countless individual stories and seemingly minute details, Gordon and Perugini draw the reader into a deeply personal world, driving home the importance of the ethics of violence and the cost of war. In the early twentieth century, progressive Western feminists, such as Millicent Fawcett and Emily Hobhouse, condemned man’s inhumanity to man, critiquing concentration camps established for Boer and African civilians, and demanding that Boer prisoners of war travel first class when serving as human shields on British trains (39-41). Agnes Maude Roydon drew on Mahatma Gandhi’s theory of *satyagraha* in the 1930s in an effort to send activists voluntarily into the Second Sino-Japanese War and “create a ‘living wall’ against war itself” (56). Roydon’s tactics radically altered how people thought about shielding. Previously, it was a coercive tactic; from that point on it emerged as a voluntary choice that exposed flaws within the law of armed conflict.

The tension between voluntary and involuntary shields unearthed by Roydon’s actions dominates the remainder of the book. Following the Second World War, a wave of codifications, including the UN Charter, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, and 1949 Geneva Conventions, all struggled to address civilian protections during war (78). Ultimately, the drafters of the Fourth Geneva Convention settled on protections for “passive civilians,” and agreed that warring parties could not transfer civilians into theaters of conflict to use as shields (81-83). On voluntary shields, however, there was silence. Civilians already stranded in war zones were similarly excluded from shielding safeguards, the argument being that military necessity might take precedence over the sanctity of individual human life (84-85). These decisions, crafted by Western policymakers in the late 1940s, have had dire repercussions for human shielding in a host of countries from the Global South in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, revealing yet again the friction between an Atlantic-centric international order and the application of its laws in the wider world. Legal hair-splitting in military manuals, CIA reports, NATO investigations, and UN tribunals only further cloud an already hazy picture as to permissible shielding (111, 122-124, 129-132, 142-143).

Gordon and Perugini effectively draw out the complications that arise because of the lack of legal settlement in a series of provocative chapters in the middle of the book. Framing the dropping of Agent Orange as a means to obliterate the vegetative shield afforded to the Viet Cong by the dense Southeast Asian jungle provides an excellent segue to environmental shielding more generally (93-95). Here, the authors describe activists who, influenced by Roydon’s “living wall” and Gandhi’s *satyagraha*, hugged trees in India to prevent deforestation, lashed themselves to boats in Mururoa to protest nuclear testing, and sailed rubber Zodiacs between harpooners and whales (100-103). The law of the sea and sovereignty are fleetingly discussed but neither one is evaluated in great detail, which would have both strengthened the overall argument and clarified the distinctions between the law of the sea and the law of armed conflict that render voluntary shielding “easier” (and legal) in international waters (106). Back on land, activists from around the globe flocked to London in 2002 to ride buses commandeered by a US army veteran, Kenneth O’Keefe, to Baghdad to protest the impending American-led invasion of Iraq (110). Policymakers were flummoxed by these actions, leading General Richard B. Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under George W. Bush, to proclaim “that all forms of shielding of military targets are illegal, even when civilians ‘volunteer for this purpose’” (111). Collectively, these chapters illustrate human ingenuity in voluntary shielding and human uncertainty in how to effectively police it. Further elucidation on these subjects would make for compelling scholarship.

Even if, as *Human Shields* reveals, there is no satisfactory legal resolution, one thing becomes exceedingly clear: civilians, particularly nonwhite civilians, almost always bear the brunt of shielding and the law’s lackluster response to it. This realization is born out chapter after chapter. The Tamil Tigers and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) both effectively converted humanitarian zones and urban landscapes into battlegrounds, the former by constructing bunkers and fortifications in Sri Lanka, the latter through a maze of tunnels connecting apartment blocks and houses in Mosul and Raqqa. The net effect was the same: “civilians became shields due to the space they occupied and its proximity to the

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<https://doi.org/10.1163/187815210X12766020139767>; Michael Schmitt, “Human Shields in International Humanitarian Law,” *Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 47:2 (January 2009): 292-338, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004219120>; Michael Schmitt, “Targeting and International Humanitarian Law in Afghanistan,” *International Law Studies* 85:1 (2009): 307-339.

fighting” (144). Despite admonitions from Pope Francis and Amnesty International, which condemned ISIS for “ruthlessly and unlawfully exploiting civilian immunity from attack in an attempt to shield its own forces,” (160) there was no swift action from the international community in either the Levant or, years earlier, Sri Lanka. Once fighting commenced, moreover, the proximity of noncombatants to the belligerents rendered them “potential weapons, thereby stripping them of some of the protections international humanitarian law bestows on civilians” (160). Similar scenarios have played out, repeatedly, in Gaza, where, in July 2014, social media accelerated the spread of propaganda produced by the Israel Defense Forces. Colorful infographics justified the bombing of Palestinian houses and shelters by invoking the “dual-use” doctrine to argue that “Some bomb shelters shelter people. Some shelter bombs” (173-174). (At the time of this writing in May 2021, Israeli authorities have once again besieged Gaza and destroyed a tower containing the Associated Press and Al-Jazeera offices, claiming that the building also housed Hamas militants).

Some of the most arresting images to emerge from recent conflicts show lifeless children in the arms of their parents following blasts on a Gaza beach or aerial bombardments of refugee camps conducted under the pretext that militants occupied these places. When the world sees these pictures, it reaffirms Gordon and Perugini’s point “that the concept of shielding has congealed to denote ‘mostly women and children’ – and mostly among populations that are nonwhite” (185). Shielding, the authors astutely note, has little to do with these women and children, but rather is “more about the effort to depict men of dark skin color as inhumane,” the effects of which have bled into vicious debates over migration in Europe and the United States in recent years (187, 189). These chilling observations bring *Human Shields* full circle, as Gordon and Perugini argue that shielding in the twenty-first century appears “*almost exclusively* in conflict zones taking place in decolonized parts of the world” and draw connections back to the earliest chapters (168). Once again, accidents of birth – from gender to race to creed to country – prove determinative in sealing an individual shield’s fate. And once again, the international legal order struggles to effectively respond.

The critiques that can be made about *Human Shields* are extraordinarily few and exceedingly minor. The sheer amount of material is the book’s greatest strength but it is also overwhelming to digest in one reading. Gordon and Perugini also rightly point out that shielding has become more common as conflict moves into urban theaters, thereby rendering combatants and civilians virtually indistinguishable, but they do not necessarily offer any prescription to remedy or rectify this ever-expanding problem. It would be worthwhile to hear how international law might develop to address human shielding in the twenty-first century. How, too, do the authors envisage the human shield evolving? Gordon and Perugini presciently acknowledge in their closing line “that Gaza becomes a terrifying prophecy, exposing how the denial of civilian protections in war zones is informing attacks on citizens participating in protests” but one wonders what cyber dimensions to shielding would look like beyond videogames and drone technology (217)? Could there be a situation in which a shield is purposefully infected with an easily transmissible virus to induce a pandemic? How does such an action complicate the “ethics of violence” and attendant international responses? These questions, scenarios, and debates are the stuff of future books, articles, policy proposals, and, hopefully, changes in international humanitarian law to address a proliferating phenomenon.

Here, I return to my recollection of the kidnapped *New York Times* journalists who feared becoming human shields in Libya a decade ago. Excellent scholarship does not just make needed interventions for its intended audience. Rather, it forces the reader to think beyond the immediacy of the page, to draw connections to current events, to reevaluate the past with newfound clarity, and to humanize inherently complicated situations. *Human Shields* achieves these objectives on every level. In the process, the book makes perhaps its greatest contribution, one that has little to do with the laws of war or the ethics of violence: it exposes, at times hauntingly, the frailty of the human condition and the precarity of life.

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