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Criterion B - Investigating

Strand iii. use research methods to collect and record appropriate, varied and relevant information

Strand iv. evaluate the research process and results.

The fundamental roots of today's modern countries were derived from ancient empires that contained vast amounts of diverse peoples and ethnic groups. Although the colossal role that empires had in the ancient world seems to have ceased in modern society, that is not the case. Various events which occurred in ancient civilization still have a significant effect on the treatment and toleration of certain ethnic groups, leading to human rights breaches. In the past few centuries, there have been critical abuses to the rights of certain peoples and a breach of human rights as a whole. This essay serves as a case study delving into some of these human rights violations as well as the actions taken to prevent such tragedies from occurring again.

The Abyssinian Empire, also known as the Ethiopian Empire, was a long lasting African state encompassed in modern day Ethiopia and parts of Eritrea. It lasted from 1270 to 1974, and played a crucial role in the development of the Horn of Africa. However, throughout the longevity of this empire, there were multiple human rights abuses that occurred. Under the reign of Menelik II, mass mutilation occurred to subdue the population into submission through fear. As Ethiopian-American historian Asafa Jalata notes, "Menelik's soldiers often cut off the right hands of conquered men and the breasts of women as a form of collective punishment and to terrorize the population into submission." (Jalata, 2013, p. 14). Menelik II also was involved in systematic slave raiding. British scholar Richard Pankhurst writes, "The conquest of the south and south-west by Menelik II (1889–1907) was accompanied by massive slave-raiding. Tens of thousands of people, especially from the Oromo, Sidama, Kaffa and other groups, were enslaved and sold in the northern markets or kept as domestic slaves." (Pankhurst, 1997, p. 109). Later on, in the early 1970s, Emperor Haile Selassie I used famine to his advantage to subject people into obedience. British anthropologist Alex de Waal remarks, "Government policy in the early 1970s deliberately delayed and obstructed relief to Wollo and Tigray because both provinces contained opposition to the central government. The emperor's own statements reveal that he saw the famine partly as a way to punish rebellious regions." (de Waal, 1991, pp. 104–105). This event is parallel to a similar withholding of food to provinces in the early 1930s, also under the emperor and his administration. Historian Patrick Gilkes remarks, "In 1930–31 Tigray suffered a terrible famine, but the central government deliberately blocked food relief and even prevented peasants from migrating in search of food, because the province was in rebellion against Ras Gugsa.

Thousands died unnecessarily.” (Gilkes, 1975, p. 189). The emperor (Emperor Haile Selassie I) also ordered mass executions after the failed 1960 coup d’etat. American historian Harold G. Markus remarks, “After the failure of the 1960 coup attempt, Emperor Haile Selassie ordered the summary execution without trial of hundreds of students, intellectuals and military officers. Corpses were left hanging in public squares as a warning.” Another serious crime against humanity was rooted in the apartheid-like system that the government instilled, favoring the northern peoples, and causing a massive disadvantage to the Oromo and other southern peoples. In the book *The invention of Ethiopia: The making of a dependent colonial state in northeast Africa*, it goes in-depth to describe their system of discrimination, noting. “The Abyssinian ruling class imposed a system of apartheid-like domination known as the ‘neftanya-gabbar’ system, in which northern soldiers (neftanya) were granted large estates and the right to extract tribute and forced labor from the indigenous southern populations (gabbar).” (Holcomb & Ibssa, 1990, p. 147). From these examples in this case study, we observe repeated crimes against humanity stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) that took place in Abyssinia.

Another site of mass breaches of human rights occurred in the Chinese Empire, which lasted from 1368 to 1912 and had various crimes against humanity spanning across several dynasties. Under the Qing Dynasty, the Ten Great Campaigns, which were a series of military campaigns, took place, from the 1750s to the 1790s, leading to mass genocide. “Qianlong’s armies systematically exterminated the Dzungar people... By 1759, perhaps 80 percent of the Dzungar population—approximately 600,000 people—had been killed or died of smallpox deliberately introduced by Qing troops. The emperor himself wrote that ‘to wipe them out completely is the only way.’” (Perdue, 2005, pp. 283–285). Another genocide in the Qing Dynasty was during the Ming-Qing Transition, where mass killings took place. Historian Frederic Wakeman notes, “In Yangzhou alone, Qing troops massacred the entire population for ten days in May 1645... The most reliable estimates put the death toll at 80,000–300,000 in that city alone. Similar massacres occurred in Jiading, Jiangyin, and Guangzhou, with total deaths in the conquest of the south estimated at several million.” (Wakeman, 1985, pp. 648–650). The Qing Dynasty used mass starvation as well, as said: “During the suppression of the Three Feudatories Rebellion (1673–1681), Qing generals deliberately destroyed dikes and crops, causing famines that killed millions in Hunan and Guangdong.” (Parsons, 1970, p. 211). Through the Song through to the Qing Dynasty, we see their harsh mandate of “footbinding” on women. Chinese-American historian Dorothy Ko says, “Although never legally mandated, the imperial state and elite culture enforced foot-binding on tens of millions of girls for a thousand years, causing lifelong disability and chronic pain. Attempts to ban it were suppressed by the court itself until 1912.” (Ko, 2005, pp. 11–14). They also castrated boys to supply palace eunuchs, as mentioned by Shih-Shan Henry Tsai: “Tens of thousands of boys, often kidnapped or sold by poor families, were castrated annually... Mortality rates from the operation were 70–80 percent in the early Qing period.” (Tsai, 1996, p. 37). These various examples show how the Chinese Empire committed crimes against humanity in mass volume.

Despite these human rights violations, there have been significant actions taken by the people affected and supra-national organizations to eliminate and prevent these from taking place. For the Abyssinian Empire, after the overthrow of emperor Haile Selassie, the ‘neftanya-gabbar’ system, the apartheid-like system that had been previously established, was discontinued. “The 1975 land reform decree nationalized all rural land, abolished the feudal tenure system including the neftanya-gabbar relationships, and redistributed land to peasant associations, effectively ending serfdom for millions in the south and providing small plots to former gabbars.” (Marcus, 1994, p. 234; updated in post-revolution analyses by Amnesty International, 1995, p. 12). The area has also seen the emergence of various independent human rights social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international movements to uphold human rights. indirect redress through investigations and advocacy. “Following the establishment of the Ethiopian Human Rights Council (EHRCO) in 1991, more groups have emerged including the Human Rights and Peace Center (Addis Ababa University), A-Bu-Gi-Da, the Center for Human Rights and Democracy, Forum-84, the Inter-Africa Group, and the Anti-Red Terror Committee... EHRCO investigates human rights violations and has published annual reports since 2004.” (University of Minnesota Human Rights Library, n.d., para. 4–5).

On the contrary, in the modern People’s Republic of China, there has been no recognition of these breaches of human rights, with even more crimes against humanity. After Mao Zedong’s communist party took over China, there has been no acknowledgement of any crimes committed against fundamental human rights. The Tiananmen Square Massacre, which occurred from June 3rd to June 4th, 1989, in what we consider as modern China, is widely considered as a breach of human rights. “The Tiananmen Massacre was precipitated by the peaceful gathering of students, workers, and others in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and other Chinese cities in April 1989, calling for free expression, democratic reform, and an end to corruption. The government responded to the intensifying demonstrations in late May 1989 by declaring martial law. On June 3-4, People’s Liberation Army soldiers fired upon and killed numerous protesters and bystanders in Beijing.” (Human Rights Watch, 2025, para. 1). To solve the issue of these human rights breaches, supra-national organizations such as the UN are required to have a more watchful observation of the Chinese government despite China’s efforts to undermine them. They have to ensure that the things listed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are enforced everywhere; not just in a few places. An increased level of cooperation between the UN and China’s government must take place to push China to the point of acknowledging past crimes committed against human rights.

Despite these various human rights breaches, in Abyssinia there have been a plethora of things done to recognize and fix the mistakes made by the past empire, but in China we see a continuous denial of crimes committed as well as unwillingness to change – something that can be fixed by increased enforcement of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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