



by Christoph Safferling  
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Non-Fiction

## The Powerlessness of International Law – The Return of War and Crimes Against Humanity

*Ohnmacht des Völkerrechts – Die Rückkehr des Kriegs und der Menschheitsverbrechen*

### review

As the global rules-based order faces unprecedented strain from resurgent state-based conflicts and a growing disregard for treaty obligations on the part of major powers, Christoph Safferling's 'The Powerlessness of International Justice' is a timely and authoritative intervention.

Safferling, a Professor of International Law and Director of the International Nuremberg Principles Academy, provides a clear-eyed historical survey of international justice, tracing its evolution from the Peace of Westphalia (1648) to the current crises in Ukraine and Gaza. The book moves beyond mere theory to ask a fundamental question: what can international law realistically achieve when its primary institutions appear increasingly paralysed?

The narrative is structured into three broad eras. The first of these explores the philosophical foundations of international law, culminating in the Nuremberg trials. Safferling positions Nuremberg as a defining moment for international law, with arguments relating to state sovereignty and personal immunity overturned, and the principle

of individual culpability being upheld. The second section surveys the latter half of the twentieth century, describing the founding of the UN and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Safferling is exceptionally clear-eyed here, documenting how the hope for a new era of peace was frequently tempered by the realities of the Cold War and the inherent limitations with regard to enforcement.

The final, most urgent section addresses the 21st century, beginning with the 9/11 attacks. Safferling argues that the subsequent 'War on Terror' challenged the UN framework for self-defence – which was designed for state actors, not terrorist groups – and ultimately weakened the credibility of international law. Detailing contemporary challenges, including US sanctions against ICC judges and the complexities of intervening in current armed conflicts, the book offers a sobering assessment of the “impotence” referenced in its title. Safferling concludes that while international law cannot always prevent or police war, its vital power lies in its ability to document atrocities and secure justice for survivors by holding individual war criminals to account.

'The Powerlessness of International Justice' is a strong candidate for an English-language academic or serious non-fiction press. Safferling avoids the dense jargon of a traditional monograph, opting for short, digestible sections that navigate complex legal frameworks with ease. Ultimately, 'The Powerlessness of International Justice' is an essential resource for those seeking to understand the stakes of our current historical moment and why we must remain committed to the institutions of international justice.

Find out more:

<https://www.dtv.de/foreign-rights/buch/ohnmacht-des-voelkerrechts-28506>

## press quotes

*An impressive and simultaneously disquieting book about the capabilities and limitations of the international legal order [...] Equal parts analysis, diagnosis and warning cry.*

Peggy Fiebig, Deutschlandfunk, Andruck

*International law has seen better days, and Christoph Safferling does not pretend to his readers that all is well. But it is precisely this realism that makes his book so well worth reading.*

NZZ Geschichte

*Safferling skilfully reconstructs the debates on peace and international law from 1945 to the present day, including the very latest developments.*

Hendrik Simon, FAZ

## about the author

**Christoph Safferling**, born in 1971, is Professor of Criminal Law, Criminal Procedure Law, International Criminal Law and International Law at the University of Erlangen-Nuremberg. He is the Director of the International Nuremberg Principles Academy.

**Previous works:** *Der Streitfall* (mit Friedrich Kießling), dtv (2024); *Staatsschutz im Kalten Krieg* (mit Friedrich Kießling), dtv (2021); *Die Akte Rosenberg – das Bundesministerium der Justiz und die NS-Zeit* (mit J. Grzywotz), C.H. Beck (2016)

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