

The holocaust in rwanda history essay



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The Holocaust was, without question, one of the defining events of the 20th Century and its legacy left an indelible mark upon subsequent attempts to come to terms with issues of genocide and mass murder. Whilst the Holocaust is the most well-known case of genocide, the systematic extermination of groups of people or entire societies both pre-dates 1945 and has also played a fundamental part in international politics since the end of the Second World War. The formation of the United Nations helped to legally define the concept of genocide and Fatsah Ouguerouz shows that Article II of the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide “ enumerates a number of acts which ‘ committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such constitute the international crime of genocide” (Ouguerouz 2003: pp. 216). However, despite greater efforts to understand and combat the problem of genocide the post-1945 world has proven itself incapable of eliminating genocide. The Holocaust might be the most glaring example of genocide before 1945, but there is a strong case to be made for the argument that the Rwandan genocide a serious episode since the end of the Cold War. This essay will examine whether the Rwandan experience displays points of comparison to the Holocaust and to what extent a comparison is a valid historical line of enquiry.

There have been a number of historians that have sought to locate common themes in the Jewish and Rwandan experience of genocide. One concept that is often applied to the Holocaust and the case of Rwanda that is argued to mark them out from other instances of genocide is the idea of ‘ total genocide’. Robert Melson draws a distinction between what he refers to as

partial genocide, which is the “ use of mass murder in order to coerce and to alter the identity or the politics of a group, not to destroy it” and total genocide, which “ means to do away with a group entirely” (Melson 1996: pp. 28). Mark Levene argues that both in the case of the Holocaust and Rwanda one can argue that total genocide was being practised by the perpetrators and that it was not “ simply a conscious attempt to mass murder targeted groups as groups, but, so far as it was possible to do so, to the point of their complete annihilation” (Levene 2005: pp. 66). The concept of total genocide to the Holocaust and to Rwanda is important to consider when thinking about both cases.

Indeed, the term ‘ Final Solution’ is synonymous with an approach seeking to exterminate an entire group of people and Friedlander shows that for Hermann Goring the final solution was also a “ total solution” (Friedlander 1997: pp. 284). Christian Scherrer argues that Rwanda can similarly only be understood as a “ situation of ‘ final solution’ and total genocide” and he argues that this “ is the only possible starting point for understanding Rwandan realities as they are today” (Scherrer 2002: pp. 169). In other words, the explicit aim of the Nazis was to remove entirely the presence of Jewish people from the face of the earth and the parallels with the case of Rwanda are clear. The relentless drive by Hutu extremists and militias to eliminate the entire Tutsi population originated in large part from the belief that “ the solution to Rwanda’s problems was to eliminate the entire Tutsi population” (Twagilimana 1997: pp. 50). Conceptualising of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide with reference to the notion of total genocide,

therefore, appears to be justified in relation to the intentions of the Nazis and the Hutu. ***** difference= brith of the hatred.

R – the division was created by the colonists (French and Belgians), by defining differences in characteristics between the Hutu and Tutsi and creating a hierarchical system for the possession of such traits, which essentially gave rise to hatred and segregation in Rwandan population.

Whereas anti-Semitism has been in existence for centuries (PROOF)

Another comparison that can be drawn between the Holocaust and the Rwandan experience of genocide is the innocence of the victims.

Lemarchand argues that “ Tutsi and Jews share a sense of victimhood for which here are few other parallels in recent or past history” and that Jews across the world, and the state of Israel in particular, heavily empathise with the Rwandan experience (Lemarchand 2005: pp. 145). A former Rwandan government official states the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust were the same as both killed innocent people based on their race, religion or convictions (Eltringham 2004: pp. 54).

ADD: how both Rwandans and the jewish populattions were both victims.

DIFFERNCE: Rwandan killed their own population

Whereas the germans gesapto aswell as SS were recruited to simply exterminate the Jewish popution.

DIFFERENCE: GERMANS BELIEFES: Aryan race, and the hatred and anilations of Jews, the disabled, old people.

Whereas in Rwanda the hatred spiralled via the post colonialist.

One common experience shared by both Jews and Tutsi that make their anguish particularly raw was the fact that in both cases the international community was slow to respond to the mounting evidence of genocide against their peoples. The American and other allied governments certainly knew of the genocide being committed against the Jews by the Nazis, but the reality of the situation was that these governments believed that they had other more vital interests that needed to be pursued elsewhere. In other words, in the context of a World War, saving the Jewish people from extermination was low on their list of priorities. This was to an extent true even of American Jews and in a speech in 1991 the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir “ said that the memory of inaction during World War Two was ‘ heavy on the conscience’ of American Jews” (Novick 2000: pp. 39).

The Rwandan experience and the Holocaust share another similarity in this sense, Destexhe argues that the Western world was very slow to recognise what was happening in Rwanda and even more reluctant to call the atrocities in the country genocide (Destexhe 1995: pp. 32). “ It took three weeks from 6 April – a long time in the world of CNN-style news – before editorials finally began comparing the situation in Rwanda with Germany under Nazism and referring to it as a genocide” (Destexhe 1995: pp. 32). Taylor agrees with this assessment arguing that the West was largely uninterested in the unfolding chaos in Rwanda (Taylor 1999: pp. 4). “ How poorly the world powers read the situation. But for that matter, did a sincere desire really exist at the time to understand it?” (Taylor 1999: pp. 4). Taylor claims that

the United States was weary of intervention during this period and that only France and Belgium had any pressing interests in Rwanda.

Another element of commonality is highlighted by Traverso, one that might be regarded as a feature that separates the genocides in Rwanda and in Germany (Traverso 1999: pp. 74). Traverso focuses upon the industrial nature of the killing both in Germany and in Rwanda and whilst the operations of the Nazis are often characterised in this fashion it is less common to conceive of the Rwandan genocide in such terms (Traverso 1999: pp. 74). “ The mobile killing units had precursors in the Ottoman Empire and epigones in Rwanda and Bosnia” and therefore he argues that the “ Jewish genocide constitutes a paradigm of modern barbarism” (Traverso 1999: pp. 74). The weaponry that the Hutu used in order to commit their crimes might have been no more sophisticated than the simple machete, but this is not Traverso’s point (Traverso 1999: pp. 74). He argues that the sophistication is to be found in the level of planning and organisation undertaken by both Nazi and Hutu leaders and that this is where the industrial and modern spectre of the genocide is to be located (Traverso 1999: pp 74).

Differences between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide

An important difference between the Rwandan experience and the Holocaust was the extent to which ideology influenced the perpetrators of the crime. Smith identifies the centrality of ideological currents in the Nazi genocide (Smith 2002: pp. 153). According to Smith, “ ideology glorifies the perpetrators’ group by assigning to that group a special historical or religious mission. It demeans the victims’ group by assigning to its members many

negative and often nonhuman characteristics” (Smith 2002: pp. 153).

Ideology certainly played an important role in the Holocaust and there were a number of “ Hutu intellectuals” who advocated more extreme forms of action against the Tutsi, but as Lemarchand argues the role of ideology was fundamentally different in both cases (Gellately 2003: pp. 331). According to Lemarchand, “ whereas the Holocaust is the classic example of an ideological genocide, rooted in the most stridently racist ideology, the Rwanda genocide is better seen as the byproduct of the mortal threats posed to the revolutionary Hutu-dominated state by the RPF” (Lemarchand 2005: pp. 148). The Rwandan genocide is therefore better understood as resulting from a Hutu population that felt itself to be under threat from the Tutsi, rather than from any driving ideological imperatives.

The difficulties of comparing the Holocaust and Rwanda

However, a number of historians are not comfortable with drawing parallels between the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide. Lemarchand argues that analysing genocide comparatively is inherently problematic and claims that each instance of genocide must be investigated on a singular basis.

Lemarchand does not fundamentally disagree with the notion that there are similarities between the two experiences, but argues that a comparative analysis is dangerous (Lemarchand 2005: pp. 143). “ To treat Rwanda as the carbon copy of the Holocaust is likely to obscure its historical specificity and regional context, and ultimately lead to a misunderstanding of the motivations behind the killings” (Lemarchand 2005: pp. 143). Eltringham’s comparative examination of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide encounters similar difficulties and finds that a comparison of the suffering in

both cases is ultimately futile (Eltringham 2004: pp. 56). “ Both Tutsi and Jews have suffered, but in a different manner and for different reasons” (Eltringham 2004: pp. 56). There may, therefore, be similarities between the experiences of Jews and Tutsi during the their respective genocides, but the entire comparative paradigm is irretrievably flawed and as a result any attempt to draw sustained parallels between Germany and Rwanda is always likely to end in failure.

In conclusion while it is possible to display points of comparison between the Rwandan genocide and the Holocaust, such a comparison must be approached with caution. One can argue that conceiving of the Holocaust and Rwanda as examples of total genocide is legitimate and that the industrial nature of the killing as well as the inaction on the part of the international community all point to a clear line of similarity between the two experiences. However, it is clear that a point of comparison between any two genocides is difficult, if not impossible task. The multitude of factors that cause genocide to take place in any given country are enormously complex and critically depend upon the context from which they emerge.(ADD: The colonists created the divide between the population, whereas anti semitism has existed for centuries. Therefore, to argue that the Rwandan genocide is a modern-day example of the Holocaust is a misplaced argument, because it does not appreciate the many points of difference that existed in the two respective cases. Ultimately, one should be careful when drawing points of comparison between the Final Solution and the Rwandan genocide for precisely this reason.

ADD: How the rwandan hutu leader sought inspiration from Hitler, he watched films related to Hitler and searched for tips .