Rachel Gonzales

The Contributions of Social Darwinism and Imperialism to the Rwandan Genocide

The African country of Rwanda has seen much violence and turmoil throughout its relatively short history. Though the true history of the Hutus and the Tutsis is not known, it is believed that the two groups came to Rwanda after that of the original natives, called Twa. The Hutus and Tutsis once cohabitated in Rwanda peacefully, sharing rulers and religion, and even marrying members of the other ethnic groups. They were unified under the allegiance to their god, Imana, and their Mwami, or spiritual leader. The social divide was based not on physical characteristics, but on wealth. In *Race and Ethnicity in Pre-colonial Rwanda*, it states: “A rich Hutu who purchased a large herd of cattle could become a Tutsi, while a Tutsi who became poor, would drop to the Hutu caste. The Twa (called Pygmies) were looked down by both tribes and had no rights.” (Genocide 2009). In the 20th century, a racial power struggle between the Hutus and Tutsis arose that would continue until the genocide in 1994. Tensions between the two groups were exacerbated by outside forces and reached a violent boiling point multiple times in the 1900s. Throughout all of this time, the principles of Imperialism and Social Darwinism were instrumental in the ideas and eventual fruition of violence and genocide in Rwanda.

Were it not for the European influence of the Belgians, the ethnic separation may never have escalated to the point of violence. At the time of the Berlin Conference, Rwanda was under the fair rule of the German power. In 1918, the colony of Rwanda was given to Belgium after the end of World War I (Gourevitch 1998). Belgium’s motives for entering Rwanda and interfering with the lives of the natives were those of an imperial nature. Motivated by a political desire to expand and gain more power, and religious need to spread their Catholicism, Belgium forever altered the pre-existing political and social hierarchy of Rwanda. Once the Belgians entered Rwanda, they were intrigued by the physical differences of the Hutus and Tutsis, choosing to favor the more regal-looking Tutsi minority over the rounder Hutu majority. Much of their bias was based on the “Hamitic Hypothesis” written by John Hanning Speke, which theorized that all culture in Africa was brought by the sharper-faced people whom Speke believed were Caucasoid in origins and descendants of the biblical figure King David. The Belgians instituted racial identification cards to distinguish between the Hutus and the Tutsis, ensuring that there would be no social movement (Gourevitch 1998). This distinct racial separation was stage one of the coming genocide: Classification. The Belgians’ favoritism resulted in education, Catholic teachings, and respectable jobs for the Tutsis and illiteracy and slavery for the Hutus. With the Belgian belief in their Catholic roots, the Tutsis grew increasingly more powerful than the Hutus.

It was the Belgian faith in the Social Darwinism principle that the Tutsis, or the better civilization, inherited favorable traits from their white, biblical ancestors that led to the severe class division in Rwanda. The Belgians gave all power in Rwanda to the sharper-faced Tutsi, leading to the oppression of their one-time African brothers. As time went on, the Hutus became progressively more frustrated with the Tutsi aristocracy and Belgian bias. In 1959, a Hutu political activist called Dominique Mbonyumutwa was attacked and beaten to near death. The Hutus believed the Tutsis were behind this senseless act and began to build rebellions to fight back. Bands of Hutus roamed the country attacking Tutsi authority and burning Tutsi homes to the ground. A Belgian named Guy Logiest, a colonel, was brought in to assist in stopping the sweeping violence. However, Logiest was against the Tutsi favoritism and instead sided with the Hutus, standing by while the Hutus set fire to homes and denying the current Tutsi Mwami permission to mount an army against the rebellions. Logiest took the opposing extremist view to the Belgian leaders that preceded him: Democracy was the future of Rwanda. As a crucial piece of the Hutu revolution, Logiest overthrew the Tutsi monarchy, replacing the Tutsi chiefs with those of Hutu ethnicity. The Hutus won the popular elections, and the Hutus were eager to use their new power against those that had been so unfair to them in the past. They would arbitrarily arrest passing Tutsis and used any opportunity to steal Tutsi property. Many Tutsis began to flee the country to escape the violence (Gourevitch 1998). It was Logiest’s extremist views that saw the end of the Tutsi aristocracy.

As time went on, the Hutus developed their own ideas rooted in Social Darwinism. Written in 1990, the Hutus published the “Hutu Ten Commandments,” a manifesto explaining how true Hutus should behave. Included were several rules such as “Hutu must stop taking pity on the Tutsi”, and “Hutu must stand firm and vigilant against their common enemy: the Tutsi.” (Ngeze 1990). The Hutus believed that they were stronger and more able than the power that had ruled them for so long, and that it was their responsibility to exterminate the “weaker” species. The ideas that had once made Tutsi respectable kings had now put a target on their backs. Soon after, the Hutus began calling the Tutsi “cockroaches” and calling for the removal of all “pests” in Rwanda. Hutu propaganda strongly advised violence and encouraged taking back the great Hutu power. The deaths of the Rwandan and Burundian presidents lit the short fuse that had been threatening to explode for so long, and suddenly, Rwanda was in the throes of a full-fledged genocide.

Had it not been for the politically and religiously motivated Belgians’ belief in the mythical origins of the Tutsis, the racial stratification between the Hutus and Tutsis may never have escalated to the point of mass murder. Of course, we cannot say for sure how history may have been changed had Rwanda been under the control of a different European country with other motivations, but I believe that the favoritism of the Tutsis and the oppression of the Hutus at the hands of the Belgians led Rwanda into the worst possible outcome. The genocide in Rwanda was a dark time in world history, and the ideas of natural selection in terms of human beings and competition for resources sparked the long chain of events ultimately leading to the 1994 genocide.

Works Cited

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