Justice Attained

Genocide has moved me from an early age. As a Polish American, I had learned about the gruesome history of the Holocaust as early as fourth grade. I can still clearly remember my Saturday morning Polish school lessons. Even more clearly, I remember learning about the mass murders of Poles by the Nazis. Most clearly, however, I remember staring down at my history book, unable to comprehend how something so terrible could be done to my country, to my people. Horrified, I told myself I could never forgive Germany for what it had done, and what others had allowed to happen. I felt that holding a grudge was the right thing to do, or else I was allowing what had happened to be forgotten. Now, years later, writing this paper, I realize that I was avoiding forgiveness because I craved justice. Forgiveness is turning a blind eye to a problem and moving on, eventually forgetting. Justice is taking a stand, acknowledging evil and making those who spread it pay the price they deserve. This type of justice can be achieved after genocide. However, it will not always be in the judicial sense but in securing a better future for victims and their families.

Technically, the Merriam-Webster dictionary defines justice as “the process or result of using laws to fairly judge and punish crimes and criminals.” History has shown that after every genocide some form of judicial justice is obtained. Countries do what they can to assist, putting whatever criminals they can convict behind bars. After World War II, “In light of mounting evidence disclosing the full extent of Nazi atrocities perpetrated under Adolf Hitler, the nature of the crimes cried out for justice. World opinion demanded it” (Rice, p 14). With victims pushing for justice and the world looking to secure a better future, the Nuremberg Trials were established in 1945. During the trials, “the judicial process was brought to bear against those who had offended the conscience of humanity by committing acts of military aggression and other crimes” (Rice, p 96). By the time the trials were concluded, twelve out of the twenty-two Nazi war criminals tried were sentenced to death and the rest to long prison sentences (history.com). This was a great success by Allied forces primarily because it gave a taste of justice to the victims. Even more importantly, the trials set an example on how to achieve judicial reparation in case of possible genocides in the future.
Unfortunately, this experience was put to use after the more recent genocide in Rwanda. In this case, the death of the country’s president sparked violence among its divided civilians. This lead to the deaths of about 800,000 Tutsis at the hand of the Hutus in a time span of only 100 days (bbc.com). “In the years following the genocide, more than 120,000 people were detained and accused of bearing criminal responsibility for their participation in the killings” (un.org). These high numbers are surely comforting to the victims in Rwanda who want nothing more than to feel safe in their own country once more. There are also other ways to achieve judicial justice as proved by the Gacaca trials. These were started to convict criminals after the Rwandan Genocide. ”The Gacaca trials...served to promote reconciliation by providing a means for victims to learn the truth about the death of their family members and relatives. They also gave perpetrators the opportunity to confess their crimes, show remorse and ask for forgiveness in front of their community” (un.org). Taking steps like these, which benefit the victims most and aid their road to recovery, are crucial to healing after the horrors of genocide.

As much good as is achieved, all terror cannot truly be stopped by trails. Looking at the large amount of Hutus detained for participation in the Rwandan genocide is nothing when you compare the number to the amount of people who participated in the 100 day slaughter as a whole. Not every perpetrator can be caught; the numbers are simply too great. Even with extensive trials and convictions, offenders will always slip through the cracks, especially after genocides. This is because killings are committed on such large scales that it is hard to separately try every single crime committed by every single offender. Even in the best planned attacks, genocides are filled with chaos and confusion for victims. This makes it hard for perpetrators to be rightfully accused or even identified in the aftermath of the crimes. Because of this, victims live on unsure if they can trust their neighbors. They have no way of knowing if their oppressors are still out in the world, free and enjoying life. These victims are not paranoid, they have great reason to be fearful. “Efraim Zuroff, Israel director of the Simon Wiesenthal Center in Jerusalem, last year estimated that “probably not more than 10 to 15 percent” of tens of thousands of Nazi war criminals had been brought to justice” (nbcnews.com). This means that the majority of Nazi’s never paid a price for their evils. Even the most powerful and guilty leaders such as Adolf Hitler escaped punishment by committing suicide while many more escaped to foreign countries. This proves that while convictions of criminals after genocides are great successes, they are merely not enough. The punishment given will never be equal to the losses suffered, both during and after genocides.
Even though it is impossible to fully recover from such horrific crimes, Justice can be obtained after genocide. There is more than one way to define justice. It is not simply what a dictionary tells us or something a lawyer can fight for. Justice can be achieved when solidifying hope for a better tomorrow. If a victim of genocide is murdered and their killer is never punished, some might say no justice was achieved. But by securing a better future for the victims’ children and grandchildren we have found justice for their mother. Likewise, if a soldier is killed fighting for equality in his country and his killer is never caught, some might say he obtained no justice. This is untrue, by saving this soldier's country, by achieving what he fought so hard for, what he died for, we helped ensure justice. No matter how great our judicial successes, genocide is about the people. The ones who survived and the ones who did not. It is about making sure they did not die for nothing, that their deaths, no matter how gruesome and inhumane, provide a better future.

Works Cited


<http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/nuremberg-trials>.

