

**Reading and Discussion Questions for Mark Mazower,  
“The Strange Triumph of Human Rights”  
History 300 / for September 19, 2013**

**Directions**

The purpose of this handout is to prepare you for an in-class discussion on Thursday, September 19. The “content analysis” questions should help you to focus on significant points in Mazower’s argument. Be sure to read the article all the way through!

Please also take the time to read two significant documents (linked here):

- [The Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#)
- [The Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide](#)

**Content analysis**

1. What is the central guiding question of Mazower’s article? Where does he articulate it?
2. Mazower mentions two prior explanations for the triumph of human rights: the “Eleanor Roosevelt” version and the “Adolf Hitler” version. What is the basic gist of each of those explanations?
3. Mazower presents his thesis at the end of the introduction – the middle of p. 381. What does he say here about the relationship between state interests and the triumph of human rights?
4. What does Mazower mean by “Great Power paternalism”? (p. 382) How might this term apply to the way Britain and France treated the Ottoman Empire and several other countries in the years before World War I?
5. How did German politicians and lobbyists in the 1920s and 1930s try to use the League of Nations as a platform for promoting the rights of German minorities in Eastern Europe? How did the racism of the Nazis lead them to dispute the ideas of international law and individual rights altogether?
6. Why wasn’t the League of Nations in a position to criticize Nazi discrimination against Jews in the 1930s? How did this lead many in Britain and the United States to call for universal human rights during World War II?
7. What made a revival of the minority rights concept unacceptable to the Czech leader, Eduard Benes? (p. 388)
8. In what ways did the new language of human rights serve as a “smokescreen” to protect the “Big Three” from outside scrutiny of their own treatment of minorities? (p. 389, pp. 391-92)

9. What was the difference between a “guarantee” of human rights and a “declaration” in favor of “promoting and favoring” human rights? According to the UN Charter, who was responsible for ensuring that human rights were respected – sovereign states or the United Nations Organization? (pp. 392-93)

10. How did the UN General Assembly emerge as a forum where human rights abuses in particular states might be held up for criticism? Why did the UN Human Rights Commission nevertheless prove to be toothless? (pp. 394-95)

11. Mazower does not describe them in detail, but 1948 saw the adoption of both a “Universal Declaration on Human Rights” and a “Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide.” Based on what you have read, which of these two documents would you expect to have carried legal force? Which of them was a non-binding statement?

### **Evaluation**

12. How well does Mazower back up his argument with relevant detail? Would you consider this to be a tightly focused article or a meandering, impressionistic piece?

13. Are you convinced by the author’s interpretation? Do you buy his claims about the relatively minor role played by idealistic individuals and revulsion against Nazism in explaining the “human rights revolution” of the 1940s?

14. How would you characterize Mazower’s general perspective on international relations? Is he optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between?