

Two Contemporaneous Conflicts: A Comparative Essay of Bosnia and Rwanda.

Analysis of Identity, Violence, and International Responses during the Bosnia and Rwanda Conflicts: by Eleanor Thorpe.

Introduction

During the early 1990s Bosnia and Rwanda were witness to their own devastating and brutal identity-driven conflicts; the Bosnian War (1992 -1995) and the Rwandan Genocide (1994). In this essay I will compare how both conflicts spanned across the same timeframes in history and share a breadth of similarities from extreme violence, identity driven mobilization and radio/media influence, yet also differ significantly in the failures of international interventions and mobilizations, combat methods and duration.

History and Origins of the Conflicts.

The Bosnian War emerged from disintegration of what was then Yugoslavia and the subsequent fragmentation of the ethnically diverse make up of (according to the 1991 Yugo census) Muslims (43.7%), Serbs (31.4%), Croats (17.3%) and 6–8% others such as Yugoslavs, Jews, Roma that made up Bosnia and Herzegovina during the early 1990s.

Before the fall of Yugoslavia Bosnia and Herzegovina and Sarajevo in particular was often referred to as the Jerusalem of the East or the Jerusalem of the Balkans which reflected its multicultural coexistence and rich history of ethnic diversity and shared cultures, a multi-ethnic federation with a strong identity as such.

At the time Bosnia and Herzegovina was held under Communist rule which when the system collapsed allowed nationalist leaders the space and opportunity for elites to actively mobilize ethnic identity and gain political and territorial control and power over the definition of future states.

Rwanda's conflict has different origins, rooted deeply in historical Colonial divisions left behind by the German and then later the Belgian European powers, the Colonial legacy left to the people of Rwanda was that of division; although there were longstanding historic divisions between the three main social groups Tutsi, Hutu and Twa before Colonial rule, these were fluid, intertwined in society and personal identities and linked to status, wealth and mobility instead of ethnic categories. The Belgians' introduction of an I.D system for Rwanda was the beginning of the foundations of solid ethnic divisions which decades later would lay significant ground for genocide to be possible.

Pre-colonial Rwanda saw Tutsis with majority political powers, and post-colonial saw the Hutu gain majority political power; The Hutu elites held political and majority control whilst the Tutsis became marginalized, and then in 1994 the Hutu leaders began coordinating a genocide against the Tutsi population, unlike Bosnia which was territorial and nationalist, this was about the extermination of Tutsi people.

Comparatives

The line *'The war had to be so bloody because the ties between us were so strong'* resonates truth to both conflicts in that people went from coexisting with different social and ethnic diversities, co-workers, inter marriages and notably neighbors to being coerced into committing murder against people who once walked alongside each other.

Nationalism and identity were the main driving factors in these atrocities with Bosnia having long-integrated communities being pulled apart and fighting against division and Rwanda having fear fueled propaganda about Tutsi threats to their safety and life, both sides used this threat to identity as mobilization tactics to legitimize mass violence on what was one time their neighbors.

Fear or marginalization

Hutu extremists used propaganda to create existential fear of the Tutsi, exploiting historical inequalities and framing them as a direct threat to Hutu survival

The Hutu elites spread Tutsi propaganda leading Hutus having existential fear of the Tutsis with a "kill or be killed" mentality towards the Tutsis *"Know that the person whose throat you do not cut now will be the one who will cut yours"* (Des Forges, 1999, p 86). this exploited historical grievances and put Tutsis in direct line as a perceived real life or death threat to the Hutu population.

Bosniaks fear came more from threats of territorial marginalization and a loss of control of their communities by the Serbs, both of these highlight the deeply rooted identity threats that each conflict centered around; crucially - both Rwanda and Bosniaks political elites weaponized threats to identity by portraying the opposing sides as the enemy no1.

Identity in Rwanda as seen in their Colonial Belgian legacy I.D cards was potentially a death sentence depending on which I.D card you carried, this was seen evidently in the targeted genocide of the Tutsi population; whereas Bosnia's conflict saw ethnicity and ethnic groups targeted - not social standing - such as Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats.

Radio and Media Propaganda.

In Rwanda radios were widely used throughout the country as the main source of news and information before and during the conflict, the Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTLM) would regularly and routinely broadcast instructions to kill Tutsis and motivations to do so across the country "*The importance of RTLM, in short, was not only to motivate willing participants before and during the genocide, but also to make genocide a familiar concept*" (Des Forges, 1999, p 86). these broadcasts were engaging, authoritative, fierce and full of anti-Tutsi propaganda. *The broadcast caused fear, fear caused panic, and panic led to verifiable reactions*" (Kellow and Steeves, 1998, p 109).

The same can be noted for Bosnia media propaganda with Radio Television Serbia (RTS) broadcasting propaganda, nationalist rhetoric and over exaggerated reports of staged attacks, thus leading to the populations being exposed to a "virtual war" before the real war had even started and purposefully trying to confuse the viewers line between reality and fiction.

Civilian War

The attacks and death inflicted on the civilians of Rwanda and Bosnia set apart these conflicts from conventional state-on-state wars as the primary targets and those who suffered genocides were not armies but civilians who suffered at the hands of their own people.

The intense hatred that was generated by both countries political elites against their own people and their neighbors was staggeringly successful, and many different factors played hand to the influence it on the people; media reach, economic instability, identity threats, propaganda, all weaving a very complex tapestry that lay the structure for everyday civilians to believe that killing thy neighbor was a form of self-defense, nationalism and an imperative action to save yourself.

Methods of Violence

Rwanda's killings and methods of violence heavily used physical means of violence such as machetes, clubs and small arms; this more archaic method of warfare requires up close physical eye to eye contact between the victim and perpetrator and causes huge bloodshed to drench the land.

Rape was also used as a systematic weapon yet also again involving close physical attachments and contact to the victim, these methods leaving permeant and deep historical post-war scars through generations.

Bosnia's killing methods were far more technically advanced using artillery, tanks and rifles; but these tools also serve as being more detached; notably shooters were used for the siege from 1992-1996 in Sarajevo with the surrounding hills being utilized as tactical positioning for snipers to reign bullets of terror on civilians trying to walk the streets underneath them.

Both these methods show the cultural differences in how the conflicts were fought and also exposes context as to how the conflicts were recovered from and lived with post-conflict, these also start to show the difference in external international interferences and supports, and the means of which the fighting could take place due to resources, intelligence, international support, and access to arms.

Duration

The duration of both these examples of identity based conflicts from very different cultures overlapping during the same period of history was remarkably different; specifically the Rwanda genocide took place over 100 days from April to July in 1994 during which an estimated 800,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsis (and moderate Hutus) were killed, which averages as 8,000 - 10,000 people a day being killed primarily by machetes, during an intensely short space of time.

On the other hand, the Bosnia conflict spanned almost 4 years (3 years 8 months) during which approximately 100,000 people lost their lives from sniper, shelling attacks and ethnic cleansing massacres.

This timeframe also included the longest City siege in modern history on Sarajevo whereby civilians were targeted with snipers and shelling daily for nearly 4 years, and had food, water and electricity supplies cut.

Both of these resulted in huge numbers of displaced civilians; approximately two thirds of the Bosnian population being displaced and over half the population of Rwanda fleeing to neighboring states.

Intervention

Although there are many comparatives and similarities to be drawn from these two conflicts, one of the starkest differences between Bosnia and Rwanda's conflicts can be seen with external intervention, international support, and the role of global awareness and media coverage.

International response, interest and support in Bosnia was due significantly to a number of factors; the post-cold war era geopolitical context, the proximity of Bosnia to Europe; the strategic positioning of Bosnia and its ties to Western allies all played a major part in ensuring global elite superpower attention was engaged into the conflict as it was seen as a player in the wider global Western security interests.

Whereas on the other side of the case study Rwanda suffered hugely in the lack thereof support, interest or action from the Western world of global superpower elites, none of the European countries with closest colonial ties to Rwanda such as Belgium, Germany nor France engaged in talks or support, and global media was silent over the genocide which originally went unreported. The U.N eventually sent in peacekeeping troops with a weak mandate, a number approximately 2,500 for a country of 7million.

Conclusion

The conflicts of Bosnia and Rwanda during the early 1990s share many similarities and parallels but strikingly united by threats to identity within coexisting communities leading to devastating conflicts and losses of life.

Both conflicts' use of media for propaganda, elites weaponizing social divisions and ethnic identity to justify extreme violence, the nationalist threat to shared and personal identity all lay the foundations for civilian-on-civilian violence, ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Rwanda experienced an acute, violent and immediate trauma which was very personal and intimate with minimal international support and limited global awareness, whereas Bosnia combined conventional and irregular disconnected war tactics over a longer period and had Western media and allies support with artillery, attention and intervention.

This demonstrates that the impact of intervention and global attention versus inaction and lack of international support can impact the duration of and mortality rates of conflict, and that there are shared themes, social factors and political climates that can create an environment for civilians to carry out extreme violence and killings to their fellow civilians.

References

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