

The Commonality of Genocide

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Report #111

In 1995 when my daughter, Joy, was researching her book, "The Pigment of Your Imagination" (www.ThePigment.com), she wanted me to visit her in Africa. I replied that to do this I needed "adventure". So we decided to go overland from Nairobi, Kenya to Harare, Zimbabwe. For part of this trip we took the Tazara Railroad from Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania to near Lusaka, Zambia. For about 100 miles of this train ride we went through the Selous Game Reserve.

In college I majored in African history and knew that in 1905 this "wild" area was full of prosperous villages. From 1905 to 1907 these villagers revolted against the German rule of then German East Africa in the Maji-Maji Rebellion. The Germans responded with a brutal genocide. They attacked the villages, killing people and animals and destroying homes and fields. Their method of obtaining subjection of the people was "famine". Those people who had been living in the Selous Game Reserve either perished or moved elsewhere. The area became depopulated and the tsetse moved into the newly growing bush. Tsetse flies bring sleeping sickness to both people and cows; even today there are large sections in Africa that are uninhabited because of the tsetse fly. As the tsetse fly moved in people were unable to re-establish their villages, farms, and communities. The bush thrived, the wild animals returned, and Selous Game Reserve is one of the biggest reserves in Tanzania, larger than the better known Serengeti Plains.

This is only one of the many genocides in Africa during this time. In German Southwest Africa (now Namibia) the Herero also revolted. The Germans pushed the 80,000 Herero into the Kalahari Desert where most perished. Those who attempted to return to the highlands from the desert were just shot dead. Only 3000 Herero survived this genocide.

The Germans were not the only ones. The British in Kenya used the same tactics against the Kalenjin and Masai groups; killing the men in battle, destroying the villages and fields of those in rebellion so that many, including women and children, died of hunger and disease. Their land was then opened up for White settlement (called the "White Highlands") and is one of the underlying causes of the current unrest in Kenya. The French did similar campaigns in West Africa and the Belgians were noted for their extreme brutality in the Congo.

These days we are used to annual increases in population. But from the beginning of the scramble for Africa in the mid 1880's until the end of the pacification of the various rebellions by 1910, the population in the area of the Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi is estimated to have been cut in half. In 1886 when King Leopold took over the Congo there were an estimated 10,000,000 people, but by the time the personal fiefdom was taken from him in 1908, the population had declined to an estimated 5,000,000.

While the extent of continuous wars due to the slave trade are frequently mentioned as a major destabilizing factor over 400 years of African history, it is rarely noted how destructive the conquest of Africa by the colonial rulers was. As is known from the plagues in Europe, when large numbers of people die in a society there are profound negative consequences to the society.

When war brings the destruction of homes, villages, and communities, when people are dying from war-induced starvation and disease, a society becomes traumatized and loses its cohesiveness.

Were these various genocides just random acts? I have just finished reading Sven Lindqvist's "Exterminate All the Brutes": One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide." Lindqvist is a Swede who is exploring the connection between these genocides in Africa and the Holocaust in Europe. His opening paragraph reads, "You already know enough. So do I. It is not knowledge we lack. What is missing is the courage to understand what we know and to draw conclusions".

By page 141 he writes (the book was written before the Rwandan genocide): "It is we who have suppressed it. We do not want to remember. We want genocide to have begun and ended with Nazism. That is what is most comforting."

In addition to the historical examples, Lindqvist gives the intellectual history that made genocide "respectable". This was Darwin's *Descent of Man* and the concept of the survival of the fittest. The white rulers of all the European countries believed in a hierarchy of race. The superior race – the white race – would overwhelm the inferior races. The European conquest of the United States and Canada was a prime example of this. The extermination of the Tasmanians in Australia might be regrettable, but an evolutionary necessity. Darwin himself was in Argentina and saw the European settlers go out into the pampas and murder any Native American that was found so that the pampas could be opened up for European settlement. According to late 19th century race theory, the white race was destined to expand throughout the world, even, for example, obliterating the Chinese "race". The point was that the superior race needed land in order to expand and would seize this from the inferior races. Consequently, since it was inevitable, genocide was normal as lower races were exterminated. All European nations subscribed to this racial interpretation of history.

After World War I Germany lost its overseas colonies. Yet Germany kept the same racial theories. Germany's expansion would not be overseas, but in Europe itself. Slavs like Poles and Ukrainians would be used as labor and would eventually die out to the superior Germans. Clearly Gypsies and Jews were an inferior people because they did not control any territory of their own – a clear sign of an inferior race. So like the Herero in German Southwest Africa, like the Native Americans in Argentina and the United States, like so many other examples, the Jewish and Gypsy population would be exterminated and in time the other ethnic groups in Central Europe would also decline as the master German race dominated from the Atlantic Ocean to the Ural Mountains.

In Sven Lindqvist's opinion, to see the World War II Holocaust as an isolated, unique event is to ignore and re-write European history. While the defeat of Germany in World War II discredited this racial hierarchical theory, if you listen closely you can still hear echoes in today's discourse, particularly where Africa is concerned.

Peace,
Dave

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