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Prepared for Dr. Shirley

HIS-301

12/02/2021

Comparison of the Ottoman and Belgian Empires

When comparing an elephant and a mouse, it is easy to see the differences at first glance. Size is the obvious noticeable element, of course, and then physical quirks, like a trunk or long whiskers. It is more challenging to find the ways in which a behemoth and a tiny creature are similar; such is the comparison and contrast of the Ottoman Empire (the elephant) and the Belgian Empire (the mouse). The longevity of both empires is starkly different, but the imprint on those they colonized lasts even today.

Providing stability and security to large areas of Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, the Ottoman Empire was founded by the Turks in Anatolia around 1299 CE. The dynasty would last more than 600 years, becoming one of the longest-lasting empires in history. Mehmed II the Conqueror seized the Byzantine Empire's capital city in 1453. As the band They Might Be Giants sang, Istanbul (not Constantinople) became the new capital of the Ottoman Empire and evolved into a "dominant international center of trade and culture."¹ As the empire continued to grow, it added city after city to its roster, including: Turkey, Greece, Hungary, Bulgaria, Egypt, Macedonia, Romania, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, portions of Arabia, and a large region of the North African coast.

¹ History.com Editors. "Ottoman Empire", <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/ottoman-empire>. A&E Television Networks, updated February 28, 2020, originally published November 3, 2017.

Notable contributions to the international market were calligraphy, painting, and other artistic pursuits like ceramics and poetry, as well as carpet weaving and textiles. Architectural influences provided distinct character to gathering places like mosques and public buildings. Art was not the only field where the Ottoman Empire excelled. Mathematics, chemistry, physics, geography, astronomy, and other scientific fields were of great importance to the Ottoman Empire, and some of the surgical tools invented during that time are still in use, such as scalpels, catheters, pincers, forceps, and lancets.²

Brutality was commonplace, genocide was typical, and the list of massacres attributed to the empire was staggering. Fratricide became a standard practice among newly-crowned sultans as a precautionary measure to ensure the rightful heir took the throne; the new sultan's brothers would be imprisoned until the birth of the sultan's first son, after which the sultan's brothers and nephews would be executed.

By contrast, the much newer Belgian Empire gained independence from the Netherlands in 1831. King Leopold II was ambitious and wanted to enrich his personal fortune through colonizing Africa and seizing all of the resources. An exploratory expedition to the Congo Free State in 1876 led to King Leopold II declaring himself king-sovereign and absolute ruler, where his brutality and viciousness (for example, if someone under his command did not meet the quota for work production, Leopold's enforcers would amputate a foot or hand) resulted in the loss of his fiefdom by 1908. Word about him had reached the Belgian government, and they took over the colony; the country's infrastructure was improved, but the nation was split into separate but unequal societies of rich whites and poor blacks, and the native Africans were denied the ability

² History.com

to “participate in the running of their own country.”³ In addition to the Congolese colony, the Belgian Empire consisted of Ruanda-Urundi. Rwanda was annexed by opportunistic Germany in 1899 during the turmoil surrounding the death of the Rwandan king. In 1916, Belgium seized Rwanda and Burundi; after Germany was defeated in World War I, Belgium was given the trust territory Ruanda-Urundi by the League of Nations (an association that later became the United Nations).

Long simmering political unrest and anti-colonization sentiment festered among the native Rwandan people. The Tutsi tribe initially comprised around 15-16% of the Rwandan population, and while many of them were poor peasants, the Tutsi were the majority ruling class and monarchy. For the remainder of the elite, the non-Tutsi were generally from the Hutu tribe, which were considered to be the working class of farmers. Physiology played a role in the caste system: Tutsi generally were taller and perceived to be somewhat more urbane. The Hutu were shorter, plumper, redder-skinned, descended from the Bantu, and agriculturalists.

Both groups, however, *hated* the Twa, also known as the Pygmy tribe. The smallest in stature, the Twa adult male on average stood no more than 4 feet 11 inches tall (150 cm). The tribesmen were forest-dwelling hunter-gatherers known for their robust music and dancing festivities. Many of the Twa lived enslaved to the Hutu from the moment of their birth. They worked to do the majority of the hunting and so forth but were often deeply mistreated, unpaid, or paid by the whim of their masters in cigarettes and used clothes. Further disgraceful treatment of the Twa is evidenced by the exportation of pygmy children to zoos around the world,

³ History.com

including the United States, where the Bronx Zoo had Ota Benga on display as a human zoo novelty. He was exhibited in the Monkey House.⁴

The inequality between the three classes, who were forced to live under colonial rule, led to civil disobedience, class war, and a fracturing of the relationship between the Ruandans and the Urundi. The tension between the warring factions was stoked by shifting endorsement from the Belgians, first championing the superiority of the Tutsi and later supporting the Hutu as they strove for greater power. Assassination attempts and power exchanges escalated until finally violence among the Tutsi and Hutu resulted in the death of hundreds of people. The Belgian government responded by formally dividing the colony into present day Rwanda and Burundi in 1960 and ending their colonial rule. The classist tension between the Twa, Hutu, and Tutsi people continues into the 21st century, and genocide has been a part of the historical record of Rwanda.

Belgium's empirical stature is akin to a 1:12 scale comparison to the Ottoman Empire, both in breadth of territory and years of longevity, but the severity of violence acceptable as part of the empirical rule of both is comparable. Genocides, brutality, and massacres are bloody badges earned by both the Ottoman and Belgian Empires, and the divisiveness of the people under the colonial rule of both can still be witnessed in the modern world.

⁴ Katherine Graves. "Ota Benga Honored", The Critgraph.com. September 14, 2017. Accessed 12/03/2021.

<https://thecritgraph.com/2017/09/14/ota-benga-honored/>

Works Cited

Katherine Graves. "Ota Benga Honored", The Critgraph.com. September 14, 2017. Accessed 12/03/2021. <https://thecritograph.com/2017/09/14/ota-benga-honored/>

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